

# Escapes

## She's Hooked on . . . Taxidermy?



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

### No Guts, No Gory in A Pennsylvania Studio

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
Special to The Washington Post

I angled the scalpel and scraped the last bits of paint off my rainbow trout's glass eye, took a step back and gasped. "It looks so *real*," I said. The shiny eye made all the difference. Gary Bruch, my taxidermy sensei for the weekend in Duncannon, Pa., nodded in agreement. He was surprised that a taxidermy novice had done so well. Then again, Bruch had surprised me, too.

I had walked into his studio the day before, thinking how much I abhor blood and guts. But one of the first things he told me was how he dislikes killing things, and one of my last thoughts of the weekend was that this man — with a koi tattooed on his forearm and fish in his freezer — is above all an artist.

I'd been angling in Arkansas with a friend who'd recently brought home a mounted Canada goose, and he talked about his taxidermist as casually as we city folk talk about our Pilates instructors. After I snagged a foot-long, 1½-pound rainbow trout in the White River, I decided that I, too, would display my trophy.

Except my bright idea came long after that fish was filleted, buttered and cooked over the campfire.

Bruch, whom I was paying \$150 for a private taxidermy class, said having eaten my fish was hardly a problem. A few weeks before I arrived, he picked out a similar-size rainbow at a hatchery, made a mold of it and cast a paint-ready fi-

**Gary Bruch, who won a national taxidermy title in 2001, displays airbrushing techniques on a replica of the rainbow trout, left, that the author caught. At right is the completed trophy.**

berglass replica. I had only a weekend to spare (which also spared me any potential gore of working with a real fish), but Bruch attracts clients from as far as South Africa who spend a week or two making fish — either a replica or skin mounts, for which they carve foam for the inside and use real skin on the outside.

I settled into the studio, where fish in various stages of creation hang from the ceiling. There were boxes of plastic fins and glass eyes, drill bits, paintbrushes and a cardboard box with "skin texture" written on the outside, filled with crumpled bridal veil and cheesecloth. Our first day was Airbrushing 101. I'd never used an airbrush before, and working my fingers to hit that sweet spot of air and paint reminded me of learning how to drive stick shift, only harder.

After lunch, I took a break and explored the area. Duncannon, 20 minutes north of Harrisburg, is a quiet river town in Perry County, known for its covered bridges and lack of traffic lights. People don't visit Duncannon for the food

or the lodging; they go for the stunning outdoors and to hunt or fish. I drove to the neighboring town of Newport and into Little Buffalo State Park, where environmental educator Jeff Wolesslagle drove me past the functional 1837 gristmill and talked about the 900-acre park's excellent hunting and fishing.

"We're stocked with pheasants twice a year," he said, "and the lake's stocked with rainbows. Ice fishing is real popular here." This time of year, look for panfish and trout.

Back in Duncannon, I checked out the Doyle Hotel, which I'd heard was a hippie hiker hang-out. (Duncannon sits roughly halfway along the Appalachian Trail.) I didn't meet any hikers, but Vickie Kelly, one of the owners, assured me I'd know if they walked in the door of the century-old building. "They'll look exhausted and be looking for a hot shower," she said. "We get about 1,200 of them a year, from all over the world."

My motel was the Stardust, which Bruch had recommended. No hikers there, either, but unlike the Doyle, its rooms have private baths, which was worth the extra \$25.

On Day 2, I arrived at Bruch's by 8 a.m. He's not a morning person, but once the coffee kicked in, he became so chatty that I knew his life story before we filled the airbrush with its first round of paint. A former chef and Marilyn Manson fan, Bruch now listens to Penn State football and has Bible verses handwritten on his

walls.

"I used to make ice sculptures, and now I sculpt fish," he said, "and make half as much." In between careers, he failed the game warden test, then ended up at taxidermy school in 1993. He started his business the following year and won a national taxidermy title in 2001.

Although Bruch enjoys teaching, he is quick to tell students that he's not the teacher. "The fish is the teacher," he said. "Everything you need to know is on the fish." Dozens of times, we pulled up the photo I'd proudly taken of my rainbow on his laptop, studying the red stripe or the pectoral fin color or the spot pattern. "I don't care if your first fish ends up looking like a deer," Bruch said. "I want you to understand color layering and tones."

