



Photo by Phil Audibert

Flanked by newspaper clippings, awards and trophies he has mounted, Clint Cockrill holds up a bear skin that he will transform into a life-size "full mount."

in his neck. "I'm going to fix that. I've got to sew that back together somehow and make it look like something."

He then screws the antlers onto some plywood embedded in the form's head, and fits the cape on the form, complete with mouth, Bondo or plastic ears, and glass eyes. He reaches into a multi-drawer plastic box and produces all manner of eyes: dark ones for bear, eerie yellow for coyote, even white for albino. If he doesn't create the ears out of Bondo, he'll use plastic inserts to make them stand up. He'll even spray the nose with a clear coat to make it look wet and alive.

The whole process takes between five and eight hours, but you'll have to wait much longer than that to get your trophy. Because of lag time, he's usually six to eight months out before you'll have something to put on your wall. Besides, just doing deer heads day in and day out can be a little tedious. He likes to vary his routine by mounting fish, birds and small game.

A basic shoulder mount of a deer head at Cockrill's Taxidermy costs about \$500. A "full mount" of a bighorn sheep, for example, can be \$2,800 and up. But deer heads are generally

cheaper to do than most small game. "The reason small game costs more is because the form's more and it takes twice as long to do one." And with birds, the tanning process is different. It's also different if you want a hide to be soft, such as a bearskin rug, for example. In that case he will treat the tanned skin with a special oil to make it more pliable.

Clint's father walks into the shop and points to a dusty looking straight on deer head on the wall. He mentions that it was his first big deer, shot in 1974. "First buck I ever killed," he says proudly.

Then we look at the incredible deer head that



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This deer head, belonging to Quentin Flowers of the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club, scored 167 on the Boone and Crockett scale before deductions. Note the realistic muscle roll on the inside shoulder.

belongs to Quentin Flowers. It will be mounted on a free standing vine-draped dead tree trunk that will look good in a corner of a living room. They discuss this deer head's Boone and Crockett "score," and whether it is "typical," or "non-typical," and if there are any "drop tines." It is a complicated formula that takes into account the breadth, length and circumference of the antlers. Before deductions, this head scores 167, which is a monster, but not quite big enough to make "the book." To make the book, you have to score 170 net "and it takes a big deer to score 170 net, once you take off the deductions," says Bob Cockrill.

A look at the Boone and Crockett web site reveals the world record "typical" (symmetrical) white tail deer trophy was taken in Saskatchewan in 1993. It scored 213 5/8 with 14 points. The world record "non-typical" deer trophy came from Missouri. It is something of a freak with 44 points, but many of those tines point down, which makes it non-typical. Still, this deer, which looks like it is wearing a brush pile on its head, scored 333 7/8.

The Cockrills originally hail from the Clifton area of Northern Virginia, and Clint used to have a taxidermy shop on Mount Paris near Winchester. They've been farming their 200-acre cattle and commercial hay operation near Unionville for nine years now. Cockrill's Taxidermy is located in a separate building in the barnyard. Sometimes when Clint shows up at the shop, hunters are already lined up with deer carcasses in their trucks.

Six months later they'll come back to collect the finished product and pay the balance right about when Clint is helping his Dad make hay. And, even though it's June, when he rolls out that trophy, you can rest assured that it is indeed that same monster buck that magically appeared before you in that frost-covered cut-over cornfield one memorable December morning.

# The Taxidermist



If you're a hunter, you can relate to this. If not, proceed with caution.

**Y**ou've done everything right. You have your license and your tags and your written permission from the landowner. You've paid attention to the weather and the wind. You've rattled and lured and sat shivering in this stand since before first light.

And then it happens: a monster buck appears upwind of you. He stands there, magnificent in the morning light at the edge of a frost-covered cut-over cornfield. His brisket is full. He has the telltale sway in his back and belly of maturity.

And look at that rack! Eight broadly spaced upwardly stretching tines, symmetrical left and right. He might even score well enough to make the Boone and Crockett "book." He has had several years to spread his good genes through the burgeoning white tail deer population; he belongs to you now.

