

Fit to be stuffed

Taxidermist Robertson brings 'em back alive

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ALBANY — Two skinless heads sit on a rusty oil barrel staring with skummy eyes. Nearby, inside a damp garage, hides are piled high with salt in a gooey mass. A deer head lays disjointed on the floor.

These animals have seen better days. Inside the shop, their other halves look more presentable: moose, antelope, deer and a cougar perched on a ledge.

"If I didn't love animals" reflects Jack Robertson, "I would never have gotten into this business."

For 25 years Robertson has been working at the art of taxidermy. For the last three years he has had a shop just outside of Albany. With this fall's hunting season his business has reached its yearly high.

Hunters by the dozens come to the shop to have their animals reconstructed. For some it is too late — the body has been kept around the house too long, the fur has slipped or hair is falling out. But most animal bodies can be helped.

Robertson leads the way past the front room, through a series of workshops with animals in varying degrees of creation. Here a duck without an eye, there a cast for a deer head. On the wall next to a mounted fish hang two large brown dried-up globs.

"Those are beaver scent glands, used for perfume," Robertson explains. "I cut them out of a big beaver years ago and never got around to throwing them away."



Things have changed since the days when straw or sawdust was stuffed up an animal's head to help it keep its shape.

Now the animal's head is set in plaster, forming a mold. This mold is filled with either layers of paper or liquid styrofoam to form an ersatz skull.

When the animal's real skull is separated from its skin, the styrofoam will serve as a replacement.

For smaller animals, such as the weasel or badger, little flex forms can be purchased

to fit directly into the skin. These forms can move their little feet and tails.

Robertson has mounted nearly every kind of animal, except dogs and cats. He once mounted a man's horse.

With a steel pole up the horse's front legs, he was able to set it in a permanent bucking position. A nine-foot polar bear he once mounted is now on exhibition in a bank.

"I grew up in the wilderness," says Robertson. "I still love to hunt with a rifle or with a camera."

When he was young, Robertson got interested in preserving his kill. He took an apprenticeship in a taxidermist's shop.

After working 17 years in Eugene, Robertson set off for Albany to start a shop of his own.

In the 25 years Robertson has been mounting animals, he has done only one for himself.

"I have one elk, and that's it. I've never had time to do any for myself," he says. Yet Robertson says he always has time to look at the animals. "I love to stop and look at deer."

Robertson unwraps a bobcat head from a bag and begins skinning. With his white beard and soft-spoken nature, he looks like a kind of Gepetto as he carves between the animal's skull and fur.

"Sure some people tell me 'It would look better alive.' This is no more true with a wild animal than it is with beef," he says. "Animals are a crop to be harvested."

"If we let it grow, nature will take the surplus." He slowly works the bobcat's face over its head and removes it, inside out, leaving the skull like an unsacked pillow on the table.

Most of the remains, according to Robinson, are put to good use. Some go to the Eugene Chemical Works. Skulls are often donated to science labs.

"I have two skulls out back that I am saving for a biology teacher," he says.

The remains of birds and fish can be eaten if the customer is willing to wait while Robertson skins the meat out. In other words, customers can have their heads and eat them too.

A hairdryer rests on Robinson's workbench along with the tanned hides and bird bodies.

"We go through about two of them every year drying duck feathers," Robinson explains.

To one side of the shop is a small cabinet filled with eyes. Roberts cradles two of them in his palm.

"The glass is imported from Germany," he says of two translucent gazelle eyes. A pair like this will cost me \$8.95."

Cost for mounted animal runs anywhere from \$500 for the mounted cougar lounging on a ledge to \$125 for a deer head, to \$65 for a gray squirrel permanently eating a nut. Customers must bring in their own animals.



After 25 years, Albany taxidermist Bill Robertson says he still is in love with animals, as well as the art of making those hunter's trophies come back to life. With the hunting season in full swing, Robertson's business has reached its yearly peak, which means he may see as many as 1,000 head of deer before the hunters put their rifles down for the year.

Robertson often donates unclaimed birds to the school for the blind.

