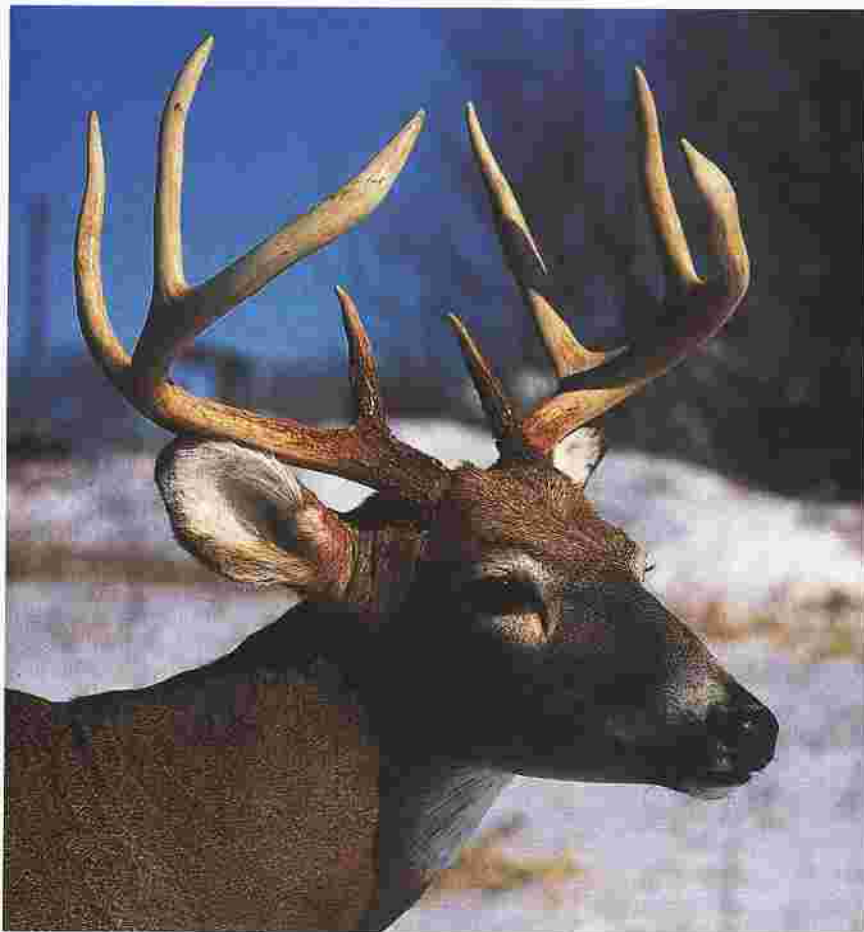


# Stuffed Duck?

Finding a good taxidermist is much like hunting — scouting pays off.



By Daniel D. Lamoreux

BILL COULDN'T BELIEVE his eyes. He'd bragged about his bear for months, and he had spent \$1,200 on his Canadian bear hunt. But now all he could do was stand over the grotesque rug and feel sick to his stomach. A second taxidermist, who tried to repair the work of the first, could do little. The damage was done, and Bill's trophy was sentenced to lie in a dark corner of the garage forever. Bill's name has been changed to protect his pride.

Unfortunately, Bill made a mistake that hunters repeat countless times every

year across North America. He'd spent a ton of money on all the right equipment, checked out the reputation and reliability of his guide, practiced his shooting for months, killed a bear — and entrusted his trophy to a taxidermist he didn't know. The results broke his heart.

According to the National Taxidermists Association, of the approximately 75,000 people practicing taxidermy in the U.S. today, the overwhelming majority have no professional training. Less than 4 percent belong to an organization that certifies its

members. Clearly, you can't trust your trophy to just anyone.

IF YOU TAKE PRIDE in your trophies, invest the time to find a good taxidermist before you ever take to the field, and start by checking a taxidermist's reputation. Sporting goods dealers, fish and game officers, or outfitters will usually know the local taxidermists through direct association. Talk to these people and get their input. Then ask prospective studios for references, and call the references.

