

THE BEST OF BONES: VIA BEETLES

By Glen Schmitt
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Waite Park, Minn. — Rorri Peterson of Waite Park figures everyone needs a hobby. His include just about anything to do with the outdoors, especially deer hunting, and a self-proclaimed fascination with deer antlers.

But this Waite Park resident has taken his passion for antlers to an entirely different level. In fact, Peterson has turned his hobby into a nice little side job — with the help of some beetles.

That's right, beetles, the dermestid beetle to be exact. Along with knowing a lot about deer and other big game animals, Peterson has become quite a beetle expert and he combines his knowledge of both to produce some of the most beautiful European skull mounts you'll find.

As the name says, this style of mount was and remains very popular in Europe. Instead of mounting the entire shoulder and head of the animal with hide attached, a European mount involves just the skull or the skull and antlers.

According to Peterson, European mounts are becoming increasingly popular here in the states. As taxidermy costs rise, more hunters are opting for European mounts because they look nice at only a fraction of the cost of a traditional mount.

"I've just always been a fan of European mounts and always wanted my own business," Peterson said. "With mounts getting more expensive, there seems to be a bigger market for European mounts."

The cost is noteworthy. Peterson said a traditional deer shoulder mount often costs in excess of \$500, while he can do a European skull mount from start to finish for about \$75. Bigger animals such as elk and buffalo cost a bit more but are still much cheaper than a traditional



mount.

But it's the process Peterson implements that's most interesting. Back in the good old days, skulls were usually left outside to rot and self-bleach. Many hunters also boil their skulls — neither of which provides the best results possible in the finished product.

Peterson said he boiled skulls for about 15 years before figuring out his beetlin' process. He was never happy with the look of a boiled skull and says that the right way and the best way to do a European mount is with dermestid beetles.

"I've had guys tell me they can do the same job by boiling their skulls," he said. "But once I show them my work and compare a boiled skull to one of mine that's beetled, they realize the difference in quality and appearance."

A little over two years ago, Peterson started researching European mounts and dermestid beetles on the Internet and through various pieces of literature. He soon discovered that these beetles do the most effective job on skulls.

In short, they pretty much eat everything away on the inside and outside of the skull, while leaving the horns or antlers intact. Peterson said they get all the flesh and muscle, which is something that's never completely accomplished through boiling a skull.

He purchased his first batch of beetles from a company in California — about 40 in all arrived via the mail. He's still working off that same batch, which he now estimates exceeds 40,000 when he's most busy.

"The more heads I put in the box with the beetles, the more they reproduce," he said. "They only have about a four-month lifespan, but continue to reproduce quickly."

The "box" Peterson refers to is what he calls his Beetle Box. It's an enclosed, temperature controlled environment where the beetles live and work. He places the skulls in the box and the beetles begin to clean them up.

This takes place only after Peterson does some prep work, which includes removing the hide, eyes, and brains. But once the skulls are in the box, it takes only 10 to 12 days to completely clean a deer skull, or about three weeks for something larger, such as a buffalo.

Once the beetles have done their job, the "de-bugging" process begins. Peterson takes the clean skull and dips it into scalding hot water. This kills the beetles and gets the skull ready for the whitening process, which involves a liquid chemical mixture.

"I just paste it on the skull with a brush, wait three days and brush it off," Peterson said. "It's like chalk when it



Rorri Peterson of Waite Park uses beetles to clean animal skulls for making European mounts. The whitetail skull above will be completely white when the process is done. Photos courtesy of Glen Schmitt

dries and gets taken off."

After that, he rinses the skull off and applies a satin finish to protect the bone. The skull dries and is then completed. The entire process sounds relatively simple enough.

But Peterson is quick to point out that this isn't a glamour job. In fact, the process was featured on the Discovery Channel's popular show, "Dirty Jobs" with Mike Rowe, and it definitely qualifies as a "dirty job."

First and foremost is the smell. There's a distinct odor wafting from Peterson's work area. Understandable when you've got rotting animal skulls lying around, although Peterson seems to be oblivious to it.

"People always ask me how I can stand the smell," he said. "My answer is always the same: What smell?"

Then there are the beetles. Imagine putting your hands in a box of 40,000 beetles and removing a skull crawling with the little creatures. The beetles also require a lot of care and die easily if the tem-

perature in the box isn't right or they don't receive enough moisture.

Although it's never happened, Peterson is always leery about the beetles getting loose. He says that's why most taxidermists don't do European mounts. If the beetles escape, it wouldn't take long for them to "eat up" a showroom of finished, traditional mounts.

As far as he knows, there are only two other companies in Minnesota that use beetles to make European mounts. That could explain his success in just two years. Last year for example, Peterson completed 190 heads for customers throughout the state.

He's done everything from shark jaws to moose skulls, down to the smallest rodent skulls. He says there isn't anything he can't do and noted that antelope and bear skulls have kept him busy in recent weeks.

"It's not something just anyone should, could, or even want to start," he said. "For me it's a hobby — but it's a fun hobby."