

Missoulian

Back to life: Award-winning Greenough taxidermist serves clients from all over

By KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, October 5, 2009 7:45 am

GREENOUGH - A white-tailed deer slowly came back to life on a stand at Mountain Creek Taxidermy.

In the shop, Rob Henrekin nudged the tip of a modeling tool under the glass eye of a whitetail deer, tucking the skin in place around it. He made the tool himself.

The champion taxidermist who started in 1989 surveyed the partly cloaked mold mounted in his shop, the animal one of roughly 150 pieces he'll shape into permanent lifelike gazes and stances in the course of a year.

"I really get a kick out of critters, working with them, whether they're dead or alive," Henrekin said.

Two of the live ones around, a corgi named Gater and airedale named Trixie, greeted visitors who pulled into his parking lot, and Thursday was an unusual day that way. The shop, normally quiet, was overrun with guests. Students were there, learning about Henrekin's work and inquiring about his views on wolf hunting. Another man arrived to see what magic his friend had undertaken with the skin of an antelope.

"Everything is just more realistic with Rob," said Ken Kovatch, a neighbor, friend and customer. "He works real hard on that."

Kovatch dropped by to pick up his antelope head, and while he waited in a showroom, he pointed out some of the details that make Henrekin's handiwork art. At the end of the room, two Russian brown bears snarled at each other, jaws open and lips curled. A close look showed lines of slobber dripping off the bears' large teeth.

When Henrekin receives the form of a mountain lion, say, he adds clay to show the muscles and define the shape of the animal. Kovatch said even the miniature habitats on which he sets the animals are creative.

In the showroom, a mountain goat stood atop a base made to look like a pedestal of granite. The actual material? Papier-mache.

"This kind of thing takes a lot of practice, too, getting these to look real," Kovatch said of the rock bases.

In Kovatch's living room, a mountain lion stands on one hind foot, a blue grouse snared in his front paw. It's one of many pieces for which Henrekin received awards. One award for this creation is "People's Choice, Best of Show," by the Montana Taxidermy Association.

Henrekin's clients come from all over, and sometimes he doesn't even know who they are. Thursday, roughly 12 students with Northwest Connections dropped in on the shop, and Henrekin told them this story.

Last fall, he sat in his Dodge pickup waiting to cross the Canadian border. He had just picked up a load of frozen capes and antlers from an outfitter, and he was headed back to Montana. As he waited, he rustled through client paperwork, thumbing across export permits.

He saw his customer's name, Jack Link, printed on a document. When he looked down at his passenger seat, he saw the same name on some of his road food: "There's a bag of Jack Link's jerky sitting there."

Sure enough, an address check showed the man who'd hired him was indeed a king of Canadian jerky. Henrekin said he told the story to Link, who laughed about it.

Not all his clients are bigwigs, but that topic wasn't the hottest one of the day with Northwest Connections students. The educational nonprofit aims to "integrate science, community and education to conserve and restore working landscapes."

Students from all over the country attend courses through the Northwest Connections program, and the budding foresters and ecologists and other conservationists peppered Henrekin with questions.

Is the material he uses safe for him? Safe for the environment? How many animals does he work on in a year? And what does he think of the wolf hunt? Does he expect to get some from the first hunt in Montana?

Yes, Henrekin believes he will work on at least one wolf this year, and it sounds like he wouldn't mind working on all 75, the limit on the first hunt in Montana. He feels threatened by wolves because of what he does for a living - they eat the critters he's paid to display - and he believes the population can handle a larger hunt.

"I understand that 75 is a good starting point, but I would like to see a lot more," he said.

He believes the animals are a treasured part of the Montana ecosystem, but he also has seen them wander too far. He reminds the students of the recent slaughter of 120 sheep near Dillon as an example.

Deer used to roam near his home, and his 12-year-old daughter, a young hunter, used to at least get a bead on one with her rifle. But he said there's not as many deer to be seen close by anymore. He figures there are many reasons, such as too many doe tags. But he said the drop also could be evidence of wolf kills.

The students listen, as respectful in their controversial questions as Henrekin is straightforward about his beliefs.

Instructor Andrea Stephens said his points of view would be new to many of them, and they would stay up late that night talking about his ideas around the campfire.

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