



It simply knocks the stuffing out of some people when they ask Kirstin Tullis what she does for a living. She's a taxidermist. PRUE DASHFIELD reports.

# THE ACCIDENTAL TAXIDERMIST

KIRSTIN TULLIS IS NOT DEFENSIVE about the fact that some people think her job is, well, weird. "It's the sort of thing I might think," she says as she deftly skins a young magpie, severs the small, round knees with a crunch of bone-cutters, strips the tendons from the feet, the muscles from the leg bones and pulls the bird's head halfway through its too-narrow neck.

Watching this nice, neat, quietly spoken young woman efficiently reducing the late magpie, prematurely struck down on Leach Highway, to a little cloak of heavenly soft feathers and listening to her explain matter-of-factly that doves have thin skins, magpies smell funny and fatty birds and sea birds smell strong, you have to wonder how on earth she got into this.

There are no stuffed birds perched around her home. Her eight and a half years with the taxidermy department of the Western Australian Museum happened by accident, not design. As a second-year biology student at Murdoch University, Tullis had decided she wanted to work with birds, though not necessarily dead ones. But jobs for biology majors were scarce as hens' teeth when she graduated in 1980 and she became a volunteer in the WA Museum's bird and reptile department where she learned how to skin-out said birds and reptiles. When a job came up in taxidermy in 1981, they gave her a couple of trial parrots to stuff at home and that was that. Tullis was a taxidermist.

For the last eight months she has con-

centrated on the preparation of the current bird taxidermy display in the museum foyer, where she sits from 10.30am to 12.30pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, skinning, slicing, stripping, peeling, binding and answering the questions of curious visitors.

In fact all specimens are DOA — victims of cars, aviary losses, storms at sea, and natural causes — brought to the museum by members of the public, museum staff and other contacts. Most are popped straight into the freezer, but the fresher the bird, the nicer it is to work with: "The condition of their skin and feathers is often much better and they're not as dried out."

After thawing a bird, Tullis draws a rough outline of its shape so that all its

PICTURE: NIC ELLIS

bits and pieces are returned to the right place and the finished bird resembles its old self as closely as possible. The internal skin is rubbed with borax to soak up blood and repel insects. Then it is washed, rinsed, stuffed with a custom-made body shape of teased-out plumbers' hemp and thread, wired through the legs, fitted with glass eyes made in Israel, posed, preened, perched and trussed with thread, pins and small cards (to hold feathers in place while the bird dries, which may take days or weeks depending on its size). Then she gives it a final preen and recolours its beak and legs if necessary.

"Sometimes I throw things away because they don't work out. Sometimes it's hard to say what's wrong with them. They just don't look right." For instance, there is a problem owl in the workshop — its posture is wrong. Subtly wrong, but wrong. "Owls are very hard to do. They've got a certain look about them. Its face isn't too bad, it's the way they stand. They very often stand very upright and erect."

There's not much you can do about tatty feathers either. The rattier-looking birds are either trashed or given to the museum's education section. Little hands will ruffle the smoothest feathers, so your second-class stuffed bird is more suitable for the classroom.

On the other hand, Tullis is very pleased with the three-day job she made of a graceful banded stilt included in the display, although the legs are perhaps a little too pink. "I was really happy about it. Being

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such long-legged, gangly, delicate things, they're really hard to do. Sometime I'll recolour those legs. It's hard to get the colour quite right."

In order to create an impression of life from a handful of feathers and a ball of plumbers' hemp, Tullis uses photographs, studies aviary birds and occasionally visits the zoo.

The ancient Egyptians practised disembowelling and embalming to prevent decay of corpses, but the craft of taxidermy is said to have originated in 16th century Holland with the death of a nobleman's aviary of colourful exotic birds. Trying to find a way of preserving their brilliant plumage, the nobleman consulted the country's most eminent chemists. The birds were treated with spices, stuffed, wired and mounted on perches and there it was: the first collection of taxidermy.

At first, the techniques of the craft were closely guarded secrets, but by the Victori-

an era practitioners were supplying museums and private collectors. Eventually no Victorian household was complete without a mounted bird of prey in the study, a tableau of red squirrels sewing happily in the sitting room or a dear departed pet propped up in a corner, forever.

Messiness and occasional smelliness go with the job, but Tullis has always enjoyed working with her hands and it gives her plenty of scope for that — mounting, model-making, and working with a wide variety of materials.

She says people associate museums with stuffed animals. "Because so many species are in danger, it's nice to be able to have some that people can look at and be aware that these things exist and to take more care in the environment."

I tell her about a taxidermy shop which sold stuffed cats dressed as Elvis Presley and Liberace rats in little sequined suits seated at tiny grand pianos. It was utterly bizarre, a travesty of the kind of taxidermy practised by Tullis. She says in Queensland they sell stuffed cane-toads playing cricket. "I think that sort of thing is really tasteless and not at all respectful of living creatures."

Some people object to any form of taxidermy, she says. "But to do that and make animals into ridiculous human things is pretty tasteless." ■

**The bird taxidermy display continues in the museum foyer until at least August 15.**

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