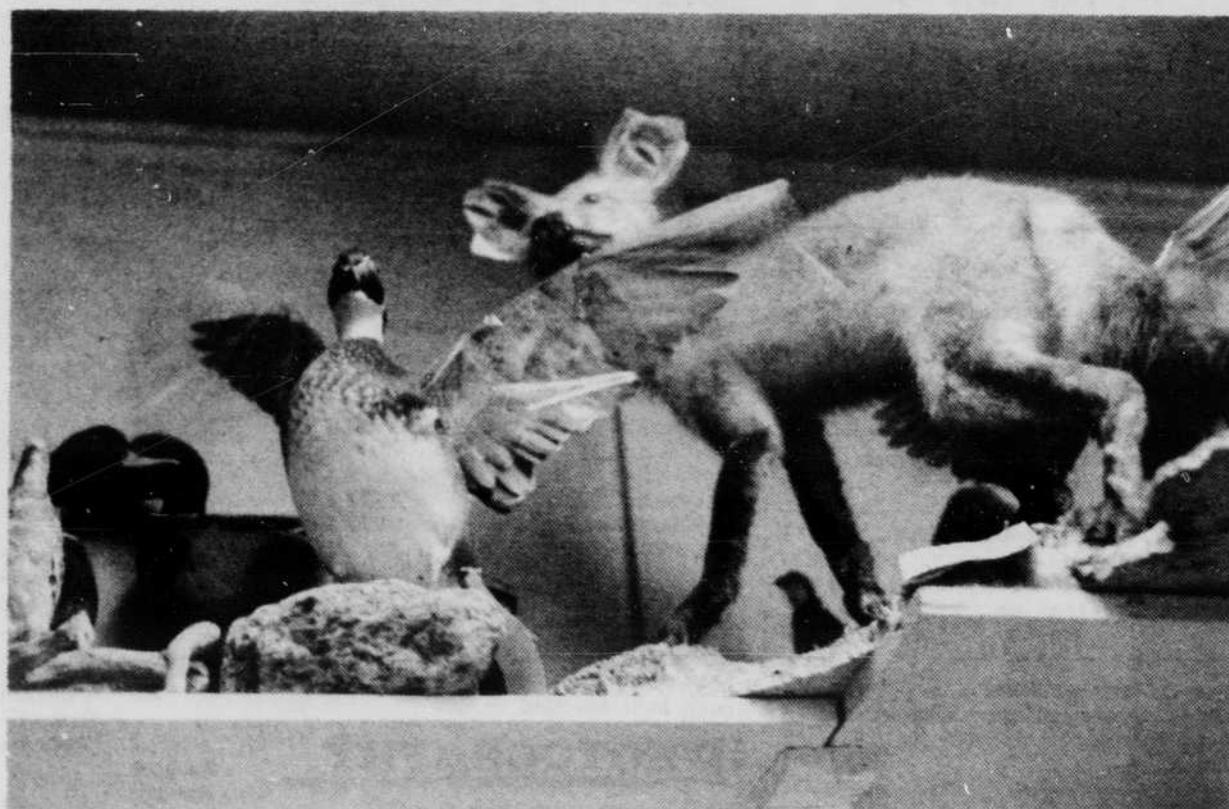
"They love to pet the birds," explains Robertson. "The birds wear out pretty fast."

Robertson displays a photographic album with pictures of his past subjects: a tiger in British Honduras shown just after its death, a blond long-haired bull from Scotland and the polar bear killed in Alaska.

From the wall, the heads of elks, deer, geese and fish search with glassy eyes for their innards, and wait to be picked up and taken to a new wall.

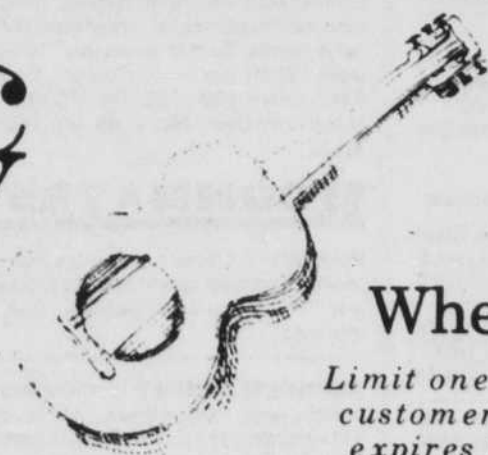
"You can look at these heads and remember everything about the animals," says Robertson.

"I love to look at animals," he repeats. "I must see a thousand deer a year, but I still have time to stop and watch."



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