

"I LIKE WORKING WITH ANIMALS, IT'S A TYPE OF ART." WENDY DECKER



BY DANNY DRENNAN AND ROGER SANDERS

Four years ago, I was hunting in Northwestern Colorado. It was my first year of hunting big game. I killed a four-point bull elk and a five-point buck. Looking back today as a junior in high school, I wish I had gotten them mounted.

This year, I joined the Three Wire Winter Class. This story was unfinished from the year before, and since Roger and I both like hunting, we decided to go ahead and finish it.

Wendy Decker is a local taxidermist who we interviewed for this story. Wendy started her business, Trails End Taxidermy, in 1983. She started her business in Hayden, and this is where the first interview took place. This past year she and her husband Gary, relocate to the Blacktail area south of Steamboat Springs. She started her story with how she got interested in taxidermy.

"I became interested when I was about 12 years old. My father hunted; he mostly hunted for pheasants. I remember I always hated it when we threw away the feathers; then I heard about taxidermy. I took part of a mail order course. When I was 13, I mounted my first pheasant. I lost some interest when I started high school. People said girls weren't supposed to do things like hunt or mess with dead animals. After I graduated, we moved from Madison, South Dakota to Fort Collins, Colorado. I went to work for Western Trophies Taxidermy, mostly as a "go-pher," doing odd jobs, but I learned a lot there. After Gary and I were married, he encouraged me to continue with this type of art."

We asked Wendy to tell us what you have to do after you harvest an animal. "First of all, don't shoot him in the neck or head if you can avoid it.

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"GIRLS WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO DO THINGS LIKE HUNT OR MESS WITH DEAD ANIMALS."

Shoot him in the rib cage, it gives you the quickest kill, and doesn't ruin any meat. It also doesn't damage the cape for the mount. When he's on the ground make sure he's dead. I have heard of people getting hurt by animals that they thought were dead, but weren't. The best test I know is to touch the eye, use a gun barrel or something, even if they are unconscious they will blink. If it doesn't blink, it should be safe to continue. When you start to field dress him, start at the sternum, below the brisket. You don't want to cut the brisket skin. Slice all the way down the belly, and dress him out as you normally would. Take the animal back to camp to finish skinning or you skin it in the field, if you prefer. Handle the animal carefully, don't drag it if you can avoid it. All our cloven big game have hollow hairs; its like a straw, and it breaks easily if rubbed backwards or dragged on the ground. Antelope are especially fragile, so get him back to camp, hang him up by the horns, and then finish skinning him out right away. The sooner you skin him out, the better. It's good for the meat, and it's good for the skin to cape the animal immediately. (The cape is the part used in a shoulder mount.)

"To cape out the animal, you would start at the back of the skull and skin down the back of his neck in a straight line. Go until you get behind his front legs to about the third rib, then go around the body and behind the front legs. Leave the arm pit and brisket skin intact. You do not want to cut the throat or split the brisket. Many hunters feel it is necessary to cut the throat to bleed the animal out, but if the heart has stopped beating the blood is not forced out. Most bleeding is internal, and the damage done to the cape when the throat is cut is very difficult, if not impossible, to repair. Cut the head off at the base

of the skull, roll up the hide and head and store it in a cool place. You can keep it in a burlap bag to keep flies away, but never store it in plastic bags or other air-tight containers. The hair will begin to slip (fall out) within a few hours because of bacteria which forms in the air-tight container. Slippage is when the hair follicles loosen up and the hair falls out, and that can't be repaired. Once slippage has started, it can rarely be stopped. Proper field care should prevent it.

"Freezing is the best method of storage until you reach your taxidermist. The ears and nose should be well wrapped to prevent freezer burn or you'll have a new problem. Freezer burned skin is very dry and it won't flex very well. Fold the hide hair side out, then put it in a heavy plastic bag. Freeze it solid. If the skin was salted, brush off as much salt as possible. Salted items don't freeze very well. It is best to let the taxidermist skin the head. Keep it frozen, call your taxidermist for further instructions. You can go to most meat lockers, and they will freeze the head and hide and store it for you, but there will be a charge in most cases. A head or hide will keep six months or longer in the freezer if wrapped well enough to prevent freezer burn.

