

Creative Juices Alive at Local Taxidermy Studio

Karen Dums, For the Price County Review, Mar 31, 2016

Wild Woods Taxidermy Studio LLC owner Travis Bottolfson is a self-proclaimed detail-oriented person. Whether he is plying a small paintbrush to fish scales, making that whitetail deer mount look “just so” or creating an interesting piece of habitat from wood and stone, he always wants it to be his best effort.

“I might be working on someone’s once in a lifetime trophy,” he says with a smile. “I give it all the attention I can.”

A taxidermy studio is an interesting setting. One might find a full-size bear standing in the middle of the workroom, peering out from behind yellow leaves. A ruffed grouse might be sitting on a workbench, looking as if it is about to take wing. Fish “swim” among rocks and driftwood pieces while hanging on a wall next to fiberglass animal molds. Such are the tools of the trade in the art form known as taxidermy.

“I loved art as a kid,” Bottolfson says as he points out displayed photo albums of his work. “Drawing, painting; I took any class I could and made up some that didn’t exist.”

He credits his early love of art in many of its forms and the desire to use it in a less than conventional way as part of what drew him into a career as a taxidermist.

Growing up he loved hunting and fishing as well as art, and envisioned living in one of the western states, alone and possibly off the grid. But there came a time when the question arose: “What do I want to do with my life?”

A television commercial regarding a taxidermy competition drew his attention, leading him to Northwest Iowa School of Taxidermy, owned by Tom Matuska and located in Spirit Lake, Iowa. His dad, Al Bottolfson, harbored a yen for taxidermy school all his life, but never had the opportunity to attend. The younger Bottolfson decided not to make that mistake. By time he was enrolled his parents had moved to Fifield. That, and meeting his now fiancé, Charlotte Larson of Park Falls, would alter his former life plan considerably; with western living replaced by a desire to be closer to family.

He graduated from NWST in 2008. Considering the economic downturn that took place that year, it was perhaps not the best time to be in search of a job. Bottolfson was fortunate in that he was kept on at NWST for an additional six years doing taxidermy work. Matuska’s is a USDA-inspected and licensed facility that can receive and do work on animals from the world over. Bottolfson gained valuable experience working on a variety of species from Africa as well as doing projects for the DNR, bringing road killed owls, eagles and hawks back to a lifelike state. He often had to carve custom bodies and make casts of the real heads, as molds such as those used for game birds are unavailable for raptors.

“Birds are probably the toughest projects,” he said, “because they are super fragile.”

Bottolfson moved to Fifield full time in 2014 and set up shop near his parent's home at the corner of State Highways 70 and 13. Soon after, retail giant Cabela's accepted Bottolfson as part of a team of taxidermists supplying taxidermy work for their stores. Due to a confidentiality agreement between the two he was unable to share much about those projects, but is thankful to work on a large scale, creating pieces for a business like Cabela's. Yet Bottolfson claims he is most in his element when working one on one.

"I enjoy customizing a mount for an individual," he said. "What goes out the door is never the same twice. There's nothing like doing a mount of a kid's first whitetail deer and seeing that smile when it's picked up."

Busy as he is with taxidermy work, and his dad helping him with habitat construction, the conversion of the recently purchased former Neeck Construction building into a showroom/studio is an ongoing work in progress where Bottolfson can be found most days. He takes time off to attend various shows and conventions pertinent to his business, however, where he can receive critiques of his own work while viewing the work of others in the field. Attending seminars and trade shows are also necessary business trips. When the World Taxidermy Championships are held in the United States, which occurs bi-annually, he and Larson make a point to attend, pulling a trailer containing a mount to use in competition and to carry back necessary supplies purchased at the accompanying trade show.

While a love of hunting and fishing may seem the perfect fit for a taxidermist, the typical autumn hunting seasons are usually a taxidermist's busiest times. Bottolfson keeps it in perspective by pursuing his love of the outdoors when and where he can. He and his dad recently took part in a successful Idaho mountain lion hunt. He was not opposed to putting a sign reading "BACK IN 14 DAYS" on the door.

"Guess I am living my dream," he said. "Using my artistic, creative side in a way I never really imagined and living close to and spending time with the people I care most about."