

Nassology with Allis Markham

Ologies Podcast

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Oh heey, it's that extra in the movie who accidentally looked right at the camera – twice - even though he was told specifically not to, Alie Ward, back with a new episode of an old, old, old ology. I have had this topic in my sights for years after once, in my 20s, at like midnight in my studio apartment, I found myself using a hacksaw to cut into a skull over a bathtub. My cousin had found a deer skull in a field and I was trying to mount just the antlers. Mm, it's no way to do it. But that brings us to this week's gorgeous, and gory, and storied art of taxidermy. That's right, there is an ology for that, thrillingly.

But first, let's thank the Patreon club at Patreon.com/Ologies for making the show possible, rain or shine, and sending in their questions. It costs as little as 25 cents an episode to join that. Thank you to everyone who has been telling friends about the show, who has rated, and subscribed, which keeps us up in the charts. And of course for the folks who leave reviews for me to read on the darker days, like these fresh ones:

ElianaCata said that they made it through the entire back catalogue, congratulations!

And Krista288 says they listened to 99 episodes while sewing fabric face masks!

Okay! Nassology! We're gonna do it! So, this is a real ology and it means the science of stuffing animals for display. It's also called taxidermy. I looked hither and dither and tither and, y'all, I could *not* find the etymology of this one. I'm guessing it comes from *nas*, Latin for nose, or from the Germanic *nass* for wet. Perhaps it's the study of wet skin? God only knows. I don't.

I have known this Nassologist for years, and I've visited her studio here in LA. I have two dead quail in my freezer for her. They were, sadly, window strikes. They'll be put to good use. I'm excited to give them to her.

She is known as an 'Ethical Taxidermist'. She deals with animals who died of natural causes, or of reasons not for the sake of stuffing. She runs a business called Prey Taxidermy, and they offer classes, and she handles a veritable ark-load of animals preserved for museum collections and for institutions.

She was really beautifully captured in the 2019 documentary *Stuffed*, which was gorgeous. She's carved a niche as the badass darling of the taxidermy world. She's earned her ranks through meticulous work, and artful mounts, and State and World Championship titles. She also - just side note - looks like a raven-haired bombshell on a 1950s movie poster and is usually dressed with some kind of vintage flair and perfect eyebrows. But she swears like a sailor, laughs like sunshine, and preserves roadkill as a career. She is, in a word, everyone's dream woman.

Despite the two frozen birds taking up precious pizza space in my freezer, we alas met up virtually from our houses about a mile apart. This episode is a glorious mix of nature appreciation, and real talk, and warning: you will hear the details of how a dearly departed specimen goes from soggy

corpse to stunning art, and it's no worse than what you do when you're preparing chicken for dinner, but it will make you appreciate your next stroll through a museum that much more.

Now, sharpen your scalpels and fasten your aprons for a chat all about following dreams, attention to detail, animal conservation, flesh, crap taxidermy, seal blubber, antique ornithology, leaving the tech world for Victorian artistry of yore, and what it's like to date someone who has freezers full of dead stuff; with globally-lauded, taxidermy icon, and nassologist: Allis Markham.

[Intro Music]

Alie: And so, nassology is a term that you'd heard of, but people told you was too old to use?

Allis: Yeaah, it's not used a lot. I really like it, and I heard it before, very early in researching taxidermy and wanting to learn this kind of, 'dead art', if you will. I read about the term, it was in an old taxidermy textbook, and there is such a thing. I had asked a few people, mostly like commercial taxidermists and at the little taxidermy school I went to in Montana, and they were like, [*with Yosemite Sam accent*] "Where did you hear that? No one says that anymore." So, yeah, it just kind of got lost a little bit to the ages, but I think it should have a comeback.

Alie: Ahhhh, yay! And how did you end up going to taxidermy school in Montana? Were you the kind of kid that was finding dead stuff in ravines or were you an indoor kid?

Allis: Uhhh, no. Me and my sister joke that when we grew up, we had one toy, and it was called, "Outside, go!" [*Alie laughs*] That's what we had. I grew up in Indiana, and also Florida, and we just had nothing but the great outdoors. Me and my sister, we always liked bugs and I was always fascinated by animals. I was always finding animal bones, or bits of skin, or whatever it is, fur. I was always so fascinated by it.

So, I really grew up with a lifelong love of nature, and also science. I really loved science growing up. I ended up going to school a little bit for anthropology. Got into marketing. Had this whole other career where I worked for Disney. I was the Director of Social Media Strategy. And I just kind of lost my marbles. [*Alie laughs*]

I did, I really did. It was not a good work environment for me, it was what I fell into. But you know what's funny? I had been collecting taxidermy and collecting all of these little natural history... creating my cabinet of curiosities. I have so much in common with my taxidermy students.

Aside: Allis says that she was always an outdoor kid. Romping through fields and searching for bones and dead things in the wilds of her Indiana upbringing. But when did the taxidermy bug first enter her life?

Alie: When did you really get that first butterfly?

Allis: I remember when I first moved to New York. I moved there at like 18 years old for college. I went to the American Museum of Natural History, and it was like I was in church, but a church I was excited for and onboard for. Everything was mahogany, and quiet, and then you

look up at these amazing dioramas, and I had just never seen anything like that. I had grown up around taxidermy, it was a thing, but not like this.

When I moved to New York, I knew one person there and I moved there in the summer, so I spent the entire summer learning that place like the back of my hand. I didn't know anyone in New York, but I knew that museum. I would take people on little impromptu tours. I would just like, kidnap tourists. [*Alie laughs*] I was a weird kid. I just knew that museum.

Then when I moved to LA a number of years later, I fell in love with our museum here and the dioramas here. I just always wanted to work in museums. So finally, when I lost my marbles at Disney, I asked myself, "If I could do anything what would it be?" And I was like, "I want to work in museums, and I think I want to be a taxidermist." [*heavenly angels singing*] And then I was like, "You know what? I'm just gonna do it."

It was just this wild hair that I got, and every day I wake up with that same wild hair and go to work. I was like "I wonder if anyone does classes? I wonder if I could learn this anywhere?" I found this little school in Montana. We were only four students and I just did a short two-week program.

Aside: This was the Advanced Taxidermy Training Center in Thompson Falls, about 100 miles northwest of Missoula. I just looked it up on a map and I realized that my 2009 Ward Family Reunion was only about 15 minutes away and now I'm hella pissed that I didn't know about this place sooner.

Allis: It was enough to get me started. It was more geared towards what we call 'commercial taxidermy'. Doing your white tail deer, your skunk, whatever it is, things like this, it's also called 'trophy work'. That was not exactly what I wanted to do. I really wanted to do museum taxidermy.

So, I got back down to LA and kind of stalked Tim Bovard, who's the Museum Taxidermist at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles. I mean, I seriously... like, I figured out his email address, and I really stalked him and got him to agree to meet with me. Then got him to agree to let me volunteer, and then I just showed up every day. I think at some level he was too embarrassed not to hire me.

Alie: Tell me a little bit about Tim. I understand he is like the Original Dude at the Natural History Museum. What kind of things did you learn from him? Does taxidermy have a lot of apprenticeships? Is that how it's, kind of, passed down?

Allis: Taxidermy is one of those things where it is very old school and you do end up, hopefully, in an apprentice-mentor situation. To this day, he'll always be mentor. I call him my Taxidermy Dad. I will literally call his house and his wife goes, "Tim, your daughter's on the phone!"

First off, he's the most amazing, kind, curious, patient, just lovely person you'll ever meet. I want to put him in his own little diorama and keep him for always. [*Alie laughs*] He's wonderful.

What it really is with learning, is that in taxidermy, we're preserving animals. That's like saying we are painting pictures. There are so many different ways to do this art slash science. So, you're learning first the way that your mentor wants you to learn it and then they'll kind

of, in my experience, Tim really widened the scope. He's like, "Okay, this is the 400-year-old technique for doing birds. We're going to use wrapped bodies. We're going to put clay. Here are the eyes."

