

Birds

Continued from Page C1

of people who are bad at construction.”

Rhodes wasn't interested in being subpar at the art-form, so at age 23, he attended the Pennsylvania Institute of Taxidermy, where he spent months mounting different animals and taking business classes in preparation for his career. He then opened his own taxidermy shop in Connecticut, which he operated for 10 years. Then he and his wife moved to Kentucky, where he worked at Gunner's Taxidermy, a business that specializes in a wide range of animals, from Alaska sea ducks to African game. During his two and a half years working there, Rhodes mounted lions, buffalo, armadillos, honey badgers, crocodiles, African porcupines and much more. But more importantly, he had the opportunity to perfect his bird mounts.

“I mounted several hundred birds when I worked there,” Rhodes said. “I had a goal to get experience and compete [in regional, state, national and international taxidermy contests].”

In recent years, Rhodes has won a number of awards for his detailed and realistic mounts. He competed at the master's level and won the “best of” category for waterfowl at the 2014 Kentucky Taxidermist Association Annual Convention and Competition, then went on to win the same award in 2015 from the New England Association of Taxidermists and Maine Association of Taxidermists.

Eager to return to New England, Rhodes and his wife moved to Maine with their two young children in February 2015, and he opened North Rhodes Taxidermy. He runs the one-man shop out of a studio at their house in Stockton Springs, and he has quickly grown his customer base. On Tuesday, the loft of his studio was filled with boxes of tanned animal



Ryan Rhodes uses a tool to gently move feathers in place on a bird at his taxidermy shop in Stockton Springs on Tuesday.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

skins, antlers and horns, and the five freezers in his garage were filled with dead birds waiting to be mounted.

“When my wife comes home [from work], I'll have a moose in the bathtub,” said Rhodes, who was planning to soak three moose hides that afternoon. Tanned hides need to be soaked so they are pliable enough to be mounted.

While Rhodes mounts a long list of fish, reptiles and mammals, about 70 percent of his business is birds. In fact, he's become so well known for his bird mounts that taxidermists throughout the country hire him to complete bird mounts for their customers.

“This one's going to New York,” Rhodes said of the cinnamon teal.

The coast of Maine is a top destination for duck hunters in pursuit of species such as scoters and eiders, and Rhodes has tapped into that customer base through local guides. He also mounts his fair share of wood ducks, pheasants,

geese, long-tailed ducks, scaups and pintails.

“I love waterfowl,” Rhodes said. “If you're not into waterfowl hunting, it's hard to explain. It's just one of those things that gets into your blood.”

In the past year, Rhodes has mounted more than 200 birds. While most of those birds are game birds, he also has mounted a few nongame birds for museums and nature centers, including different owl species and falcons. And when presented with a species he's never mounted before, he often has to do a great deal of research about the bird's anatomy, movements and habits.

“I love wildlife, that's why I do what I do,” Rhodes said.

The price for one of his mounted ducks is \$300, and a lot more goes into the process than what meets the eye.

First, he skins the bird carefully and uses a special wheel to remove the fat from the bird's thin skin until it's nearly transparent. He then creates a cast of the bird's skull and beak.

“If you use the real butt to clean them,” he explained.

Then, he usually uses a plastic foam form, wires and other materials to “stuff” the body, injecting certain areas with a variety of synthetic materials including silicone, liquid plastic and polyurethane casting resin called Fast Cast. The bird's feet and legs, which are reinforced and anchored with wires, are especially important to preserve with these plastics. If you don't, they shrivel and are likely to attract insects and rodents.

The bird then takes a few weeks to dry, after which Rhodes will air-brush its feet and beak with lacquer-based paints, referring to one of the many field guides he keeps on hand.

“It's more than just putting a pillowcase over a pillow,” Rhodes said of the process.

Customers often request the animal be in a certain position, and some customers request elaborate

mounts and display cases. That's when the woodworking skills Rhodes learned while in construction come in handy, as well as the painting lessons he took when he was a kid. And when it comes to materials and tools, he thinks outside the box.

“I'll be at Rite Aid buying a bunch of cosmetics and people will think I'm crazy,” he said. “I just use whatever works best.”

And sometimes that's a blush brush.

In June, Rhodes will give a seminar on mounting waterfowl at the 45th annual National Taxidermists Association Convention and Competition, where he will also compete. This year, the event will run June 9-12 at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in Champion, Pennsylvania.

To learn more about the competition, visit nationaltaxidermists.com. And to learn more about North Rhodes Taxidermy, visit northrhodestaxidermy.com, or follow North Rhodes Taxidermy on Facebook.

Holyoke

Continued from Page C1

that were in the truck — both were trained to sniff out gunpowder and recognized the present danger — ended the situation, sending the man scurrying.

While it's easy to root for Guay and celebrate his dogs after reading about the cases they helped solve and the people they helped find, there's another side to the book that is stunningly open and heart-wrenching.

Guay explains that so many years dealing with the deaths and near deaths of others took a toll on him that he hadn't expected.

Now, he says, he recognizes he had post-traumatic stress disorder. At the time, two warden colleagues recognized their friend had changed and was not himself at all. They stepped in, told him he had to take time off and helped him begin his journey on the road to recovery.

From that dark place, Guay has found light. He tells stories that need telling in a first-person style that is very readable. Part of the credit for that, of course, belongs to Flora, who agreed to help tell Guay's story.

Others in his shoes — nonwriters with stories to tell — would be well-advised to do the same and seek the aid of a professional who knows how to craft a tale.

In this case, Guay picked well. Flora has published 14 mystery and true crime books, and “Finding Amy,” about a case that Guay helped solve, was an Edgar Award nominee.

With that said, those accustomed to the hilarious warden tales, a la Ford, won't find those here. Guay's accounts are factual and interesting, but there aren't many laughs to be found.

Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course.

Even the dark stories deserve to be told. And here, they're told very well.

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