Hunters and fisherman make hobby a business

Story: KATHY PARKER
Photos: DOUG BAUMAN

What began as a childhood interest in hunting and fishing and a hobby of mounting his prize catches, Lyle Johnson has turned into a thriving business. As owner of Dumont Taxidermy, Johnson has seen more animals in his 37 years than most people see in a lifetime.

A visitor to his shop can see anything from Michigan coyotes and deer to the tiny African dik-dik. "I've mounted everything from the record-holding full size Michigan black bear to a 581-pound, 9½-foot-long tuna," Johnson says.

He and colleagues Jim Burton and Owen Mitchell skin and mount about 175 deer heads a year, and as many birds fish and waterfowl.

They are all licensed taxidermists, and the shop has a special federal license required to mount waterfowl. Johnson opened his Avon Township shop in 1970, after working as an apprentice with Burton in Hilde's Taxidermy. Burton joined Johnson's staff five years ago.

Michigan deer are the company's "bread and butter," Burton says, but the front of the shop is conspicuous for its display of African safari catches. Mammoth heads of warthog buffalo, reedbuck and topi, as well as gazelle and impalla, share wall and shelf space with a zebra skin and a howling Michigan coyote.

REAR ROOMS sport dozens of antelope and deer horns, hand-crafted head forms, freezers of fish and birds and a salting area. Dumont's skins the animals, and salts the skin to preserve it temporarily until it reaches a California tannery.

"The fur is dressed at the tannery," Burton says, "similar to the way a woman's fur coat is dressed. It's a minimum of six months before the skins are shipped back to us."

The men are not idle while the horns dry and skins are in process. The cyclic nature of hunting seasons keeps them busy year round. September to December, the three work 14 hours a day, preparing skins and mounting life-size animals for customers. When deer season ends, birds, fish and waterfowl take most of the taxidermists' time.

The birds are cleaned and placed in wooden tumblers filled with hardwood sawdust to revive their color and texture. Burton says most birds come out of the process better-looking than when they were alive.

Life-size animals and birds are stuffed with excelsior, a type of shredded wood, and through wiring, can be made to appear in any posture the customer desires. Fish, traditional mounting favorites, are retained with little, if any, reproduction. Plastic coating is applied to fins to prevent breakage. Burton says. Color is revived through air brushing and oil-paint. The men recently painted a sand shark caught in the Gulf of Mexico.

"IT OFFENDS some people to think of stuffing and mounting animals, but it's really conservation—using of the entire animal. We can't touch endangered species, such as owls or hawks, or any of the African spotted cats."

Both Johnson and Burton point to the dichotomy of the spotted cat law, saying, "It's not against the law to go to Africa and shoot them, but you can't bring them into the United States."

Birds, such as pheasants and partridges, take the least amount of time to prepare, he says, "because there's not much to them." Fish are the most time-consuming, because an intricate process of cleaning, sewing, shellacing and painting goes into their preservation.

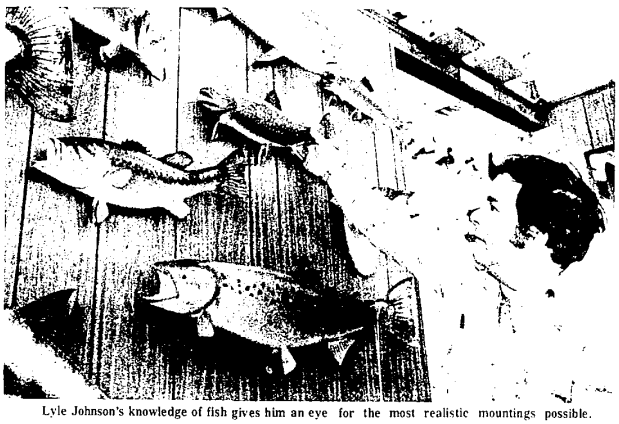
Although some customers have brought in pets they hoped to retain for posterity, Burton says he does not enjoy that aspect of taxidermy.

"It's difficult to preserve a tame animal so that it appears as it was in life," he says. "And most of these pets have lived with their owners for 10 years or more—it's never quite right."

Now, he says, he is exercising his taxidermy skills on a canary, a red fox and someone's pet guinea pig.

The young red fox (above) was killed by an automobile and is being preserved, while the African warthog (right) was captured on safari and took almost a year to complete.

Jim Burton (left) and Owen Mitchell prepare to mount a sand shark from the Gulf of Mexico.



Lyle Johnson's knowledge of fish gives him an eye for the most realistic mountings possible.