Aside: From those wrapped bodies that you might see in collection drawers, she moved on to carving body shapes, and casting heads. Just up and up the ranks of difficulty and artistry, learning from the masters as she went.

Allis: I have gone and trained with other taxidermists. I've gone down to Texas and worked with Danny Owens. I've gone up to Canada and worked with Ken Walker. I've gone to Europe and learned from people like Peter Sunesen and Jack Fishwick. I'm sure these are all names you all know, right? *[both laugh]* This is really funny because they're really famous in taxidermy land.

Then you take all these techniques that you've learned from different people and you do what works for you. I have taxidermy students and I always tell them the only wrong way to do it is to say there's only one way. That's how I feel.

Alie: Walk me through basic taxidermy. Because I think that a lot of people think that you take the skin of an animal, you stuff it with newspaper, and then you sew it back up on the bottom, and I have a feeling that's not what happens.

Allis: *[laughs]* Oh that hurts my soul to hear that because I know it's true. It's so true! Yeah, they either think what you just said, or they think I'm, like, an undertaker, or a mortician, and I use like formaldehyde and crazy chemicals. Neither one of those things are true!

Basic taxidermy is this: you start with prep, aka deconstruction. So, I will have an animal, let's say it's a mammal, and it comes to me dead, and it comes to me - generally speaking - frozen and bagged.

Aside: I have visited her studio and she has so many freezers just filled to the gills with bags containing frosty birds, beavers, and foxes, dead racoons. I saw an heirloom swan preserved on ice since 1976. She's probably got a warthog. There are stillborn tiger cubs, and more, just waiting in the chilly wings until it's their time to shine in the glow of her preservation techniques.

Allis: So, I have my frozen animal and I will let it thaw out a little bit. I still like to keep it cold; we like to be like a butcher shop. The colder you have the meat the less it's going to break down on you. And I'll take a whole bunch of measurements. Eye-to-nose measurement, length of the tail, length of each limb, each individual joint-to-joint. We have all these crazy measurement sheets.

I take photos. Getting myself as much reference as I can on this animal. Then we're going to remove the skin. I've heard this described before by other taxidermists - I'm going to borrow it. Imagine you're skinning an orange, so the rind comes off and you want to do that in as few cuts as possible, right? So, we're kind of skinning it, removing that rind.

And all the nice juicy stuff on the inside that pests would just love to eat? That's got to go bye-bye. So, I'm not actually going into any of the organs, anything like that. I'm essentially

removing the skin, like you would take off a hoodie or a onesie. And so, there's a few different incisions you can do. As I like to say, there's more than one way to skin a cat.

Aside: That phrase and variations of it, by the by, has been in use since the 1600s. Some think it originated with the skinning and burning of witches and thus their suspected pets, cats. But this led me down a real nass-hole and I just learned that dried and posed dead cats were sometimes hidden in house walls as protection from evil spirits. So, if you live in an old house and have great luck, there might be a really old dead cat in your wall.

Anyway, Allis has to skin the animal and then use, what's aptly called, a 'flesher', which is a motored, grinder-type of gadget that scrapes leftover muscle and membranes from a hide. So, imagine using a power tool but instead of sanding down wood, it just flecks flesh off.

Allis: And then the skin itself has to be preserved. In the case of a mammal, we're going to turn that skin into leather. That is a process known as tanning and it's not the kind of tanning we do on the beaches here in California. It's a chemical process from turning raw skin into leather.

Tanning, for humans, goes back... oh, I don't even want to guess because I never became that anthropologist, but probably 10,000 years. In fact you can tan an animal with its own brain.

Alie: What?!

Allis: Yeah, it's called brain tanning. A fun fact of that is: every animal has enough brain to tan its own skin.

Alie: Oh God!

Aside: Yes, Egyptians thousands of years ago would preserve all kinds of animals, and even hippo mummies have been found. And also, brain tanning works by boiling brains with water and then applying that as a paste to the hide. There's an oily lecithin in the brain that moisturizes the collagen in the skin to make it pliable and preserved.

But there are other methods of preserving skin that involve letting it soak in pee, or in a solution of pigeon droppings. Allis may have a flair for vintage aesthetics, but yeah, that's not what she does.

Allis: But the type of tanning I do, it's actually... it's really fun. You get into organic chemistry with this. It is called 'immersion tanning'. It actually creates an ionic bond. It's really cool.

First, the skin goes into an acid pickle. I know it sounds really, really scary, like, "Oh my God, you're playing with acid!" It's really not. I use a formic acid. I dilute it enough that it gets down only to 2 on the pH scale. And just to give you an idea of the pH scale, seven is neutral, anything above that is alkaline, the opposite of acid. And then below seven, in order to, like, burn your face off, it would be like a -10 or something like that on the pH scale.

So, I could give myself a little bit of a chemical burn, but we're pretty safe around the studio with gloves, and masks, and all of that. But yeah, it goes in this acid pickle, which is essentially a big bucket with some salt and some acid. And what the acid does is it stretches out the molecules of the skin. We're actually changing the skin on a molecular level. It's stretching out that molecule and it's making space for a new ion. And so after it's been in the

pickle for like a week, two weeks, six months if you're doing a cow, then you pull it out and you can then put it in another bucket. Now, it'll sound sciency, but it just looks like buckets.

We have some salt in there as well. We always have salt in the water because salt is hydrophobic, so it's gonna let the skin absorb some of the water, but not too much of it. The salt is kind of putting the brakes on the skin from getting too much moisture. Then what happens is you add... the commercial term for it is Lutan FN, and it's an actual little ion and it goes into the molecule and zap. [*Poof.*] All of a sudden it's no longer raw skin. It's leather.

Alie: No way!

Allis: Yeah! So we make our own leather, only, it has eyelids, and claws, and foot pads.

Alie: Wow. Now, tanning it also protects it against pests and decomposition?

Allis: Yeah, absolutely. The first thing it's going to take care of is the decomposition. So, obviously the raw skin is really unstable. The proteins, everything's breaking down when you're talking about raw skin. It's also a breeding ground for bacteria. You've got moisture, you've got heat, you've got all of these things. So, it's going to be very attractive to bacteria growth and also pests. But when you tan it, just like a leather jacket, it is much more stable. It's not breaking down anymore. It's got this artificial ion in there that has really stabilized that molecule.

Now, one thing I do stress to my clients, which are almost completely museums, nature centers, et cetera, is moths and beetles - the common pests that do go after taxidermy - they can eat that; they can absolutely eat it, especially the little hair follicles going into the fur. So, by tanning it we've made it not attractive to pests, but just like a wool sweater hanging in your closet, moths can go after that. They can certainly go after taxidermy in a museum or in your home.

Aside: So don't add random dirty stuff from outside to your precious collections without doing a little bug management first. And if you're gonna DIY it, you've got to scrape all the fat and flesh off. And while in the old timey days they may have stuffed these hides with newspaper, or horsehair, or even Spanish moss, modern day taxidermists don't stuff them. Nope.

Allis: No. Today what we are doing, we are not stuffing them. In fact, in the taxidermy world, if you say, "Oh, you stuff animals," that is like the biggest dirty word you can say. It's nails on a chalkboard to us. You know what is sad though? The term, the preferred nomenclature is 'mount'. We mount animals. That doesn't sound any better.

Alie: No it doesn't. [*both laughing*] So is it foam underneath? Because I understand that if you, say, do trophy taxidermy, you can buy certain mounts that are, like, an elk buck and a doe deer. You can buy these kinds of prefab ones.

Allis: Yeah.

Alie: How much are you using those versus having to sculpt those down to fit particular dimensions?

Allis: Yes. That's exactly right. What's inside is called a form or a mannequin. It's basically a sculpture of the animal that the skin is going to go over. Now, it has to fit, hopefully. So, there

are 'commercial forms', and there are taxidermy catalogs. By the way, I highly recommend you go on some of these websites, especially if you're into Halloween, or sculpting, or taxidermy. You can actually take the measurements of your animal, within reason, and you can go on these websites, and you can look up your animal. You find the pose you want, jumping, sitting, laying down, or if it's just a game head or whatever, you can find a form that might fit your specimen.