"Black pepper is a good deterrent for flies; sprinkled in the nose and eyes it helps keep the flies out. If the hide has been fleshed, salt it before you roll it up. Non-iodized salt is the best. Don't use rock salt because it is too coarse, and it won't penetrate the skin. I always carry a five pound bag of un-iodized table salt with me. All the fat and thick meat has to come off the hide. Salt will not penetrate fat and it will still spoil under the fat; you will lose the hair. The deterioration begins as soon as the animal dies, so you need to take care of preventing it right away. Remember, though, not to salt it if you



"I CAN MOUNT ANY HORNS WITH ANY CAPE."

plan to freeze it.

"I would prefer that the head be brought in whole, unskinned. Most taxidermists would; it's very detailed work. You have to be careful not to cut off the eyelids. I've had animals come in with no eyelids. The hardest detail is around the eye, and then the lips and nose are a little bit tough. The ears have to be turned inside out, which is kind of complicated until you've seen how it's done. The cartilage and the skin are separated and the ear is actually turned inside out.

"I include skinning in my costs. I would rather do the skinning and have it done correctly, than to have to charge extra for mistakes. Repairs are an extra charge; cut throats, split briskets, reversed skinning (some people want to go right up to the front) are always an extra charge. If you cut off an eyelid that's another extra charge. If you didn't get to your taxidermist on time, and it starts to spoil, the cape will have to be replaced. I could mount any set of horns; all we need is a new cape."



"ALL CLOVEN HOOFED ANIMALS HAVE HALLOW HAIR."

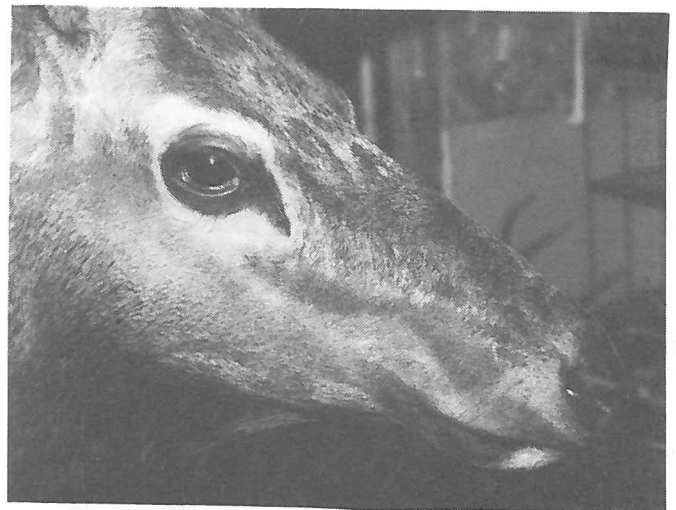
We asked Wendy if photographs of the trophy help her in her work. "Yes, they do. You need several measurements to buy the right size form and to set the horns at the correct angle. The form is altered to fit each animal, if necessary, and photos are great if there's something special about that animal. Say he had a big Roman nose, and you want him to look like that when he's mounted. Take a profile picture and a head on picture, and I can recreate that feature. Photos are a great help, especially with fishermen. If



"THE EARS HAVE TO BE TURNED INSIDE OUT."

they go out and catch a nice fish they want mounted, they should take a picture of that fish as soon as he is out of the water and while he is still alive. When it's mounted those colors can be reproduced correctly. The fish are air brushed with special paint when mounted. Fish that will be mounted should be frozen whole."

Wendy told us some of the problems she has seen as a taxidermist. "Hairslippage and capes that are too short or damaged are usually the biggest problems. Normally if there's a problem that I can see early, I will tell the hunter before he leaves here. I did have a big deer one year that according to the hunter, he took great care of. He brought it to me semi-frozen. During the tanning process a large patch of hair slipped under the throat. It was a short-haired cape because it was taken during archery season, and it was hard to replace, so I had to repair it. Neither I or the tannery knew it was going to slip; they called me and warned me of the problem. We finished the tanning, and I cut the



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hairless section out and repaired it. He might of had that deer laying in his pickup over the tailpipe where it got warm, and it started spoiling in that one spot. It was only one area, so that's the only conclusion I could come up with. Also, when the bucks and bulls come into the rut (mating season) their necks become very swollen, and a lot of body heat is retained there. The skin should be pulled off as soon as possible to let the meat cool. The neck is usually the first area to start slipping because of this body heat.



anywhere between twenty dollars and fifty dollars. When a person needs a replacement, the charge will vary according to what I paid for the cape. A hunter knows before he walks out the door of my shop if he needs a replacement cape. I don't want to spring any customer with a surprise like that. If the cape looks like it's on the verge of slipping, I'll warn them and write it on their work order, and also what it will cost them to have a replacement. Sometimes they only slip in little patches, and that can be cut out and sewn back together, and you can't tell the difference."