Dan, the taxidermist and owner of River of No Return Taxidermy in Salmon, Idaho, offered a suggestion. "Don't bargain hunt," he said. "When you use money as your primary influence, you usually get what you pay for."

As the president of the Illinois Taxidermists Association, Donald agrees. He has contact with taxidermists of all walks. "You'll find a wide range of pricing, but what are you looking for?" he asked. "If you just want a stuffed duck, that's one thing. A mount that is accurate and detailed costs more!"

Once you start looking at samples closely, you'll realize that details are the common feature of truly beautiful mounts. Be certain, however, that what you see is what you will get.

The taxidermist may have a showroom full of "award winning" animals, but, ideally, you want to view work done for regular, paying customers. Mitch is a full-time taxidermist and owner of Big River Bait & Taxidermy in Mount Carroll, Illinois. "There are techniques used in competition mounts that are just so intricate and time consuming that you can't afford to do them for every customer," he explained. "You're not going to get a competition mount for list price."

Using head mounts or rugs as examples, let's review some things that separate the exceptional from the adequate.

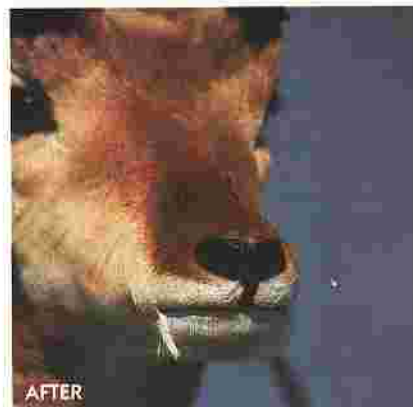
"Look for paint not cleaned off the eyes, teeth, or hair," Dan said. "And check to see if the hair or fur is well groomed and clean." A taxidermist who doesn't polish his work probably takes other shortcuts you can't see — yet.

Look at the seam where the antlers meet the skull. The hide starts to shrink as it dries after the mounting process. A sign of trouble will be a gap forming between





BEFORE



AFTER

A professional taxidermist can often fix even the most horrendous of problems.

the hide and the antler butts. This is an indication that the stitching was not adequate to keep the hide in place.

A similar indicator is the "V" between and behind the antlers where the hide has been stitched together. As the hide ages and dries, poor stitching techniques will become more evident.

The nostrils and ear canals can reveal how much time a taxidermist has spent on a mount. The ability to preserve these openings and recreate a realistic look takes a great deal of time and effort during the caping and fleshing phases. Many taxidermists will bypass these details, opting instead for a quick fix.

The nostrils are easiest to check. Do they go deep into the nose, simulating the look of a live animal? Or are they simply small hollows in the face that have been puttied closed and painted black?

Step back and look at the ears in relationship to the overall head. A professional will give particular attention to positioning the ears. They should complement the antlers and head pose. For example, if the head is in an alert position, do the ears also look alert and pointed in the same direction as the eyes?

"The eyes are a big thing," Mitch explained. "People do eyes in different ways. Do they look sleepy? Do they look alert? Are they naturally shaped and have eyelashes?" In addition to answering

these questions, inspect for cracking or separation between the eye and the hide. Like the antler butts, the eyes will reveal shrinkage if the hide is not properly prepared and anchored. Also, look for subtle muscle definition around the eyes and in the face.

"Deer have a lot of long facial whiskers in life," Mitch said. "But on a lot of mounts they're gone." Again, this is an indicator of an improperly prepared hide. It's the little things that add character and animation to an otherwise "stuffed duck."

FINALLY, DAN ADVISES, "Ask for a detailed contract of exact price and description of what will be done to your trophy." Be specific in terms of what you want and what the job will cost.

In locating a taxidermist, proceed as you would in any other aspect of a hunt. Scouting makes a difference. Do it right to ensure that your hard-earned, costly trophy will hang in a place of honor in the den, not end up in the next garage sale. ♪

*Freelance photographer/writer Daniel D. Lamoreux hails from Mt. Carroll, Illinois.*

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