Now for me, that's not always so helpful. For one, I work on things that a lot of people do not work on because they are protected by the federal government. So I've worked on endangered animals, protected animals. I heard in a couple of your episodes people mentioning the black-footed ferret. I have worked on black-footed ferrets and I can tell you there is no black-footed ferret commercial form because there's only 700 black-footed ferrets alive. So, for me, I end up making a lot of mine custom.

And so what that looks like is... Remember I talked about we do all these measurements, and photos, and all of that? So, I've got a few different options here. I can take my measurements and the carcass of the animal and I can take some foam... It's not quite like Styrofoam, it's more like insulation foam. It's called polyurethane foam. And I can carve the animal so I can work in a subjective way of sculpting. And, I can start carving that.

The other thing I can do is I can take my carcass and I can make a mold of it. So now we get into molding and casting, which is one of my very favorite things to do now. This is where I'm talking about these advanced skills that I got to learn from my mentor and some other people. What I'll do is, I'll take the carcass and I'll freeze it in the position that I'm going to want this animal in. I'm going to talk about a specific one now. I did a baby harbor seal. So adorable. This was for the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History and it's there now in one of the dioramas.

Aside: Sidenote; I looked this silvery spotted harbor seal up on Allis's Instagram, and it's just the cutest little muffin, at once both smol and a chonk. And she's about to describe the process of preserving it for science. Remember: it passed away naturally and the museum is putting it to use educating people about marine ecology.

Allis: And so I got this baby harbor seal that unfortunately did not make it. Oh my God, what a chubby little cuteness. And so I skinned him out, did that whole process, was tanning the skin. And while that's all going on I have this baby harbor seal without skin on it. So I put him in the basic position that I knew the museum and their mammologist wanted to have this in. They wanted him looking up at the viewer. And so I froze him in that position. Then I took fiberglass and... essentially, you're dumping a fiberglass resin mixture over the carcass. And so that fiberglass sets up and it's nice and hard. [*"Nice."*] And so then what I did, I took a spiral saw and I cut the fiberglass shell so I'd be able to pop it open.

I removed the carcass of my baby harbor seal, essentially the harbor seal without its skin on it. I removed that and now I have a mold. So, I have all this negative space; I have this shell. So I rejoined the shell, added a bottom to it, and then, I took this foam that I'm talking about... It comes in liquid form, there's an A and a B and it's this expanding foam. So you got an A and a B, you mix it together, you stir it all up, and it starts to expand and then it hardens. It's really cool stuff to play with but if you get it in your hair you gotta cut your hair, it's horrible.

Alie: *[laughs]* I feel like this has happened to you.

Allis: This happened to one of my assistants and I was like, “Oh honey, oh sweetness. You’re getting’ a haircut.” That is a lesson learned. *[“Let’s do a makeover!”]* So, you pour that A and B mixture, mix it all up, throw it into your mold, it expands and then you pop out a little replica of that carcass. So, I had a little replica, same size, exact to scale replica of what this baby harbor seal was, only it’s made out of this lightweight foam.

Alie: That’s amazing. So then you have something that’s going to custom fit the skin that you’re tanning.

Allis: Well, here’s the difficulty. Harbor seals, and everything else, there’s a lot of fat I had to remove off of that skin. Like I said, this was a little chubby cuteness. So all of the fat goes with the skin. So now, I’ve got a very skinny version of what that baby harbor seal was. Then I went back to my measurements. This is where we get into math, which I actually really love.

I measured what I have on the foam. They have these little rolls back behind their neck, these little fat rolls, especially when they look up. So I took measurements of the entire circumference going down the body and I was able to say to myself, “Aw man, I’m missing like 15 millimeters of fat all around here.” So I ended up adding that back. So I put some foam on there, I carved it back down. I started putting foam on it in various places, carving it to those measurements, and adding all these little fat rolls.

So, I had to look it up on my computer. I go on Google Images and Flickr and I found all these images of baby harbor seals that are alive. If I’ve got him in this little position where he’s looking up, where are those fat rolls going to be and how many fat rolls are there? How do I make him look like this little alive chunker that I need him to be? So that’s what I did.

Alie: Aw! And then are you sculpting that on top of the polyurethane cast that you’ve made?

Allis: Exactly. I’m taking more of that A and B polyurethane; I’m pouring it on top of there. I’m letting it dry, and I’m taking files, and rasps, and I’m shaving it and essentially sculpting it into what that shape needs to be. I gave him those little fat rolls back and all of that. From there, once I had this, I can always take the skin and I can pull it out of those buckets, that pickle I have it in, and I can do what’s called a test fit.

It’s just like you trying on clothes. My little baby harbor seal had to try on his body. *[Alie makes a squeamish yet excited: Oh!]* So, I see if it fits and what do I think of it? How does it look? Then I needed to do other things to that little face because, think about it, how much fat is in our cheeks if you touch your cheek right now?

Aside: *[sheepishly]* Yeah, a little more than before the bread episode.

Allis: Under your chin, your forehead, your eyebrows, you have these little muscles there and some fat. I needed to make sure that he had that. One of the things that I did before I skinned him is I took what we call a ‘death mask’.

Aside: Mmm a death mask! Casual.

Allis: Death masks are essentially when you take a mold of a face of a dead animal, or in some cases, people. I think there’s even a death mask of Abraham Lincoln. What I did was I took a

mold of the face before I did anything. What I use to make that mold is a material called alginate. Alginate is used by dentists to make a mold of your teeth. It's a very pliable, nontoxic, very soft, mold material.

I mixed a whole bucket of alginate and I dipped his face in there. Alginate sets up in like 10 minutes. We call it 'when it kicks,' when it hardens. It won't pull any of the hair out, generally, so I knew I was going to be able to get a copy exactly of his face without damaging the skin.

I had him in the alginate for 10 minutes and then I carefully backed his face out of the alginate. Then, into the alginate I poured plaster, and 10 minutes later I take out the plaster, which is now an exact replica of his face that we call a death mask. It's the cutest thing. If you go on my *Instagram*, and you scroll down, you can see this entire process.

Aside: So for visuals, see [Instagram.com/Allis](https://www.instagram.com/Allis) where she's posted a step-by-step of this process, including casting the seal's face, making a replica out of that in polyurethane foam, and then sculpting it down a bit to make room for clay additions to finesse the expression.

Allis: If you can imagine, now that I've made the sculpture of the body, I've got all the little fatness and everything like that, and now I've got that face on there, which is an exact replica. I use the same type of foam to essentially glue all these parts together. Now, I'll put the skin on again for another test fit and check it. We're trying on our skin to make sure it's all gonna look cute. [*"That's a great look for you."*] The next thing we'll try on is the eyes. This really brings it to life.

Alie: I'm so curious about this.

Allis: Taxidermy eyes are made out of glass or acrylic plastic. They are completely fake. You can't use real eyeballs. There are different taxidermy eye companies. This is what they do for a living. They make taxidermy eyes and they are really cool. I have so many eyeball drawers at my studio, I can't even tell you.

Alie: Oh my God. So now, how do you get the skin to stick onto the form when you're ready? Are there seams that we can't see?

Allis: Yeah, there are. So, like I said, whenever you skin something, you're going to do it in a way that you're not going to be able to see the stitches. I knew before doing this baby seal what the pose was going to be. It was going to be laying on its belly looking up at the viewer. I made my seam and incisions exactly where it was going to be sitting on the ground.

So I got the eyes, and I put them on clay with the form. Then I will take a glue – we call it hide paste – and I put that all over the form. We're going to put hide paste all over our sculpture so it's nice and wet. We're going to take clay and we put it down inside each one of the digits. Yes, seals, sea lions, all that, they may look like flippers, but they do have individual little digits. That is all filled with clay. It's just like a glove.