Wendy talked about complaints and questions taxidermists get. "There's always the guy who brings it in and wants it tomorrow. Someone brings in their trophy and says, 'Can I come back in two weeks?' You say no, it will be six to eight months and they don't understand. Then you explain to them what happens to the mount, the whole process, and then they understand. The public today is much more educated than they were a few years ago. They're starting to realize that mounts aren't stuffed with rags. They don't rot when they're hanging on the wall. The eyes aren't real. I have people who come up and touch the eye and want to know why it hasn't shrunk up. They ask if I inject the eyes with something. I don't know where some of these ideas come from. By the way, the eyes are high quality glass."

In your business how do you go about collect-

"YOU HANDLE THESE THINGS BY THE HORNS."

"In order to get the mount to look like he was when he was alive, you have to take a lot of measurements off the original animal when it's brought in. I take measurements from the end of the nose to the front corner of the eye, nose to base of skull, circumference of neck, and also tip of horns to nose. I do occasionally buy capes. If they are in good condition and big, I'll buy or trade for them. Large elk capes would be worth



"I CAN SHIP ANYWHERE IN THE U.S."

ing the money from the customer? "When the trophies are brought in, I take a 50 percent deposit, unless it's something more expensive, like a large lifesize. Then I take a smaller deposit and then take payments; I leave that up to the individual. When the mount is completed, the balance is due in full. Nothing leaves until it's paid for. I send a picture of the mount to the



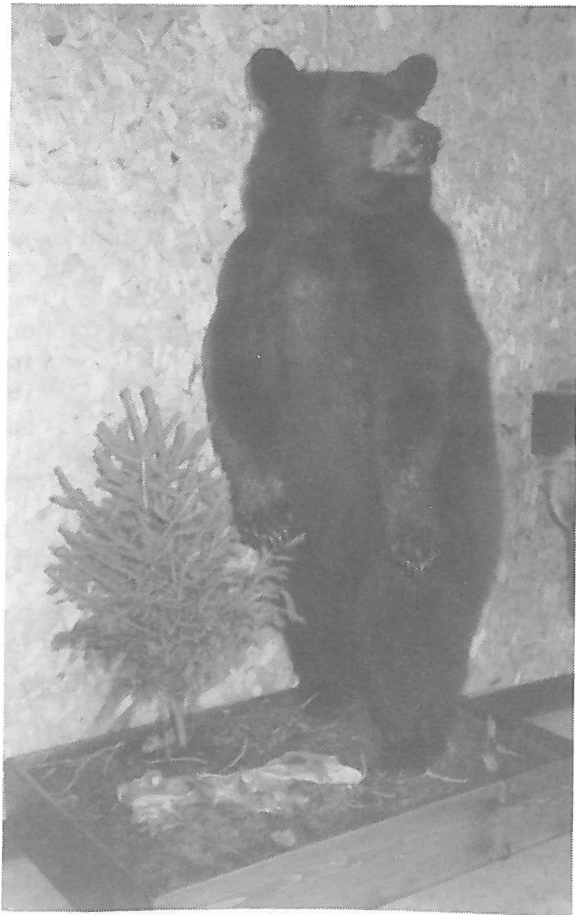
customer; if they're satisfied, they send the balance. I guarantee satisfaction on any game head or lifesize mount that was brought to me in prime condition. If it is starting to spoil or is badly damaged to start with, I can't always guarantee how it will work out. One bear I rugged last year had been shot in the jaw. There was a section missing; I managed to patch it. I made it look like a small scar; it was the best that I could do, and it looked good. The customer was satisfied. I cannot guarantee tanning. There's no guarantee on tanning because I don't do it. Even if I did, I couldn't guarantee it because I don't know what the fellow did to it while it was out in the field. Did he leave it lay in the sun for hours, did he leave it in the back of his truck for two weeks, and then freeze it? Who knows; I've had calls like that. One year I had a call from a man that asked me if he could get his deer head mounted. He never showed up that day. Two weeks later he walked in the door and said he had called me about a deer head and also an elk hide. I asked him if they were frozen and **he said no, they've been laying in his garage, and they were spoiled.** The elk hide had to be turned into leather. And the deer mount had to have a replacement cape. Well, everybody learns from their mistakes. An animal's own health can affect tanning. I recently learned that during the breeding season, cow elk in estrus will often lose hair; hormone levels seem to have an effect. Scarred and bruised areas also lose hair. Road-killed animals often loose patches of hair where they were hit."