I donned latex gloves and got to work airbrushing, layering yellow, gold, green, gloss, silver, gold. Every hour, the hands on his clock pointed to a different fish and chimed variations of the sound of a lure skipping across the water. And with each gluk-gluk and splash-splash, my fish looked more and more like its picture.

When it came time to add the rainbow's spots, Bruch picked up a Sharpie. "Many taxidermists use this," he said. "But that's not accurate." Instead, I spent more than an hour tediously airbrushing hundreds of spots on my fish. Then, at last, I started scraping paint off the sparkling eye.

The sun had set, and the clock was about to herald 6 p.m. with a rainbow trout gurgle. We sprayed a final coat of gloss over the fish and its rock mount, and I took my artwork out to the car.

I shifted into first — the rainbow eyeballing me from the passenger seat — and proudly drove my trophy home.

■ Bruch's Fish Taxidermy is at 635 Dellville Rd., Duncannon, Pa. Ship your frozen fish to Bruch or make a replica. Private classes are \$15 an hour, including instruction and materials. Ready-to-paint replicas are \$10 per inch. Info: 717-756-8689, [www.bruchsfish.com](http://www.bruchsfish.com).

#### ESCAPE KEYS

**GETTING THERE:** Duncannon is about 2½ hours from the Capital Beltway. Take Interstate 95 to I-695 (Baltimore Beltway) toward I-83/Towson. Follow I-83 north toward York, Pa., then take Exit 43 toward State Capitol/Second Street. Follow signs to Route 22 west and take that up to Route 849 west, which will take you into Duncannon.

**STAYING THERE:** In town, the **Doyle Hotel** (7 N. Market St., 717-834-6789, [www.doylehotel.com](http://www.doylehotel.com)) is Appalachian Trail hiker- and pet-friendly. Bare-bones rooms (no TV, no phone, bathroom down the hall) are \$20. Four miles north is the **Stardust Motel** (3418 Susquehanna Trail, 717-834-9883); doubles — with paper bathmats and paper-thin walls — are \$45 on the weekends. Venture farther out for some B&Bs, including the **Dragonfly Inn** in Honey Grove (717-734-3555, [www.dragonfly-inn.com](http://www.dragonfly-inn.com); doubles from \$105) and **Warm Springs Lodge** (717-789-9927, [www.warmspringslodge.com](http://www.warmspringslodge.com); from \$55) in Landisburg.

**EATING THERE:** The **Red Rabbit** (Route 322, 717-834-4694; closed December and January, open for lunch and dinner Friday-Sunday starting Feb. 1) is

a '50s-style restaurant where the price is right and the food (Bunny Burgers, barbecue, fried chicken) arrives at your car window. Burgers are \$4.40. For hot drinks and a toasty atmosphere, consider the **Espresso Yourself Cafe** (8 S. Second St., Newport, 717-567-9882). Sandwiches are \$8.95,

or \$7.05 for a half-sandwich and soup. The **Ranch House** (routes 11 and 15, 717-834-4710), which offers steak, seafood and home-style food (beef pot pie), is one of the town's few nonsmoking spots. Burgers and entrees start at \$6.

**INFO: Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau**, 800-995-0969, [www.hersheyharrisburg.org](http://www.hersheyharrisburg.org).



BY LARIS KARKLIS — THE WASHINGTON POST

**IF TAXIDERMY ISN'T YOUR THING . . .** there's no better wintry place in these parts than **Little Buffalo State Park** (1579 State Park Rd., 717-567-9255, [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/Parks/littlebuffalo.aspx](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/Parks/littlebuffalo.aspx)) in Newport, Pa. The park has eight miles of hiking trails for cross-country skiing; Lake Holman has a two-acre skating area. You can take breaks in the heated restrooms and warming hut. When ice on the lake is thick enough, ice fishing is permitted; just remember to dress for the cold and to bring your own fishing gear and Pennsylvania fishing license. Indoor types can head to the **Perry County Council of the Arts Gallery** (1 S. Second St., 717-567-7023, [www.perrycountyarts.org](http://www.perrycountyarts.org)) in Newport. It sells works by local artists, including handmade jewelry, pottery, hand-woven rugs and wood carvings.