Next we're gonna take the skin and we lay it over our sculpture. The head goes on like a little hoodie and, the rest of it, it's just like putting on a onesie. That onesie goes on, and instead of zipping it up, I use what is called FireLine. I think it's for fishing – I've never used it for such – but it's a monofilament. Then we sew it all up.

After that, this is where the 'taxi' comes into taxidermy because, 'taxi' means arrange or movement, and 'dermy' is from dermis. So, now I'm going to push that skin, and move it around, and finagle it to wherever it needs to be. In the case of this little harbor seal, I had to put the skin into the little chunker folds. You're sculpting the skin where it needs to be from the outside. For a lot of mammals, like bobcats, mountain lions, deer, kudu, we end up putting these little liners inside the ears so that they won't fold.

Now the face. The hardest part is getting the face because where do people look when they look at taxidermy? They look at the face, they look at the eyes. So now we get to what we call tucking. You actually will take the lips and on your form you make a slit. You're going to end up tucking the skin into that slit inside the form.

Aside: So this process is called 'splitting the lips', and Allis helps shape them with clay. It's kind of like Juvéderm but taxidermy, which makes me wonder if the science of getting injectables to look younger should be called Juvédermy. Anyway, Allis is careful about the shape of the mouth.

Alie: Oh, because you have to do these very, very subtle movements in the lips to show relaxation, or fear, or delight, or inquisitiveness in the animal?

Allis: Exactly. Exactly. And if we do open mouth, then we have to do it to an even more extreme degree. If we're doing something open mouth, we never use the real teeth. You have to make an artificial jaw set, with teeth and all of that.

Aside: Wait, why did they ditch the teeth?

Allis: The reason we don't use the real teeth is that teeth are used to being in a moist environment. If we take them out of that environment because the animal is dead, the enamel breaks down and they start to crack and fall out.

Alie: Oh wow, I didn't know that.

Allis: Yeah, so just like we make a mold for a death mask, we will make a mold of the teeth, and the gums, and even the tongues, and you can make copies of all of that. I do jaw sets for myself for open mouth things, like I had to do a little bitty island fox for the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum, which was snagging a berry.

But the island fox is protected so there's no jaw set for that. They're really tiny. So I made my own using dental acrylic. It was really cute, but I had to do its two super tiny little jaw sets. But that way it doesn't break down over time.

Imagine an open mouth mountain lion. It's got that snarl and the nose where the muscles are going to pull up...

Aside: Hearing about how much science and sculpture is in her work, I realized I totally neglected to ask her about that.

Allis: ... and the cheeks, and the flare of the whiskers, all of that. You've got to sculpt that with clay from the outside. And you've got to get that lip to sit. The lower jaw will be very taut, the upper lip is going to be pulled up and you have to shape that.

Alie: This is a stupid question, but was your background in studio art before this? I mean, you have to be a really good artist to be a taxidermist. How did you get so good at this?

Allis: Oh, I'm always learning. I hope I'm good at this.

Alie: [*very emphatically*] Yes you are! You've won so many awards! There have been documentaries about you! You're one of the best taxidermists in the world!

Allis: [*laughing*] Oh my gosh, thank you.

Alie: How did you develop that skill? And are you really good at pumpkin carving?

Allis: [*faux seriously*] Okay, first off, I'm an amazing pumpkin carver. [*laughs*]

Alie: [*laughs*] I knew it!

Allis: First and foremost. But you know, I learned this from my mentor, Tim Bovard, and from many, many others. I've been doing this only for about 10 years now. I think what's really helped me develop, to gain an eye, is to not make any assumptions. I don't assume I know what a cat looks like. I go to my measurement sheets, I go to my death masks, I go to references that I'm looking at on the computer, I look at live animals when I'm working on something, and I do this every time.

I'm currently working on a gray fox. I have done so many gray foxes, but I always have my references there, not just for that fox, but for looking back at reference photos every time, because it becomes a game of telephone. If I make an assumption on this gray fox, ten gray foxes later how many have I made an assumption on and how many new assumptions? Then it doesn't even look like a gray fox anymore. Maybe it starts to look like my dog.

Alie: Now is that why some taxidermy is just bad?

Allis: Yeah, I think so. I think some of it's just bad because of time. A lot of the things that you see out there, they didn't have the kind of tanning that we have now. We've only had this foam since the 1970s. Polyurethane wasn't a thing before the 1970s, so they were built on burlap and plaster, which takes on moisture, and they start to break down.

But other bad taxidermy I see, I see a lot of small birds out there, things like crows or jays, that look like ducks. And it's because that taxidermist is a duck taxidermist. And I can tell. I've been guilty of this myself. There's a lot of taxidermy at the LA County Natural History Museum that I did early on that I need to drag out and burn, quite frankly.

Alie: Oh my gosh!

Allis: I did this ground squirrel. Thank God it's not on exhibit. Most of the squirrels that I have seen in my life are fox squirrels, and I'll be damned if that ground squirrel does not look exactly like a fox squirrel. It's got a big old pointy head, ears sticking straight up. The whole thing was that ground squirrels are really, really different from fox squirrels.

It's so funny to look back at that now. I'm like, "Yeah, I did that." But I had a mentor that told me the truth about it in a very kind way. He was really sweet about it. He's like, [*in an encouraging, trying-to-find-something-positive-to-say-about-it voice*] "Well, it looks like a squirrel. I don't know about a ground squirrel, but it's got some squirrely qualities." That's

exactly what he said to me. Over time he was like [*dry, matter-of-fact voice*] “Yeah, that looks like a fox squirrel.” He’s gotten more blunt with me through the years.

But the thing is, I like to think of myself as just, just stupid enough. I never think that I’m too smart and that I know anything. I like to keep myself, not in a self-esteem kind of way, but in a humility kind of way. I’ll never get as good as mother nature. I’m chasing that rainbow and I’m never going to catch it. It’s my job to get as close as possible every time. And the only way to do that to is never trust myself. Only trust mother nature.

Alie: Oh, that's so smart.

Aside: Why do we love peoples screw ups? Well, at least their taxidermy flubs? Like for example: woodland creatures with possessed expressions.

Alie: What is that really just bizarre looking fox that made the rounds a few years ago?

Allis: Oh Lord, you know what? I have, like, eight copies of that book because people... I swear to God, if I get another one, I'm going to lose my mind. People keep giving them to me as presents and I'm like, “Why?” I don't like crap taxidermy. I think it gives us all a bad name. And I have to fight that a lot, quite frankly. When people think of taxidermy, they think Norman Bates crap taxidermy, that's what I get, right?

Alie: Is there a taxidermist in a movie that you feel like really gets it right?

Allis: Yeah, my documentary.

Aside: That documentary, *Stuffed*, is available on many platforms, including Amazon Prime. And I just looked it up on Rotten Tomatoes: 100%. That's some hardcore quality right there my babies. But she's also helped put more fact into fiction.

Allis: Okay. So I did get to do some work for, *Bates Motel*. So, if you look at Norman Bates's later work in the television show, I will say that Norman finally got it right. Thank you very much. Those are my birds. So there we go.

Alie: That's amazing!

Allis: He turned into a really good taxidermist.

Alie: [*laughing*] Oh my God. That's amazing. He had a couple decades to, um, to perfect his art. What about flimflam, what about myths about taxidermy that you really want to debunk?

Allis: Okay. Myths that I really want to debunk. Again, we are not morticians. We are not undertakers. I have a very good friend who is an undertaker and our jobs are nothing alike. We have spoken about it. What other myths? Oh, you know what? Is that we kill animals for taxidermy. That is the biggest myth.

Let me tell you, for one, everything in my personal studio, just because of how I am, and where I live, and who my clients are, quite frankly, everything in my studio, it died in reasons unrelated to the taxidermy. So that baby harbor seal, someone went on my Instagram like, “How dare you kill this?!” or whatever. And I was like, “But noooo, I didn't club a baby seal!” So, I take those moments rather than start a flame war back, it's my job in that moment to educate the public. So I was like, “Hey, just so you know, this came from a wildlife rehab.