You may be 10 years old; you may be 70, but this might be a once in a lifetime opportunity. Don't mess it up. You will your shaking hands still,



Above, Bob Cockrill (right) took and mounted every trophy you see in this picture. The wall continues around the corner to his left. He started out in taxidermy in the 1970s and passed the tradition on to his son, Clint. Left, after the acidic tanning process the deer hide is neutralized in a baking soda solution.

Photos by Phil Audibert



put the cross hairs on him right behind the shoulder, squeeze the trigger and bring him down with one shot.

Well done! You have a trophy buck. You want to put him on your wall and remember this moment for the rest of your life. But what you do next is crucial.

Clint Cockrill of Unionville is a full time taxidermist. He's extremely busy this time of year and will remain so until early summer. He will be happy to mount this trophy buck of yours just as long as you are patient and you have followed the advice of his video entitled, *Field Dressing, Skinning and Quartering Deer*. The 42-minute-long DVD, by How To Productions, shows in graphic detail what you the hunter should do to ensure that you will have a fine looking trophy on your wall and plenty of unspoiled meat in your freezer.

Some typical mistakes that will make a deer more difficult or even impossible to mount include cutting the skin up too high on the throat of the animal. In the video, Clint uses a surprisingly small knife to expertly field dress the carcass. He never cuts higher than the bottom of the rib cage so that he has plenty of unmarred pelt to mount.

"Don't cut the throat on the deer," he cautions. If a coup de grace is necessary, "Go ahead and shoot him again in the heart and lungs. It's fairer to the animal that way." Besides Clint can only do so much with needle and thread, and you want this trophy to be, well, perfect.

The next thing he recommends is you bring him the carcass. "I would rather do the skinning than have someone else do the skinning and mess it up," he explains, adding "Don't let it ride around in the back of your truck in 70 degree heat for four or

five days before you bring it to your taxidermist. Get it refrigerated or cooled down as soon as possible, even freeze it," he recommends. "Bacteria is your worst enemy to your mount...You can't do anything if the hair starts to fall out of it."

So, you take his advice, load the field dressed deer into your pick up truck and bump down the long farm lane off of Route 522 in Unionville to Cockrill's Taxidermy. The first thing you see when you walk in is a wall of mounted heads, floor to ceiling. It stretches around two corners and features not just deer, but elk and moose, even a full size black bear. All of these animals were taken and mounted by Clint's father, Bob Cockrill over the past 35 years. With some formal training and a lot of learn-as-you-go, the father passed on to his son the tricks of the trade ever since Clint was eight years old.

"And then he went to school and learned all the new stuff that they had come out with in the last 15 or 20 years that I didn't know about," says the father. "So, I taught him everything that I knew, and he learned a whole bunch of new stuff and wouldn't tell me what he had learned." His eyes twinkle, and Clint responds with an eye roll. "So, he's better than me," continues Bob. "You need to be good in this day and age because there's a lot of good taxidermists around."

Sifting through stacks of photographs, it is pretty obvious that Clint is one of the good ones. "I'm not the best, but I'm right in there with them, so I'm told," says Clint pointing to a row of taxidermy award ribbons on the wall. "Every mount I do has a blue-ribbon potential."

Clint has done it all: small game such as



Photos by Phil Audibert  
You can get everything from McKenzie Taxidermy Supply catalog: from left to right: a plastic deer ear liner, coyote eyes, a bear's snout.

foxes, coyotes, squirrels and skunks, all manner of fish, and he can even do exotics such as gerenuks from Africa and aoudads from heaven knows where. He's done wild boar and mountain goats, javelins and moose, even a longhorn steer. One of his favorites was a wolverine. And he's done some pets, including a parakeet.

He's also stuffed and mounted his fair share of road kill. "Can I fix it?" he asks rhetorically. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depends on how bad it is. Needle and thread. As long as the skin and hair's there, you can fix it." Of small game and fish, he advises, "Don't field dress your small game. Don't field dress your fish, because I do all that. If you gut the fish, then I have to fix it."

