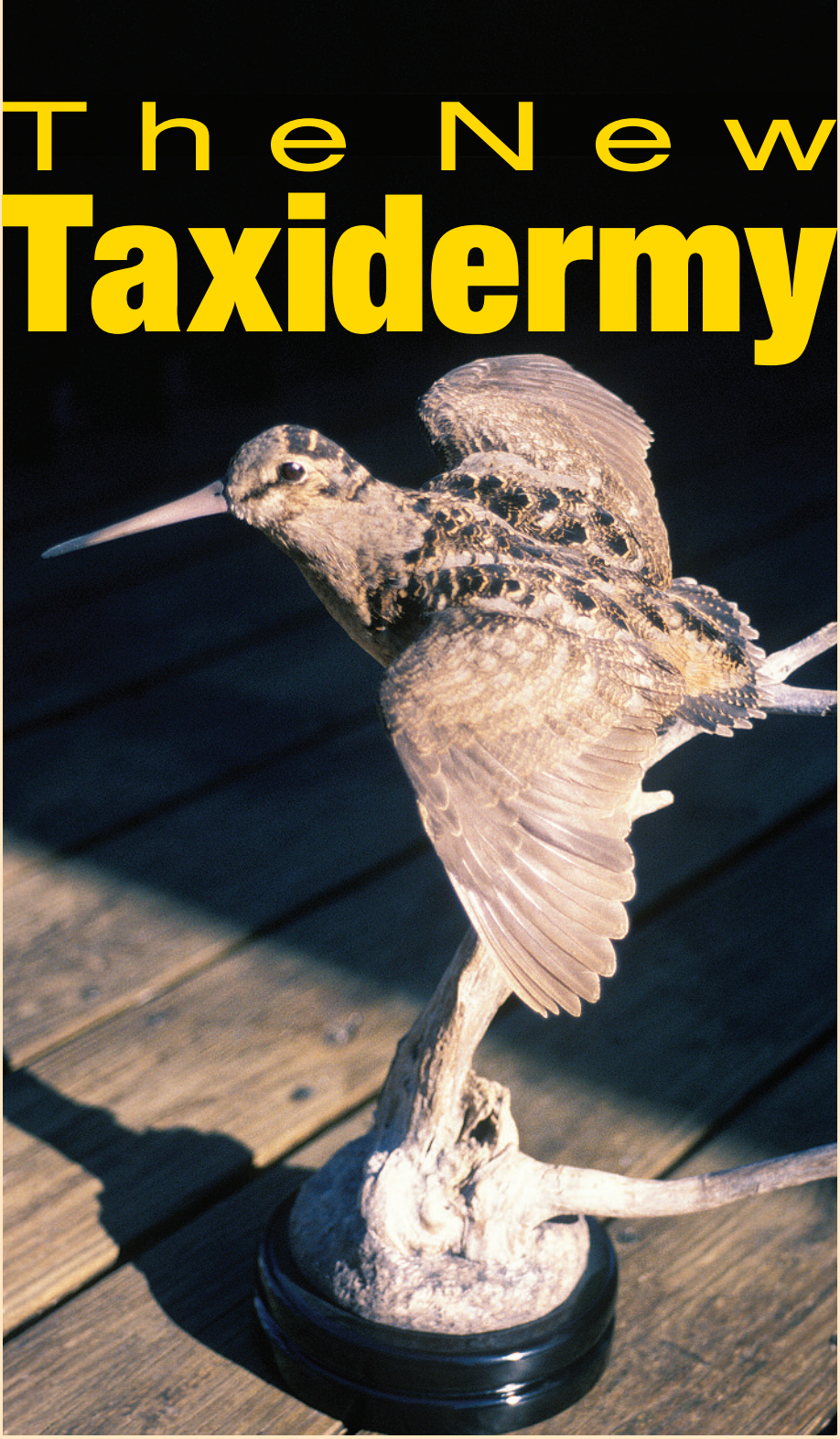
The New Taxidermy

Take a look at how this ancient science is now art.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland



Harvey Zeigler is not your average brooding artist.

"Dust," the southern Illinois taxidermist muttered, squinting into the air as he imagined one of his old works. "I'll bet it's covered in dust now, or..." he stopped himself, unable to speak of other, imagined atrocities of taxidermy curatorship.

He has reason to be persnickety. Winner of the highest international award a taxidermist can receive, the 58-year-old Williamson County resident never ceases to care about his creations. Even after they're long-gone and on the wall of the customers who bought them.

"It's probably ruined," Zeigler eventually dismissed the matter.

Such passion for aesthetics separates Zeigler from the old image of a taxidermist: a guy who merely preserves hides, then stuffs them with straw and adds a couple of glass eyes.

"People get tired of looking at those old trophy mounts on the wall," Zeigler explained. "They bring them home, put them up, and for a few weeks they look at them.

"I want to make something people never get tired of looking at."

Following his father's tradition of excellent aesthetic details in taxidermy, Ryan Ziegler already has gained international recognition.

