

State touts top taxidermy academy

By Mack McConnell

The brook trout scans the rocks in the stream bed as it swims slowly against the current, or so it seems, just for an instant. Of course you know it's not real, it's an illusion created by a talented taxidermist, but the artistic way the mount is displayed gives a feeling of motion and reality to the observer.

It is that kind of quality artistic rendering that is the stock and trade of the Academy of Realistic Taxidermy (ART). The academy, located 40 miles north of Havre near the Canadian Border, was named Best in North America in 1999 by the National Taxidermists Association.

It's no accident that the acronym for the academy is ART. "It's what distinguishes us from a lot of schools," says Steve Faechner, the school's founder. "Taxidermy is not just game heads on a wall. Taxidermy has evolved into a full-fledged form of wildlife art. To do it right, you have to have a knowledge of the anatomy of the animals you are dealing with and you have to concentrate on detail and technique. Composition and design are critical."

The remote location of the school has not deterred the instructors, who are flown in from around the nation one at a time to teach two-week sections of the curriculum. Nor has it deterred students who have driven from as far away as Florida to complete the eight-week course. The students live on campus while taking the classes. The campus is alcohol free and classes are tobacco free while instruction is under way.

"The instructors are the best in the world," Steve says, "They are all experts in their fields and many are national champions. A couple of them have even done work for the Smithsonian Institute, that's the Mount Everest of Taxidermy. 'Masters building future masters' is our motto."

The maximum class size is eight students. The curriculum includes two weeks of instruction about game heads,

two weeks on birds, two weeks on fish and two weeks on full-size mammal mounts. He said even intermediate taxidermists benefit from the courses because techniques vary from one instructor to another.

"We concentrate on quality, not speed," says Steve. "As you get more proficient, you get faster but that is not the goal."

Steve has a few tips for those who want to have fish or animals mounted.

"Get the animal to the taxidermist as quickly as possible," he says. "The animal starts to deteriorate the instant it dies. If it is a deer, don't drag it. You'll damage the hair and hide. If it is a fish

the replicate habitat that goes with the mount is also an artistic endeavor, he adds.

"We also have a section on learning the business side of taxidermy," he says, "That is very important. When students leave here, hopefully they can set up their own shops."

Steve knows first hand that the business side of taxidermy can be very difficult. There were some hard times for the school and Steve and his wife Kim and their two daughters in the beginning.

"Times were tough but there were those who stood by me and were



This golden pheasant, mounted by Steve Faechner, was a first place winner in the 2002 National Competition.

or bird, don't gut it. Freeze it whole. Wrap a fish in a wet towel before putting it in the freezer."

Regardless of how fast a fish is put in the freezer, they have to be painted later. "The colors on a fish begin to fade the minute you hook it," he says. There is some painting to every kind of mount, even deer and bears, around the eyes and nose," he adds. "It's very detailed and exacting work." Creating

understanding," he says.

Steve includes Hill County Electric Cooperative and Triangle Telephone Cooperative among those who were understanding. "We are members of both of those co-ops. They worked with me during those years. They have been very helpful and their service has been great."

Steve was a fourth generation railroad worker before he had an

accident that required three surgical procedures on his back. Then he decided to become a taxidermist.

“I thought, ‘what a wonderful way to make a living, I can fish and hunt and do what I want to do.’ In the beginning, I did a little too much fishing and hunting and not enough working. I learned I have to carefully choose my fishing and hunting days.”

In 1989, he attended a taxidermy school in Iowa. “I came back from Iowa disappointed. I didn’t learn that much there,” he says. In 1994, he opened a commercial tannery.

“Then, in 1995, I went to the World Taxidermy Show in Gainesville, Georgia and my life changed,” he says. “The World Show, which takes place every other year, features about 200 taxidermists from all over the world. They have extremely talented artists displaying their work there, including some from Montana. The show includes outstanding workshops. That’s why we encourage our students to participate in competitive shows. It’s a learning experience even if they just attend and don’t compete.”

The academy’s students have been very successful in competitive shows. In one show, students and former students of the academy won 12 Best of Category awards.



Steve Faechner, the founder of the Academy of Realistic Taxidermy, poses between two of his prize mounts.

“My dream was to have a student become a national champion and then come back to the school to teach,” Steve says, “It appears that is going to happen.”

Steve, who was raised in the Havre area, was able to purchase a building for the academy that was formerly part of a U.S. Air Force radar installation.

“The building is indestructible and

large enough to fulfill our needs,” he says. The residence for Steve and his family and the dormitories for the instructors and students are in two other buildings on the site.

“We’ve started a taxidermy supplies business here too,” he adds.

Steve believes the future for taxidermy is promising because a growing number of people are beginning to view it as an art form.

“There are still those who think of us as somehow being murderers of animals, but those who know us realize we love nature and love wildlife.”

He received the national association’s President’s Award in 2002 for creating the academy. He sees a bright future for the school.

“Presently we are one of the best and one of the cheapest schools in the world,” he says with a smile. “That cheapest part may have to change.”

Steve welcomes visitors to the academy which includes a showroom full of mounts and a library.

For more information about the academy, Write to A.R.T., 23474 Road 250 N, Havre MT 59501-8051, call (406) 394-1514, e-mail bpfd@taxidermyart.net, or go on the web at www.taxidermyart.net.



Scott Brewer, a national champion taxidermist, is shown giving instruction in a class at the Academy of Artistic Taxidermy.