Unfortunately, he didn't make it. Sometimes a mom will abandon them and I'm happy I can put this to good use for education."

So that's the thing. I will also say that, that deer head on someone's wall, somebody ate that. Are you kidding me? Somebody went out, it might be a trophy so that they can remember getting it, but that venison is in that person's freezer. It's also in their neighbor's freezer, their best friend's freezer. Like, I have elk in my freezer right now from a friend of mine who hunts. That's wild meat. It never lived in a pen. It's the truest form of free range. Even with commercial taxidermy, there's not a lot of people out there wasting good meat. There's just not.

Alie: Yeah. What about big game trophy hunting, like a Safari parks and things like that? Does that ever... is that a pretty small amount of taxidermy?

Allis: That's a very small amount of taxidermy, big game taxidermist. So, now we're going to go into some, some like real gray areas, right? I think people have to kind of decide for themselves. For me, I would never want to go out and hunt an elephant, or a lion, or a jaguar, or something like that. But in certain African countries, and just to name some, so like Zimbabwe, South Africa, if these animals don't have a value, then they are considered worthless. And I'll just speak about South Africa for right now.

If they are allowing, big game hunting of, let's say, a rhino or an elephant, generally internationally-watched or protected species, they're going to let them hunt a male or a female that is past breeding age. So, a person is paying sometimes up to \$250,000 or more in order to hunt that. Then that money can go towards land that the herd can continue to live on. And that's how we have people doing anti-poaching work and guarding them, et cetera.

And so to me, I think some of that is a necessary evil, but I don't like to speak about Africa as a continent. It's individual countries and how that money is used and how that hunting is happening there is individual to that place.

Alie: And what about if someone wants to start a taxidermy collection? Should they look for vintage taxidermy? Should they try to find ethically sourced new taxidermy? What's the best place to acquire?

Allis: Yeah, so with taxidermy, if you want to start a collection... I've got some vintage taxidermy that I really like, and I think it was well done. And I sometimes just like that vintage look to it. What I would say is, first off, make sure what you're buying is legal in your country and in your state. Do you know in California state it is illegal to buy kangaroo or zebra?

Alie: Oh? No! I didn't know that.

Aside: And as I've recently learned, it's illegal to own a feather. Unless you're Allis.

Allis: It is illegal to own any part of the bird, including feathers, or their nests, or their eggs. Those are all protected. It is federally protected. So in order to work on these things, I actually have a federal bird permit and each one of my clients, the museums or institutions, if they are going to have me do one of these protected birds for them, they have to have a permit and have listed on that permit each individual bird. It's more paperwork than you think.

So, some of the birds are fair game. You can totally have them. Pigeons; knock yourself out. Those are feral. All pigeons are feral. They used to be wild. They're not anymore. And they're nonnative. European starlings. Guess what? They belong in Europe. Go ahead. Knock yourself out. But other things like hummingbirds are completely federally protected. Seagulls, any type of sea bird, federally protected. Then you get into weird things like crows. Crows are not protected per se, but you cannot legally buy or sell a crow.

Alie: Really?

Aside: I checked this out and yes: It's illegal to take/possess, export/import, transport, sell/purchase, or trade any crow or any part of a crow, including its feathers, or their eggs, or nests, without a permit. But what are we talking? Like a misdemeanor? Nope! It's a felony.

Allis: Well for one, these laws were put in place because of women wearing different things on their hats, or these things becoming jewelry, especially during the early 1900s. So, what we want to do is, they don't want to create a market for these things. So basically, if it's pretty, and colorful, and native to where you live, it's probably illegal for you to have any part of it. Don't bother, don't touch it. And yes, Fish and Wildlife are going on things like Etsy and eBay and they will bust you. [*fade up to the beginning of the COPS theme*]

And honestly, I agree with these laws. I sometimes get people emailing me and I explain to them that it's illegal and they're like, "Yeah, but just on the down low." And I'm like, "No, I'm not going to commit a felony for you. No." And also, these laws were put in place to protect our native fauna, and also Fish and Wildlife is one of my clients. So maybe I'd like to keep my job.

And the other thing I would say is if you're going to get something vintage, make sure you're not bringing in something with pests on it. You can put it in the freezer for 72 hours. That's always a good idea. The other thing you can do is put it in a space you're not using, a room or a garage, and set off a bug bomb. It will not leave residue on it. You can bug bomb it.

Alie: Oh, I didn't know that. I had a friend who had a moth and a dermestid beetle infestation on her taxidermy collection. She was heartbroken.

Allis: [*empathetic*] Yeah.

Alie: Also flim flam that your studio smells. I feel like I have been there, and it was not smelly at all. How do you keep it from stinking?

Allis: My studio smells like Tabasco and vanilla scented candles. If your studio smells, I mean, I'll be honest, there's no way I don't have the cleanest taxidermy studio in the world. I do. But if your studio smells, straight up, you've got problems because that means bacteria is growing and that means it's attractive to pests.

My job is to work on things, like I've said, that are rare, endangered things, and then they need to go to museums. They need to be incredibly clean and not attractive to pests. And that means my studio does too. We bug bomb in there fairly regularly. I painted my entire studio white so I can see everything. And I mean, I am living in a world of spray bleach and gloves. I am medicated for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It is very clean.

Alie: But it makes you so good at your job.

Allis: Yeah, exactly. I'm like, if I want to really do well at a competition, I'll just go off my meds.

Alie: *[laughs]* And you do so well at competitions. I always am so proud of you whenever I see that you've gotten a new award.

Aside: Among those awards: the 2018 California Champion, getting the Judges Best in Show; The People's Choice Award for the United Taxidermist Association; and was recognized in the World Taxidermy Championships as being third in the world! She knows her shit. And people love her for it.

So we will pepper her with Patreon questions in a minute, but first a word from sponsors of the show who make it possible for us to donate to a different charity of the ologist's choosing each week. This week Allis chose ConservationAmbassadors.org in Paso Robles, California. Conservation Ambassadors offers permanent, loving homes for displaced, abused, abandoned, or injured wildlife and exotic animals.

They were also featured in the documentary, *Stuffed*, and Allis says that at times like this, they could probably really use the money to help feed all of their animals. A donation went to ConservationAmbassadors.org in her name. That was made possible by sponsors of the show which you may hear about now.

[Ad Break]

Okay, your questions.

Alie: Can I ask you some Patreon questions?

Allis: Yeah, let's do it.

Alie: Yay! Okay. A lot of people, Marylynn Skruck, Jennifer Alvarez, Amesia Doles, Stephanie Broertjes, and Kayla Jane all want to know if you have a favorite animal to taxidermy?

Allis: Okay. Yes, I definitely do. My favorite animal to taxidermy is... It's definitely birds. I really, really love doing birds. A lot of taxidermists like to work on really big stuff. They're like, *[tough guy voice]* "Argh! Go big or go home!" And I'm like, "No, I'm going to go small or go home." My favorite thing to work on is hummingbirds.

Alie: Really?

Allis: Yeah. I actually developed my own technique for doing hummingbirds. I got to do like... I think I did like 30 of them for this exhibit at the Huntington Library. I did two cases of hummingbirds. They were replicas of John Gould's hummingbird cases from 1851.

Aside: PS: I wasn't sure what those were, and it turned out: a big deal. John Gould was a British ornithologist and taxidermist, and in 1851 he exhibited 24 elaborate cases, each over 2 feet tall, made of ebonized wood with this gold trim. Inside each one were between 5 and 15 hummingbirds in this environment of foliage and flowers. *Thousands* of people came to see them at the Zoological Gardens of Regent Park, including a guy named Charles Dickens. Chucky Dicks. Who wrote a detailed account that Allis used to recreate the look in her two cases.

Allis: I even had a wood carver carve exactly what these cases used to be. And then I did all these hummingbirds in them, and now they live at the Moore Lab at Occidental College. But, the jewel of it, the jewel of my eye, I got to do two little baby hummingbirds being fed by their mom.

