

Commemorate the hunt

At the door to Ethan Gebauer's taxidermy shop in Sonora, I didn't know what to expect. A bloody abattoir? A sad scary place of dusty dead animals? Sometimes a story is nerve-wracking; I never know what I'll find.

My imagination had over dramatized the scene. The brightly lit workspace at Sierra Nevada Taxidermy was spotless. Two sets of elk antlers, prehistorically huge, sat neatly on the floor. Smaller antlers, identification tags dangling, hung over a window. A bear rug, head snarling, was folded on a shelf. In the middle of the workspace rose a foam deer head. On the workbench, mementos of past hunting trips shared space with drawers holding glass eyes and plastic tongues.

"I keep the shop organized," Gebauer said. "If you keep it clean, it's just a smoother operation altogether. Otherwise, in this business, it would be

impossible."

Gebauer grew up hunting, fishing and playing in the Sierra. He spent time as a fly-fishing guide in Alaska, and as we talked, he spun stories about trying to outsmart brown trout, about hunting in the Arctic Circle, about mistaking a musk ox for a grizzly. He loves the outdoors, and is fascinated by wildlife.

"I'm always watching animals," he said. "We have deer in our yard; I'm always watching how they move."

Gebauer had been interested in taxidermy, but never thought of it as a career. When a workplace injury forced him to change jobs, he spoke with a taxidermist who was retiring, and realized that there aren't many people taking up the trade. So he enrolled in a taxidermy school in Montana, where he spent long hours learning to skin, sew and glue animals into works of art. During an internship in Alaska, he worked

with the skins of moose, sheep and wolves; he's always learning.

"I like learning old and new ways of doing things," he said.

Taxidermy is a long process; each animal requires hours of work just to prepare it for mounting. It starts with the animal pelt, head still attached, usually sent by a hunter. Gebauer makes exacting measurements so that he can order the correct mounting form – the starting point, the "stuffing" in the general shape of an animal. Gebauer's job is to make it into a specific animal, a lifelike animal, one that his client will recognize. Decisions must be made: Will the head be turned? Will it turn to the left or the right? Will it be up, down or out?

After he measures (and this part gets a little gross), he takes the hide off the skull. If the animal has antlers, he cuts off a skull cap with the antlers attached. Then, on a plank resembling an ironing board, he removes all the meat and fat from the inside of the skin, a slow process called fleshing.

"A bear is really a messy job," he said. "They are really smelly."

Details in the hide are carefully preserved: the lips, the eyes, the nose, the ears. Then the hide is salted and sent to a tannery to be preserved.

Ethan Gebauer restored a mountain lion inside the Calaveras Big Trees State Park Visitor Center and built a display with wire-covered burlap soaked in plaster.

Courtesy photo

By Margaret Sloan

Once the hide is tanned and returned, Gebauer "sweats" it by soaking it in warm water and letting it cool for a day. This makes the hide soft and pliable again so that he can stretch it onto the form.

People have preserved animals forever; think of mummies! But taxidermy as we know it today seems to have started in the 16th century, when a Dutch nobleman stuffed a bird with preservative spices and posed it with wire supports. In later centuries, people built frames covered with straw and plaster; according to Gebauer, animal forms were often made from paper-mache, a material that breaks



Photo by Margaret Sloan

Ethan Gebauer is the owner and operator of Sierra Nevada Taxidermy in Sonora.



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down over time.

"That's why you see old mounts in museums that are cracking and slumping," Gebauer said.

These days, taxidermy forms are made of hard foam that can be carved; they are anatomically correct, with details like muscles, nostrils and even eye glands. Gebauer adds glass eyes, using clay to build the eyelids, as well as enhancing muscles, relying on his own knowledge of anatomy and photographs.

He covers the form with glue and stretches the wet pelt over the form, perfecting every detail. He tucks in the lips and eyes – making sure the eyelashes go in the right direction – and the nostrils. He sews the pelt together and tacks it to the form with pins and stiff cards. After it dries, he paints details onto the lips and nose.

Gebauer's goal is to

make the animal look as lifelike as possible; he wants to create a specimen that's what the client remembers.

"I ask the hunter, what was his memory of the animal? Were its ears forward or back? Was its head turned?" Those memories make all the difference.

In hipster circles, rogue taxidermy is having a moment, with artists sewing together different parts of unrelated animals to create weird fantasy creatures. But Gebauer's work is old-school, authentic, mindful of the animal's life. He creates beauty.

"This is 100%, straight up art," he said. "Bringing an animal back to life. Recreating the memory hunters or fishermen had when they first saw the animal."

Gebauer reminded me that most hunters respect the animals they

hunt, and love the environment. They are also important to wildlife conservation.

And Gebauer doesn't just create new mounts.

"I love fixing up old mounts. I like to see the old work. I always learn something."

He recently restored a mountain lion at the Calaveras Big Trees State Park Visitor Center, and created a plaster "rock" where it now crouches. He finds reconstruction work satisfying.

"When I make a new animal, the clients are happy. When I restore an older mount, the clients are ecstatic. 'It looks just like it used to,' they say." Taxidermy aside, Gebauer's biggest passion is painting fish.

"I don't stretch fish skin," he said. "But I can paint a fish to look lifelike."

With photos as guides, he paints detailed fish forms with layers of

Ethan Gebauer places a deer pelt on a foam form to achieve the correct proportions at his Sierra Nevada Taxidermy.

Photos by Margaret Sloan



spray paint, watercolor pencils, metallic pigments, even makeup and chalk.

"I was a fly-fishing guide in Alaska," he laughed. "I know what fish look like."

In Gebauer's peaceful office next to his workspace, fly-fishing rods line one wall. A glass case holds trout leaping and various animal skulls. Two deer heads gaze into the middle distance. A bear, mid-stride, occupies one corner. An antelope head looked so life-like I thought its enormous eyes might blink.

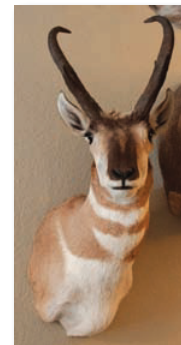
The room was as calm as a forest glade, a testament to Gebauer's wildlife ethic. He said he feels strongly that people need to respect the animals they hunt.

"It's not just the hunting of the animal; it's what you do with the animal. You have to take care of the meat and the hide. People spend all this time to go hunting the animal; you need to give it the respect of taking care of it afterward as well."

If you're going hunting and think you might want the animal preserved, Gebauer recommends researching how to prepare the hide. If you're really stuck, he said, "Just call your local taxidermist."



Big elk antlers await their turn at mounting.



Real bear claws, glass eyes and ear stiffeners await their turns as art.

A bear is mounted in taxidermist Ethan Gebauer's office in Sonora.

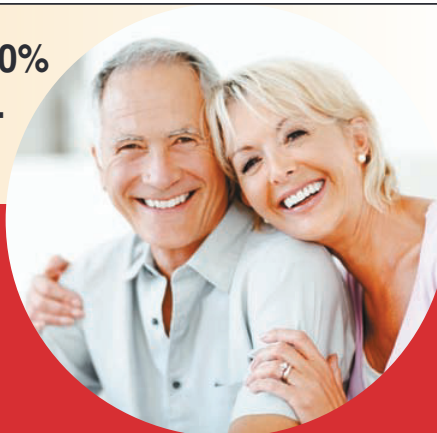


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