"I GET TO SEE ALL KINDS OF THINGS."

Have you ever had someone decide that they're not going to pay for the mount? "Yes, it happens. That's why I get a deposit and don't let anything go until it's paid for. The policy is, on a hide that is tanned, if it's not paid for in thirty days, I'll sell it and on mounts I have 60 days also, unless they are making time payments. I have no problem with that. But I am stuck right now with a spike bull mount that is not paid for, and that's not exactly what sells easily. It's also hard on the pocketbook. A lot of places will buy mounts like restaurants and western stores."

Why does it take so long after you get something in? "After you've skinned it and dried it, it will go to the tannery, and it goes through

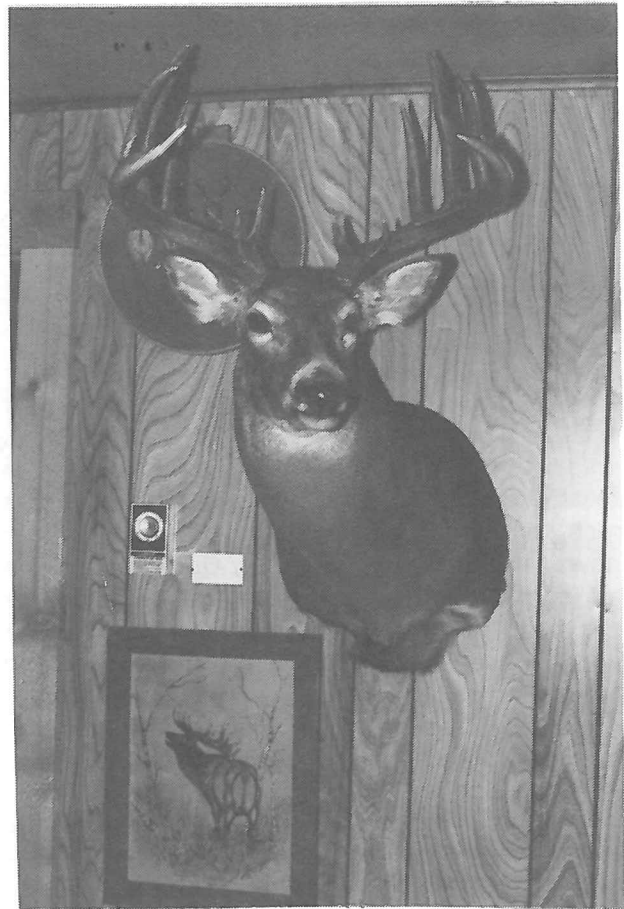


"LIFESIZE BEARS AND MOUNTAIN LIONS ARE VERY POPULAR."

the tanning process. That process can take anywhere from 60 days to 7 or 8 months, depending on how busy the tannery is, and when it went in. I can't send just one or two hides. I have to wait until I get a full shipment. After it comes back, there is usually some other type of season going on. I get some of my capes back around spring time and that's when bear season is on, and they're being processed. I try and do the mounts in the order they come in, just to keep things organized. After my capes come back, I buy the supplies. An elk mount takes a day to a day-and-a-half for me to do; then it has to dry for

10 to 14 days. Then it has to have the finish work done, which takes a couple of hours. This involves removing all of the pins, restoring color to eyelids and nose, brushing and cleaning. In many cases it has to be shipped; so I have to build a crate. It's a long process, and if you want it to be done right, you have to be patient. You start doing too many mounts at one time and the quality starts to go down. I just try to get them out as quickly as possible and not lose quality.

"Elk aren't too bad to work with; some of them are too heavy for me alone. Other than that, they're easy to handle. And their hair isn't as fragile as an antelope. If you rub against the grain of the hair on antelope or deer, it breaks the hair and it's ruined. It will have marks on it for the rest of its duration. You handle mounts by the horns, the nose, and the brisket. The ears are fragile; tip it over and an ear might break off. Of course, the eyes are glass, so if you hit them against something hard they're going to break, and that's the hardest thing to repair. Broken horns are fairly simple to repair. I saw a mount of a bugling bull elk hanging about half way down on a wall. The owner took it off the wall to dust it. He didn't get it back on the nail all the way, and when his secretary came in, she put her hand on its nose, and it came crashing down to the floor. It broke the whole jaw; all the teeth were broken; it shattered it. It had to be remounted. To get a cape big enough for an elk that size is hard. It was a 7 x 8 bull."