Alie: Oh my gosh, how small are the tools? Are you using dental tools for that?

Allis: Oh, I use spinal surgery tools. So I work in a 55° room on a frozen marble slab, and I keep my tools cold in an alcohol slush. And I never, ever touch them with my hands, only the cold metal tools. So, that's the secret, is keeping them really, really, really cold.

It's fun because the mom is feeding one of the babies with her beak going in the mouth. And I've got a little wire in there you can't see. And that's how the mom is suspended, feeding them in the little nest.

Alie: Woah, my God that's so smart.

Aside: I went and looked up photos of this little Allen's Hummingbird feeding two fluff nuggets in a nest. And baby hummingbirds, by the by, can be less than a gram in weight, that's lighter than a dime, and just about an inch long. That is some intricate work. And if you're wondering if you can get a crick in your neck, the answer is yes. And in Allis's case, one that required recent surgery. But more on that later. First, what about hot gossip? Let's get into it.

Alie: Jess Swann wants to know: Are there any major controversies in the taxidermy world?

Allis: Oh my God, every day there's a major controversy in the taxidermy world, let me tell ya. Oh yeah, we're a tight-knit community. There's not that many of us, there's like 700 worldwide that talk to each other all the time. And the controversies are people fighting over, like, which tanning formula is best, or things like that. Imagine the kind of fights that people get into on, like, Wikipedia pages. [*Alie laughs*]

We have this forum on Taxidermy.net and sometimes over on Facebook. And we will fight with each other about the most minute little details. It's like, "You can't tube your tails! You need to skin them out!" Ya know, just shit like that. It's so funny and I love it! I never get involved, but I love it! [*I like to watch!*]

Alie: A lot of people had questions about ethical sourcing. Ira Gray, Jessie Dragon, Rebekah Landry, Nozomi Fukui, Ashley Herbel, Roxanne Parker, Erin Ryan, Graham Tattersall, Bonnie, and Donica Hart all wanted to know: The ethical aspects, cruelty-free specimens, and what do you do if you see an endangered species that's taxidermied in a business?

Allis: Okay, so, ethically sourcing things. So, what are your ethics? Are you okay with the specimen? Like, my Birds 101 course is European starlings. European starlings are non-native to where I live in North America, and they are killed through pest control. They're shot out of the sky. They're also really bad for our native birds. So do you consider that ethical? I do. Also, I'm not sending out someone just to kill these. They're being killed anyway by someone doing pest control and I'm just getting the dead bodies.

For other people, they're fine with ordering rats that would be used for snake food and working on those. So is that ethical? So a taxidermist who is doing foxes for their client, their client went out fox hunting, maybe it wasn't necessarily depredation, and the taxidermist is doing it to put food on their table. Is that a good ethic for you? So I think you really have to ask yourself what's ethical.

And I think it is totally fine is to ask the taxidermist where they acquired the specimen. That is always fine, and then you can make your decision. For me, I like to work on things that were in no way killed to be taxidermied. For me that means that depredation is fine, that means pest control is fine. That means a rancher who is ranching peacocks for their feathers that fall out, that rancher has to occasionally kill some of the males because they get super aggressive. So those are the ones I get and I'm fine with that, and I do eat the meat. And is it okay if you're going to eat the meat anyway, right? The other thing I'll say is, if it's a deer, if it's an elk, straight up, somebody ate it. So just don't even worry about it.

Aside: So we addressed this in the Acarology and Disease Ecology episodes about ticks, and Lyme disease, and deer populations, but deer populations are swelling in some areas. And hunting kills about the same number of deer as would have died being hit by cars, but in a more controlled, and safe, and less-wasteful way. But obviously, if you're looking to get into hunting, do research for your own area and see what Fish & Wildlife agencies and conservationists say about specific species. And if you hunt: always, always check your crevices. Check 'em!

Alie: A lot of folks – Hollis, Ayla Taylor, Mackenzie N. Brown, Taylor Balliet, Ira Gray, Kile Mullen – want to know: What's the hardest animal to preserve?

Allis: The hardest animal to preserve...

Alie: Is it ones with thick skins, like rhinos, or fish?

Allis: Yeah, so I think every artist has something that's difficult for them. Some artists are not good at painting people, but they can do amazing still-lives or something. For a lot of taxidermists, they would think that the baby hummingbirds would be really hard.

But for me, I think the hardest thing to preserve would be something really big, like, I can't pick up a rhino skin! Those things are usually done in a team when you're going to do something big. It's like, "Ah! Taxidermists assemble!" And you bring out whoever you can.

Aside: I tried to figure out how much a rhino hide would weigh, and, tanned, one source said 150 pounds. So wet, with all the flesh still on it, must be double that, right? Like 300 pounds?

Allis: So big things would be something, but I'll tell you what I've had the worst time with, and I hate them, and everyone knows I hate them. I hate pocket gophers.

Alie: What?? Why?! *[laughing]*

Allis: I hate them so much. Pocket gophers are the worst thing ever. First off, immediately when they die – and I think it has something to do with their metabolism – they start to rot, and they get these horrible green bellies. They also smell really bad to me. I have dealt with a lot

in my career, but I think they smell horrible. And then you go to skin them and their body is just shaped like a potato and you're like, "Oh, I'm supposed to sculpt a potato?!"

And so I call them potato pocket gophers. And their hair is really short so it falls out really easy. So for one, they just start to rot on you, and all their hair falls out. So I swear, if I do ten of them, if I skin ten of them, maybe one of them will turn out. So that is the thing I refuse to work on. I just hand it to my assistant and I'm like, "I'm not working on this. I hate them." So yeah, I will outsource that every time!

Alie: [*laughing*] So on your shit list. And so Dianne P, Nozomi Fukui, and Mackenzie N. Brown want to know: Can you get any pathogens from working on any animals? Any diseases or ticks you have to look out for?

Allis: Well, I'm not going to get the coronavirus for sure, because I'm all alone in my studio, which is nothing but spray bleach and gloves. But yeah, you can, actually. A lot of the danger with catching things would be if they were fresh and not frozen. By the way, in California, it's illegal to pick up roadkill, so you should always check before you pick up roadkill. It's the fleas on things that you can get sick from. You can get pneumonic plague; you can get all kinds of things.

But also, I really worry when I'm working on primates because we can contract a lot of things from primates. It'll pass to us very easily. So that's a situation where it's like, mask, and double gloves, and everything else when you're working on primates. When I work on birds, I don't worry too much unless there have been cases of the bird flu around. So I do keep track of all that as well. A lot of mammals, I don't worry too much, but I think gloves are always a good precaution.

Alie: Right. And Matt Johnson, Sabina Ciardi, juliebear, Anna Okrasinski-Maddox, and Paige Poe, first-time question-asker, want to know about poses: How do you feel about kinda goofy poses? And Paige asked: What's your opinion on posed or dressed taxidermy specimens where they look like they're doing something specific, like mice playing a tiny banjo, or rats playing poker, or dapper squirrels wearing tiny top hats? [*"Ohh, fancy, fancy."*]

Allis: [*laughs*] Yeah! My thoughts on that are... I do taxidermy workshops and I have a lot of students who are interested in doing that kind of work. And again, taxidermy is an art, just like painting. You can paint whatever style you want, right? And you can do real stuff, really true to life, or you can do stuff that's really out there, like a Salvador Dali. And taxidermy is just the same.

So it's not my cup of tea to make a mouse drinking a cup of tea. [*Alie laughs*] But I certainly know people where that is just their jam. And so, my only thing with that is like, whatever you're going to do, just make sure it's preserved really well and not attractive to pests, and have a field day.

Alie: Well, as long as we're talking anthropomorphics, a truly shocking number of people asked – Jennifer Baguley, Nicholas Couzelis (first-time question-asker), Marisa Holzman, Tyler Q, Kelly Semon, Maddy Mayer – all wanted to know, in Jennifer's words: Could you theoretically taxidermy a hooman being?

