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Taxidermist seeks to capture snapshot of life

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Well over a year ago, an ad caught my eye for Frozen in Flight taxidermy. The fact that this service specialized in waterfowl, game birds, turkeys and exotic species piqued my curiosity.

Taxidermy is a technique to preserve animals that has been practiced since antiquity. Historians trace taxidermy back to early hunters who formed animal skins over mud and rock for use in hunting rituals. Much later in the early 19th century, hunters began taking their trophies to upholstery shops where their animal skins were stuffed with rags and cotton, and where the term "stuffed animal" got its origin.

The practice has since evolved into a science of specialized tools in a gifted artisan's hands. The goal of an avian taxidermist is to capture the nature of the species and preserve the grandeur and beauty of the individual bird.

I recently caught up with Rob Olson, the owner and craftsman of Frozen in Flight, whose studio and workshop are near the Diamond on West Moore Street in Northside Richmond.

One of a few local practitioners who specialize exclusively in avian taxidermy, his fascination with birds goes back to childhood years. Along with numerous taxidermy classes, he gained experience through apprenticeships with several skilled practitioners in Louisiana, Georgia and Oregon.

Olson's guiding artistic principle is to capture a snapshot of life for each of his specimens, and each waterfowl species in his studio displayed true flight or landing behavior as well as its exquisite color and feather patterns. A close view of a bird reveals intricate color tones and dappling that are nearly invisible in the field when birds are spotted from afar, even when using high-powered binoculars.

Olson's customers are mainly hunters, folks who want to hold onto the memory of daybreak with friends in a favorite marsh where flocks of ducks and geese crisscross overhead, hanging just below the clouds. Also among his customers, though, are several avian collectors who specialize in particular species.

Olson's birds are displayed in several East Coast museums, and he has won prestigious awards from taxidermist associations in Virginia and Maryland.

When I visited his studio, Olson was preparing a tundra swan, a large and magnificent species that winters along the Virginia coast and breeds in the arctic tundra. The mounted specimen seemed suspended in air, with the bird alertly looking for a landing spot, feet extended and poised for touchdown, truly frozen in flight.

Olson, a young and enthusiastic artisan, has specimens displayed at several local merchants: a ring-necked pheasant at Orvis, a pair of wood ducks at Green Top Sporting Goods, and a flock of ruddy ducks at Dick's Sporting Goods. You can learn more about Olson's craft and see his photo gallery at his Web site <http://www.frozeninflight.com>.

Contact Jerry Uhlman at flyways@verizon.net.

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