"I GUARANTEE THAT THEY'LL LIKE THE MOUNT."

Is there anything you don't mount? "I don't do domestic pets. Not only would I not have the heart for it, but it would be very difficult to get the expressions right, and I don't do rattlesnakes or other reptiles. Rattlesnakes are risky, they're poisonous, and if you scratch yourself on a fang you've been bit more or less. Most of what's in my freezer is my own. I don't have time to do my own things right now. I'm trying to get caught up since the move to Steamboat. I'm behind, but most of my customers are very understanding. They realize what's happened. But then there's some others that are upset. There's nothing I can do about it but keep on working. Normally I have game heads completed in six to eight months."

Wendy told us a little more about moving the business from Hayden to Steamboat. "We were trying to find a bigger house to live in, but we couldn't find one in Hayden that was quite what we wanted; then we found this one. It was nice to have my husband, Gary, closer to his job in Steamboat. I wasn't so hard to leave Hayden because we like the Blacktail area. I do miss my friends very much and the small friendly community. Steamboat in't on a first name basis as much as Hayden is. I am doing more advertising because of the move. I did buy an ad in the yellow pages. But most of my business is brought in by word of mouth. I'll have a



"EVERY ANIMAL IS SUCH AN INDIVIDUAL."

customer who likes his deer mount, and then he tells his two buddies. I have a lot of outfitters who recommend me. I sent out letters a couple of years ago inviting outfitters to come into my studio and see my work. If they like if they can bring their clients. I think I brought in four outfitters that way. Most of them are local. I can ship game heads anywhere in the U.S., which is a plus. This elk that I'm working on now is going to Pennsylvania, and the one in the other room goes to New Jersey. They do go a long ways sometimes. I have many customers from the Steamboat area."

We asked Wendy more about what it takes to get a headmount shipped. "I have to build a wooden crate, and big mounts are shipped by trucks. The rates vary in price because of size. All shipping and crating are extra. I have a set price for the crating. For example, an elk crate is \$55, a deer crate is \$35; then it's shipped freight collect. Customers take care of that on their end.

"It's a little better for a customer who lives in the east to have his elk or antelope mounted here by a taxidermist who is more familiar with the species. Any taxidermist can buy an elk form, but we're a little more familiar with what an elk really looks like in the wild. Whereas Whitetails, we don't see that many Whitetail deer here. I



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"I HAVE A LOT OF OUTFITTERS WHO RECOMMEND ME."

break out every reference photo I can find, and then I mount the Whitetails. The taxidermists back east are experts with Whitetails. And that's where most top Whitetail taxidermists seem to come from."

We asked Wendy how would a person go about shipping something, say like from Canada, to be mounted. "If someone shot an animal out of state and wanted to ship it to me to have it mounted, how would he go about this? First of all, anything that is killed outside the United States, like in Canada, would have to go through customs, which is done at the border. It's not anything complicated; the border patrol just looks at it and makes sure it is a legal kill, tags it, and sends you through. The best thing to do before the hunter goes on the trip, would be to get in touch with his taxidermist and find out how to take care of the animal, how to skin it, flesh it, and salt it while he's there. He could bring it back with him, or dry the skin completely and ship it. But he should find out how to take care of it before he goes on the hunt. Also he needs to check the state's laws and regulations on shipping such items."

Wendy told us about what was hard about her job. "Sometimes to keep on schedule can be hard in a one person operation. At times the hardest thing for me is letting the mount go. I get a little attached to them; after a while there's a lot of TLC in each one. Some of the mounts out front are not mine, but the fellow who they belong to doesn't have any place to keep them at this time. They're paid for, and he comes over and looks at them once in a while. When he does find a place to keep them, its going to be sad, because I'm