Allis: Ohhhh, you know, it's so funny, I get this question more than you'd think. I get this one a lot! So, yes you could! Yes you could. [*Alie squeals uncomfortably*] We've got skin, but here's the kicker. Alright, so you know how I talked about the process where you turn the skin into leather? So the skin itself looks like leather. If it's not covered in fur, it's gonna look like a handbag. So if I taxidermy you, you're gonna look like you spent some daaaays at the beach. Like one of those ladies from the 1970s who put on a lot of Hawaiian Tropic. You're gonna look like that. You're gonna look dry.

However, I have thought about this. There is an old medical technique that has been used in taxidermy. It's called 'wax infiltration'. And you can also see it at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, if you look at our chimpanzee group and you look at their faces, their ears, and their hands and feet, they actually took them off, those parts with all the flesh on them and not a lot of hair, and they put them in this alcohol solution. And this takes six months to a year, and they slowly, slowly, slowly start adding more and more... I'm not going to quite explain this right, because I haven't done it, but you make the solution less water and more and more and more alcohol. And then you add paraffin wax and you bake it, and the skin is so thirsty from being in all the alcohol that it sucks up the paraffin wax, and it infiltrates the skin in the same way that the tanning ion would infiltrate it. And it's essentially turning the skin into wax. And it's got that nice, translucent look to it and everything.

And so if I were to taxidermy a human, I would do that. It would take a long time and I would need some really big vats and everything, but...

Aside: Okay, this next one is just one of my own curiosities that I could not suppress.

Alie: How is it to date as a taxidermist?

Allis: Ya know what, I'm newly single and I don't really know because I'm quarantined! [*both laugh*] I've been kinda quarantined because I had neck surgery this year. So if you want to know about taxidermy and the injuries you can get, you look down a lot and that can do a number on your neck.

So, I've been laid up for a little while and not so much with the dating. I am not having a lot of online dating luck. Nobody matches with me! Because you have to say what you do, and I think people think I'm creepy.

Alie: No, what?! You're gorgeous and world famous at what you do! [*Allis laughs*] It's just a matter of what you do. That just weeds out the people who you wouldn't want to hang with anyway. Ya know what I mean?

Allis: Yeah, but who am I gonna weed in? I mean, look, guys have walked away from me when I've told them what I do.

Alie: [*shocked gasp*] Well they're just... they're not our people! You just know that they're not our people. That's the thing. You're a special one.

Allis: I think so, too. I'm super independent, I can bring home the bacon, I can fry it up, and then I can mount it as taxidermy. So, whatever.

Alie: [*laughing*] Oh, my God. Well, anyone who dates you: very lucky.

Allis: I agree! [*“She is the best.”*]

Alie: I have a couple more questions from listeners who are falling in love with you by the moment. Mae Merrill, Mackenzie N. Brown, Sam Moody, and Nicole Kuha want to know: Is there a responsible, respectable way to taxidermy a pet? And how do you feel about it?

Allis: Yeah, you know what? I think there is. I, personally, don't really do pet taxidermy. I will do pet bird taxidermy, because when I compete, I compete with birds. I feel very, very, very well-connected to bird specimens, and that I would be the person that could do a very good job on a pet bird to bring out the personality. So I will do that, depending on the condition of the bird.

Because, when our pets die, we loved them, we took them to the vet, we did this, we did that, right? So they're not going to be a freshly-dead, blunt-force trauma, window-strike kinda bird. They're gonna not look great, ya know? They were sick or something. And so you can't always get a good mount.

The way I look at taxidermy with pets is this: if you got a German Shepherd, I can make you a German Shepherd. Now, if you looked at that German Shepherd every day of its life, and you knew every little nuance of character, every little expression, all of these things... I'm just making a sculptural representation of your pet. I don't know what it looks like as well as you do. I'll do my very best. And quite frankly, I don't think I would do that great on someone's German Shepherd, which is why I don't do pet taxidermy when it comes to cat and dogs. Also, the eyes are made of glass. It's not gonna look the same in that way.

But I do know taxidermists who do. There's, Precious Creature, Lauren Kane-Lysak. She has a very respectful pet taxidermy business - she's located in Joshua Tree. She does a lot of sleeping poses, and also does pet cremation and things like that. So I send people to her, her whole business is pet taxidermy. I strongly feel that she is a compassionate, respectful person and that this is her calling, not mine.

Alie: That's amazing, that's so good to know!

Aside: For more on this you can see PreciousCreatureTaxidermy.com. I just found myself on their site staring at photos of people's artfully posed taxidermied chihuahuas and then glancing over at Gremmie and trying not to bawl. I get it. You know it's beautiful work when you find yourself wanting to gently kiss a dead cat.

Alie: Which dovetails to Art T Lang's question: Can you do at home DIY taxidermy if you're really feeling up to it? I'm going to be like, "That's a no?"

Allis: That's a yes! That's a total yes!

Alie: [*surprised*] What! Really? Oh!

Allis: My studio's at my house, technically that's 'at home'. It's big, and industrial, and on its own - totally separate - but most taxidermists have a home studio. In fact, in Europe, most taxidermists are what we call 'hobbyists' - they don't do this for a living.

Some of the best taxidermists in the world, by the way, are hobbyists. They'll spend a month working on one thing, which I can't afford to do. Commercial taxidermists can't afford to do. And they can really dial down into the nuances of this.

If you do want to try to do taxidermy on your own DIY or whatever, I highly recommend it! Again, I teach workshops and I tell everybody the supplies, you can do this at home, this is how to get specimens. So for people out there, there's a few really good guides for doing it at home. Carl Church wrote a good bird taxidermy book.

Aside: Okay, not to be a nosy grandma pressuring you to have kids for her sake, but, when will Allis write a book?

Allis: I know! I gotta put down the scalpel and pick up the keyboard, but that's too hard to do! But you can find a lot of tutorials on Taxidermy.net on the forum. There are a lot of resources out there and most things you can get online, you can order all of the supplies, super easy.

If you're looking for specimens, I get specimens from pet stores! When you have *livestock*, you get *deadstock*, that is a fact. I generally pay 10-20% of the live value and have them put everything in bags in the freezer for me. Then I go there every couple of months or so and I get their dead stuff. They're happy to get something for it because they're dead anyway.

And places I've asked have actually not been that creeped out when I've shown up with my business card. Or you just talk to them like a normal person like, "I know this is gonna sound a little weird, but I'm doing taxidermy and I would love to get a specimen."

That's the other thing, stuff from a pet store, it's not wild, you don't have to worry about pathogens and things like that, so it's going to be much safer. I really don't want people running around picking up roadkill because it's really not safe to do. It's really not legal, and quite frankly, it's mostly not gonna turn out. Stuff that gets hit by a car goes through a lot of trauma, and bacteria starts working, and all of that. It's really difficult to do.

Or, ask somebody who does pest control or owns a ranch, you never know.

Alie: Oh, that's so awesome. I had no idea. And that actually answers my next question, which was from Heather Shaver, who wanted to know: What do you keep in your car trunk in case you come across some good roadkill? But that's not even up your alley.

Allis: I have done that before when I was working at the museum. The museum has a permit called a 'Collection Permit', only given to institutions in California. I had a museum badge and I had a pair of gloves - I have a lot of gloves in my car at all times for other reasons, I'm weird - some trash bags, and a bag of salt. So we were looking for some roadkill for one of our exhibits. We were looking for feral cats, we didn't want to use somebody's potential cat, that's very sad. So I picked up a roadkill cat, using those items, and I was just coming from a brunch, so I had a little sundress on. [*Alie laughs*] All of a sudden [*Allis makes siren noises: weeeeee-weeeeee*]

Aside: [*Alie pretending to be a cop*] Uh, ma'am?

Allis: The cop comes up [*Alie gasps*] and he looks at me, and without any sound his mouth just formed the shape of 'why?' [*slow-motion, low-pitch repeat 'whyyyy?'*] I was like: "I know this

looks weird, I work for the Natural History Museum, we have a collection permit from the county. I'm working on an exhibit right now where we need some feral cats and I'm picking this up. Let me get you my museum badge."