It's no small goal. The demands of today's taxidermist include an understanding of mortuary science, wildlife anatomy and artistic ability–all rolled into one. But while the craft hasn't changed fundamentally over the years (essentially, it's still the job of preserving a creature in a life-like resemblance), the emphasis on artistic composition is increasingly powerful. A great taxidermist today must also be a great artist.

For example, Zeigler spent months tinkering with the mounted arrangement of a group of snow geese in flight before entering them in the World Taxidermy Competition in 2001. Any variety of poses might have looked acceptably realistic. But Zeigler wanted to create lasting art, as memorable as classic sculpture or music.

Taking lessons from life, acclaimed Illinois taxidermist Harvey Ziegler raises a small collection of various waterfowl for continual study.

His demands for excellence paid off. Competing against crowds of the best taxidermists worldwide—including his own son Ryan—Zeigler's descending snow geese was judged the best overall waterfowl mount in the world competition. For Ryan Zeigler, whose Canada goose mount was judged the best for his division, having a mentor-father whose skills are unsurpassed in the world could be intimidating. But the Zeiglers don't compete against each other—at home.

"We help each other out," the 26-year-old is quick to note. "Dad will see something I don't notice, or he'll ask me to look at something he's working on. We don't really compete against each other; we work together."

The growing family tradition of taxidermy artistry has brought the freedom to work instinctively, opposed to simply filling orders. Neither father nor son feels compelled to create the usual, cookie-cutter taxidermy mounts the public recognizes. When they stop by Zeigler's workshop with a frozen bird to be mounted, customers quickly change their expectations.

"Make it like that," Harvey Zeigler recites in a customer voice. "They see there are different ways to do a mount, and they realize what they *thought* they wanted has already been done a million times."

Not that Zeigler pushes his own ideas upon anyone. But customers quickly figure out it's best to leave the artistic decisions to someone who knows the medium.

When the Zeiglers aren't producing mounts for the public, they often create mounts of their own design, totally free from customer influence—art for art's sake. Many of those mounts aren't typical "trophy" taxidermy mounts, either.

Harvey Zeigler bagged a diminutive snipe while waterfowl hunting a few years ago and turned it into a small, coffee-table mount for himself–and later won a medal at the world competition. Ryan Zeigler won a national championship for a quail mount he did for art's sake.

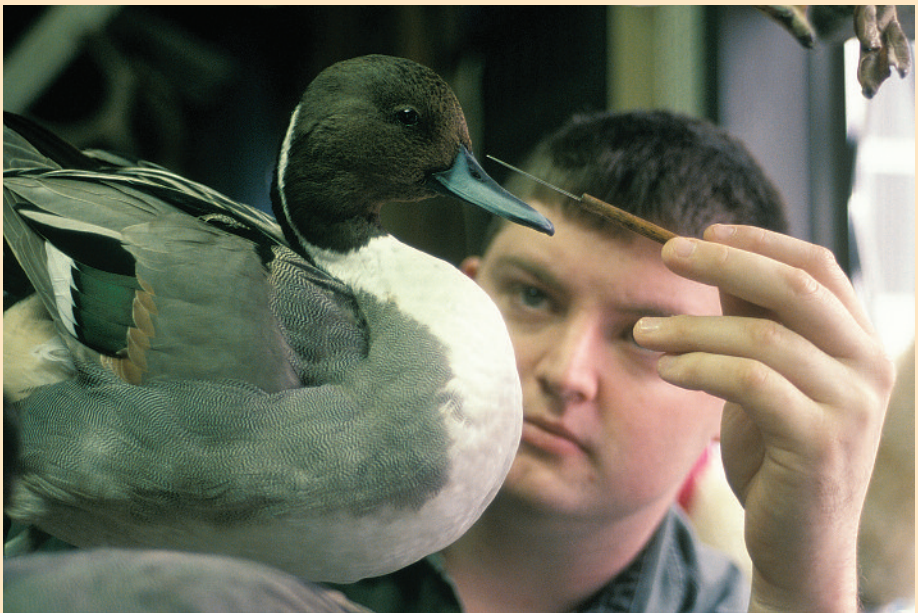
Quail and snipe aren't standard sportsman mounts; but that's part of the allure of modern taxidermy. Artistic expression has replaced simple preservation when it comes to technical priorities. Clearly, a mount must be preserved in a lifelike condition. But how that mount is composed makes all of the difference today.

Harvey Zeigler concedes his artistic emphasis doesn't compensate for the fact he cannot preserve a creature to look truly alive, according to his standards. This champion taxidermist still marvels at the real thing, deferring to the living creature when citing perfection.

"Look at that iridescent sheen," Zeigler said quietly as he stared at a backyard pond of live ducks. "I don't come close to that—-nobody does."

One of the challenging differences between a taxidermy bird mount— Zeigler's specialty—and the actual, living creature, is the preening oils lost during the preservation process. And there's just something about how waterfowl constantly pluck and ruffle feathers that makes the "soft" look of the real thing a nearly unattainable detail for even Zeigler.

"If I could get that..." Zeigler said, but interrupted himself with typical restraint, "I never will."



Today's taxidermist works to create lifelike details in every aspect of the mount. The Zieglers are master artists.