OU prof ties magnetics to heart research

Story: KATHY PARKER
Photos: DOUG BAUMAN

About one-half mile from the center of Oakland University's campus, accessible only by a makeshift dirt and gravel road, stands an unobtrusive but unique building: Charles F. Kettering Magnetics Laboratory.

Few students, and fewer area residents, are aware of its existence, but the startling experiments taking place there could change the face of heart research and diagnostic techniques in just a few years. The researchers, under the direction of Dr. Norman Tepley and with financing by the Michigan Heart Association, hope to perfect a means of measuring cardiac output—the flow of blood from the heart to other parts of the body.

Using "noninvasive" magnetic techniques and a superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID), Tepley hopes to increase the speed and accuracy of detecting heart abnormalities.

Tepley, an associate professor of physics at OU, says two research projects are under way. The first is the development of the magneto-cardiogram; the second, measurement of an accurate magnetic signal from flowing blood.

THE MAGNETOCARDIOGRAM is the magnetic analog of the electrocardiogram, in wide use in clinics and hospitals as part of a routine physical, measuring the electrical activity of the heart. The new device, Tepley says, "contains some clinically useful information," and is also being studied at MIT and Stanford, as well as in Helsinki.

"Our major thrust at the moment is measurement of a magnetic signal from flowing blood," Tepley says. "It has become our primary interest, basically because we can do it better than anybody else, I think, in our laboratory."

Kettering Lab was built in 1963 in one of the most secluded areas of OU's campus. Financed by the C.F. Kettering Foundation, the building was designed as a facility for experiments requiring low magnetic fields and maximum freedom from magnetic and mechanical disturbance. The site's geomagnetic field has been surveyed and found especially uniform, and construction of the building is completely nonmagnetic.

Tepley's research differs from other, similar projects in a number of ways, the most basic being a difference in the type of magnetic field applied to the subject.

"Others used large magnetic fields, and when I saw the first paper on the topic, I thought, 'Why didn't I think of that?' " Tepley says. "As it happened, they could not interpret their data. With a weak magnetic field, we are getting data that we are able to interpret—we've essentially reached the point where we've demonstrated the technique works."

TEPLEY'S COLLOBORATORS include Dr. Adrain Kantrowitz, a cardiovascular surgeon and researcher, and Dr. Andreas von Recum, both of Sinai Hospital. Gary Boismier, an OU grad student in physics, and Ron Cooly, OU undergrad, work with Tepley in the lab.

"What we have are very large coils, producing a weak but very uniform magnetic field. This magnetizes the blood, and we get a magnetic signal from the flowing blood. I think it's the uniformity of the field which makes it possible to interpret the data."

Tepley's experiments could have long-term repercussions for the heart patient and for medical science in general.

"To the patient with heart disease, it could be a quantitative means of evaluating various kinds of treatment, for instance, the effect of drugs. Now we simply give the drugs and ask the patient how he feels in a few days—not very scientific," Tepley says.

"It could be developed to the point where it becomes part of a routine physical exam, indicating possible abnormalities or letting him know all is well.

"The other part, which sometimes gets me excited, is that if you can make it work really well, it's conceivable that you can measure blood flow in other parts of the body, in arteries that supply the brain, the legs, kidneys—this has considerable medical significance."

Tepley's grant from the Michigan Heart Association has been committed for at least another year. He hopes to perfect his technique and have it available for use in hospitals within five years.

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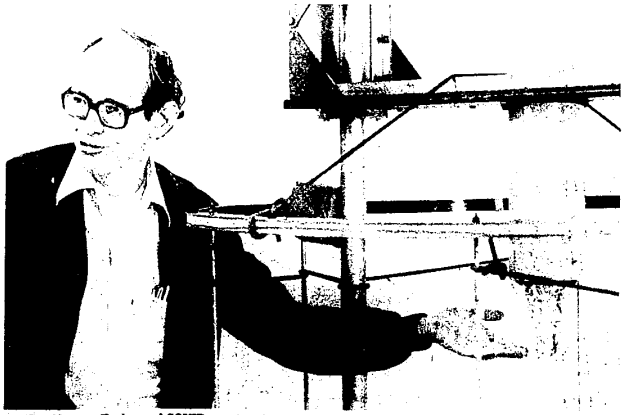
—Dr. Norman Tepley

The nonmagnetic Kettering lab makes it possible for Tepley to conduct experiments impossible in other labs.



Dr. Norman Tepley and SQUID, co-stars in the research project that could change cardiac techniques in the near future.