**"I DON'T LIKE SEEING ANY OF
IT GO TO WASTE."**

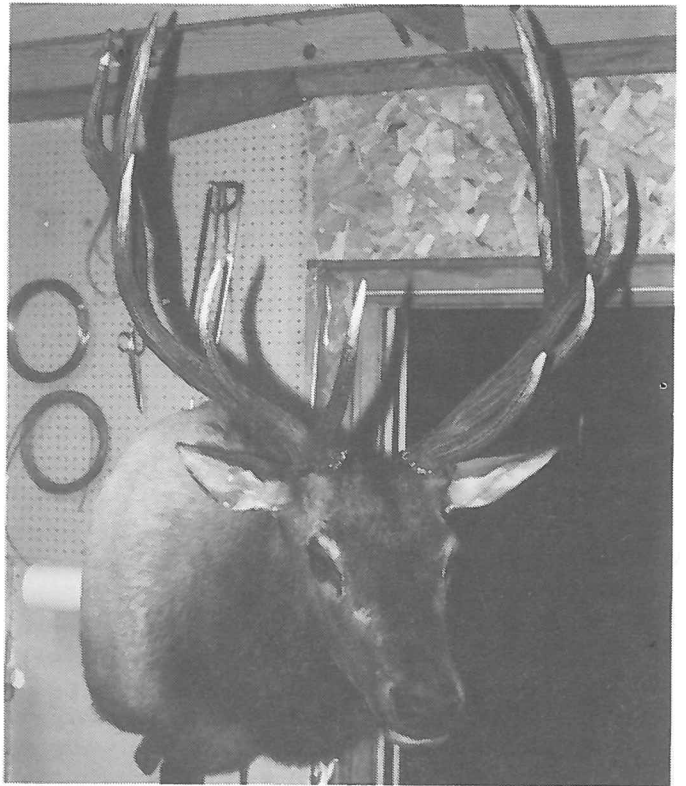
going to hate to see them go. They're so nice, and they're an attention getter, a big Whitetail and a big antelope. Oh well, more room for new faces.

"I have some deer heads left to do and a couple of elk. I will be busy caping heads that will be brought in and running around picking up animals from the lockers. I pick up and deliver from Kremmling to Craig. There is a charge for the gas. But I do it if somebody calls. I understand how hard it is to get your trophy here from Craig or Hayden. I'll run over and get it, and I'll charge a little for gas. I think I'll be just as busy as last year. The hunting should be good. The point restrictions on elk have really helped already. I've had many reports of multi-point bulls being seen. I've got a couple of new outfitters already this year that will be sending me

their clients. I think I'll do alright. I won't have the walk-in business I had in downtown Hayden. I had guys who were driving down the highway that saw my sign and turned around and came back. It was mostly hunters wanting hides tanned. I didn't get that many head mounts from the walk-in business. The head mounts are really bread and butter for me.

"There's two taxidermists in Craig and one in Kremmling, but my biggest competition is in Denver. In Denver, one of my taxidermist friends was telling me that he counted 48 taxidermists in the Yellow Pages. When there's that many, you get a lot of cut-throat prices. A deer head can cost you anywhere from \$100 to \$350. I try and keep my prices in the middle, I want everyone to be able to afford to have their trophy mounted. I just can't see some of the prices that are charged; \$350 for a deer head, that's getting up there. That's not much more than what I charge for an elk. You get a lot of variety. I think people should go to different taxidermists and look at their work. I believe in price shopping, to an extent, but you have to remember that you'll have that mount for the rest of your life. If it's hanging there with two crooked eyes it's going to bother you forever. Go around and compare as many different taxidermists as possible. If the head/hide is frozen there's plenty of time to shop. Don't leave it laying on the back of a truck or in a garage.

"I love to hunt. It's easier to be a bow hunter and a taxidermist than it is to be a rifle hunter and a taxidermist. Rifle season is our busiest season. There's a mad rush during this season. Most of the taxidermists I know are bow hunters. It's the only time we can get away from the shop. I have someone here most of the time when I am gone, to house-sit and maintain my work if anyone comes in. We don't get as many bow hunter's trophies as we do rifle trophies. OK Locker in Steamboat is my drop station.



**"THERE'S A LOT OF
TLC IN EACH ONE."**

"I like working with the animals, it's an art. I'm more of an artist than anything else. I also do a lot of sketching. Oil painting, when I have time, is another favorite. I get to see so many different things; before I started doing this I'd never seen a big horn sheep or a mountain lion; now they are right here. I like to see them re-created and not going to waste. Sometimes someone will say something like, "How can you stand to kill it and then hang it on the wall?" Well, it's already dead; you ate the meat. Why waste the rest of it? At least do something with it. I don't like to see any of it go to waste. Taxidermy is a unique art, and mounts done right are works of art. For some, mounts are the only way they'll see wildlife up close."

**"I'M MORE OF AN ARTIST
THAN ANYTHING ELSE."**