So I showed him my badge and I was like, "You know, it's legal," and he didn't say anything for the longest time. Then he finally said: "I do this program with kids; do you ever do tours?" So he ended up doing a tour!

Alie: *[laughs]* Oh, that's amazing! And you were not arrested!

Allis: I had the permit legally, but if I hadn't, I just don't even know what would have happened!

Alie: Yeah, seriously.

Aside: Just a quick aside, in the Corvid Thanatology episode about crow funerals, Dr. Kaeli Swift made a really excellent point about privilege in science and in fieldwork. It's, sadly, much easier for some white lady to get away with picking up animal corpses than it might be for other people of different backgrounds, which is why representation is so important; and so is equitable treatment by law enforcement. It matters in STEM, and so does acknowledgement of that privilege. Science is for everyone, and it sucks that it's not fair. What else sucks?

Alie: And now, what about... What sucks? What is the worst part about being a taxidermist? There must be something that sucks, I always ask this.

Allis: The thing that suck is it's really solitary. I'm a pretty social person, and you are typically working alone. Taxidermy is a quiet job. I like to say, "All my coworkers are dead." You're surrounded by eyes, but not one of them is alive.

I listen to podcasts, audio books, things about science. My hands are working, and my mind can also be feeling like I'm not so alone. But that's why we have such a big group of taxidermists that are connected online. One of my very, very, very best friends lives in the UK and one lives Australia. I have friends in South Africa, Iowa, New Orleans. We only see each other every two years or so, but we talk constantly. We ask each other questions like, "Hey, what's your trick for opening up ears? What's your thing for this?" whatever it is.

So we have a really tight knit, but very spread out community. That's what sucks, it's solitary. I do have my assistant Paloma, who I call my little dove, it's just the two of us. We do bring on more people, like when we were doing the Santa Barbara job, redoing a bunch of stuff, my mentor came and worked with us. Dakotah Rose from Iowa. We bring people on for things. I even bring on students occasionally, so that's great. And I do the classes, and I've been teaching a college course at Occidental College. So that's one of the ways I get over the suckage.

Aside: Her website, PreyTaxidermy.com, lists upcoming classes and she has on the calendar, a 2-day intensive course called Birds 101 on Saturday May 23rd and 24th. Underneath it however, in big red type is the note, "On hold due to plague." But you're free to join her mailing list for updates on when classes resume.

This favorites question is going to be a two-parter since Allis is a fount of passion about her work. First: does she have a favorite piece of taxidermy she's ever seen?

Alie: Do you have a favorite diorama in the New York museum or the LA museum? Is there one that you always stop at?

Allis: I do have a favorite. I'm gonna tell you a secret: there is a diorama hall at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, and it has not been open to the public for 20 years. They closed it "temporarily," but there is this diorama in there of these Sumatran tigers. It's in the jungle, and it's in this strange, forced perspective... You're looking up at this ridge of these two tigers hiding in there. It is just absolutely gorgeous; it's a marvel of forced perspective!

I am one of the few people that have gotten to see it because it's been closed for 20 years! I've been talking with the museum administration, unfortunately, they're talking about getting rid of this hall.

Alie: Oooooohhhhhh!

Allis: I know there's a pangolin diorama in there, a clouded leopard, African painted dogs. Some of them are completely in disrepair, but there's a high number of them that are really good and really amazing. It's one of four diorama halls in that museum, so they'd be getting rid of, essentially, 25% of their dioramas.

There are so few diorama halls left in the world. They got rid of them in the Smithsonian in the '80s. So, I am begging the administration of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, I've had meetings, to not only preserve this hall, but let's restore it. There's an opportunity to maybe even do new dioramas or whatever it is, but I'm begging them to preserve it. So if you're a member of the museum and this strikes a chord with you, I do recommend reaching out to them and letting them know that you'd like to see Allis Markham's favorite diorama!

Alie: Yes!

Aside: And of course the final most difficult question...

Alie: And now, your favorite thing about taxidermy? I don't even know how you're gonna answer this.

Allis: My favorite thing is what I'm doing now! Getting to educate people is my whole thing. The two ways I get to do that are, number one; I get to create these amazing specimens that get people excited about animals, and that's educating them. And then another form of educating people is what I'm doing right now with talking to your listeners and talking about the thing I am so very passionate about; this dying art, if you will, and really getting people to understand this very misunderstood science. So that's kinda my favorite thing. I mean, I think you can tell I can go for days on taxidermy. *[laughs]*

Alie: I love it, I love it! You're literally like one of the world's best!

Aside: Man, I gotta get her those quail corpses. Not just for science but also because it's illegal, and I need more room for mochi.

Allis: I think I have over 2,000 specimens in my freezer, so I've got a lot to keep me busy. That's the great thing. My work was made for the coronavirus. Again, it's completely isolated, everything is sterile, I'm really making the apocalypse work for me!

Alie: *[laughs]* You're doing just fine!

Allis: I got a side of elk in the freezer, bottles and bottles of ethanol alcohol. I'm good.

Alie: Oh my God, you're so ready. This has been absolutely such a joy!

Allis: I really appreciate it very much.

Alie: Oh my gosh, of course!

Allis: I'm so excited for this. I listen, and whenever there's a new one I'm like *[really excited, higher-pitched voice]* "THERE'S A NEW OLOGIES!"

Alie: Yeah!!

Allis: So, thank you!

So ask smart people stupid questions, and you can follow Allis's work at [Instagram.com/allis](https://www.instagram.com/allis). She's also on Twitter: [Twitter.com/AllisMarkham](https://twitter.com/AllisMarkham), or you can go to [PreyTaxidermy.com](https://www.PreyTaxidermy.com) to see her work. And you can check out the stunning documentary [Stuffed](#) for more visuals of her whole world and the taxidermy scene.

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). I'm @AlieWard on [both](#). There are bleeped episodes for kids and transcripts are up at [AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras](https://www.AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras) and there will be links to all of this plus the sponsors of the show and the charities we've supported in the show notes. Thank you to Emily White and all the *Ologies* transcribers for making those transcripts available, you're amazing.

Ologies merch is available at [OlogiesMerch.com](https://www.OlogiesMerch.com) and thank you Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus, sisters who host the comedy podcast, *You Are That*, for managing all the merch.

Thank you, Caleb Patton for bleeping our episodes, Noel Dilworth for being an amazing scheduler, and Erin Talbert for managing the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group. Jarrett Sleeper does assistant editing and has daily free workouts on his Instagram at noon PST every day!

And of course, for the sharpest scalpel in the box, Steven Ray Morris, lead editor, who also hosts the podcasts *The Purrrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*.

Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music and is in the band Islands.

If you stick around until the end of the episode you know I tell you a secret and this week I owe you a bidet update and hoo-boy howdy: toilet hoses, a truly illuminating experience. If you're looking to save toilet paper in these whacky times, I highly recommend. If you've been asking yourself, how can I shower one very specific area of my body as many times a day as I want? Well then, a bidet is just waiting for you. Come on America, let's make this a not-weird thing to have hooked up to our toilets, shall we? 10 out of 10!

Anywhoozle, next week: more stupid questions, more confessions, more wonder at the world. Thank you so much for being here, I appreciate you more than you know. Okay, berbye.

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Some links which may be of use:

["Stuffed" documentary!](#)

[Prey Taxidermy classes](#)

[Advanced Taxidermy Training Center in Montana](#)

[Dried cats in your walls?](#)

[History of taxidermy](#)

Preserving your pet with [Precious Creatures](#)

What is a ... [fleshing machine?](#)

[Deer populations & Long Island lady hunters](#)

[Indigenous approach to brain tanning](#)

[Allis in the NY Times](#)

[Her work on baby hummingbirds](#)

[John Gould's 1851 Hummingbirds](#)

[Allis's ode to John Gould](#)

["Crap Taxidermy" book](#)

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