Not long ago he did a full mount of a Russian bear with a head as big as a trash can and paws the size of jagged oven mitts. He has a picture of it standing on its hind feet, towering over his six-year-old son, Ethan.

How in the world

did he get a Russian bear back here? "A guy went over there and killed him. They skinned him down; they shipped the cape back to me. The whole hide and the head, they put it in a box, shipped it straight here," he responds nonchalantly. "This was a small bear believe it or not."

He points to an inch and a-half-thick catalog entitled *McKenzie Taxidermy Supply*. This is where most of the stuff comes from, the foam forms of Russian bears, lesser Kudus, Cape Buffalo, and yes whitetail deer. "The mannequins are being sculpted a whole lot better today," he

says as he riffles through pages and pages of examples of everything from heads at various angles to full bodies in various poses. "Things have progressed so much."

Even small things such as eyes, ears and teeth are startlingly realistic. He points to a form of a snarling wild boar's mouth. "We get all the fine detail in the mouth that we didn't have years ago," he continues. "The tusks are fake," he points out. You could use the real ones, he says, "but a lot of times over the years, they'll crack and break."

Exotic species aside, in this part of the world, Clint's bread and butter is deer heads. He'll do about 100 a year. On this particular day, Clint is working on a magnificent buck that was shot recently by an eleven-year-old. Clint had already taken measurements around the neck and from the eye to the snout to know what size form to order. And he had determined from the boy whether he wants the

head to be looking left or right.

"I believe that you don't show as much muscle on a straight form. When a deer turns his neck he'll have a muscle roll that rolls down through his neck." He demonstrates on a completed deer head belonging to Quentin Flowers, of the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club. Flowers was featured in an *Insider* about hunting about a year ago. "Guys like to see that muscle roll," smiles Clint. "I get a lot of compliments on that."

Once these decisions are made by the customer, Clint will "cape out" the carcass. Working swiftly and deftly with an extremely sharp knife, he skins the deer from its rear end to its head as it hangs from the ceiling in his blood-stained work area. Just like we take a sweater off, the "cape" rolls off of the animal as Clint carefully separates the skin from the fascia, totally at ease with the knife in either hand.

He carefully exposes the skull, saws off the antlers at the base, tags them with your number and hangs them up on a wire. Next, he will "turn the lips and split the nose." Then, usually at this point, he will roll the cape up, put it in a heavy duty garbage bag, label it according to the number on the antlers, and put it in one of his five chest freezers.

When he returns to it, Clint will thaw it out, don surgical gloves and place the por-

tion of the skin that he will mount, basically from the armpits forward, into a five gallon bucket containing a tanning solution called "a pickle" for a minimum of three days. "It's got some nasty stuff in it," he says of the pickle, wrinkling his nose. "If you stuck your hand down there and left your hand in there, it would burn all the skin off of it." Still, Clint prefers to do all his tanning in house.

After the three days or more are up, he pulls the skin out of the tanning solution and washes it repeatedly. "I have to kill the acid," he says as he dumps sodium bicarbonate, basically "high end baking soda," into the pickle. It bubbles and froths menacingly; then settles down to become as inert as bath water.

He then rinses the cured hide, inside and out in a baking soda-laced bath to completely neutralize the tanning process. After it drains, he moves over to an electric scraper/shaver to rid the hide of all excess flesh. "That's got to come off," he cautions. "You can't leave that on there or it will rot. It's all got to be smooth."

This is a delicate stage in the process; one slip and you may ruin the mount. "The most important thing here is not to cut a hole in the man's cape." As it is, he has worked around bullet holes before, and on this particular cape, the deer "apparently got in a fight." His opponent's antler split his lip and gored a hole



Photo by Clint Cockrill  
A stuffed Russian bear towers over Ethan Cockrill, age 6.



Photos by Cockrill Taxidermy and Phil Audibert  
It's not just deer heads. Cockrill Taxidermy also mounts fish and birds, above, and small game such as a bobcat and a fox with a quail in his mouth, at right.

