

Dubois antler artist Monte Baker puts a little finish on an eagle carved into a moose's antler at his Horse Creek Gallery. Baker does most of his work at his studio just a few miles from the gallery. The studio affords more space and he doesn't have to worry about offending people with the smell of bone dust.



## LAYERS OF

# DISCOVERY

Dubois artist brings wildlife, history to life in the sheds big game animals leave behind

Story by Kelsey Dayton | Photos by Justin Joiner

**T**HERE IS TREASURE hidden in the mountains near Dubois. Monte Baker knows, he's found it — hundreds, maybe even thousands of pounds of discarded riches rest there, disguised as elk and moose antlers and bighorn sheep horns shed or forfeited in death by wild travelers.

These are riches Baker has hunted since he was a child and transforms into works of art, carefully carving wild scenes into wild canvases of antler and horn: soaring eagles, stampeding buffalo and bear cubs climbing a tree. It's a blend of nature's own art with the skills he's perfected after more than 40 years spent carving.

Baker's work is both inspired by, and a homage to, the things he loves most about

Wyoming: its history and wildlife. He carves moose, bears and elk, as well as stagecoaches, Native Americans and Mormons pushing handcars.

"If it's part of local history, I grew up in and with it and I put it all in my carvings," he said.

Baker spent his early childhood in the Bridger-Teton National Forest, where his father worked for the U.S. Forest Service at Blackrock Ranger Station east of Moran Junction. Together they'd scour the Teton Wilderness for natural wonders. Every day was a mountain treasure hunt, Baker said. He filled the family bathtub with his bounty — frogs and salamanders — and stacked piles of found deer, elk and moose antlers outside in long-gone days before shed hunting was regulated.



Monte Baker cuts away small chunks of moose antler as he follows his pencil sketch of an eagle. Baker uses a handful of tools to create his work including a band saw and a jigsaw, but the detail work is done with a dental drill that runs at 400,000 rpm.

When it was time for Baker, the oldest of three children, to start school, the family moved to Dubois. There he continued his natural treasure hunts and discovered “elephant graveyards” of sheds. He built an entire fence one summer from elk antlers.

Baker’s parents encouraged the children to find indoor hobbies to pass the long Wyoming winters. So he played the piano and taught himself to whittle. In sixth grade, he graduated to a drill press and carved a belt buckle from an antler he found.

He started selling his small carvings in high school, but didn’t see art as a career. He went on to earn degrees in electrical engineering, physics, math and German from Utah State University. But 30 years ago, one couldn’t work as an electrical engineer and live in Dubois. Baker hated the thought of long commutes and raising his family — which eventually included five children — far from the mountains. So he returned to

Dubois and took a job installing lines with the telephone company and traveling to art shows to sell his carvings.

“There was still treasure to be had here,” he said.

### Bone dust studio

The sounds of ragtime piano music fill the air along the boardwalk one summer day on Ramshorn, the main thoroughfare through Dubois. Baker plays old-time music anytime it’s warm enough to feel his fingers on the outdoor piano and there isn’t someone perusing his Horse Creek Gallery, which he opened 25 years ago when art became his full-time job.

Baker creates his carvings only a short drive away in his studio, where dust flies as he leans over, carving with his handheld dental drill. He keeps an arsenal of more

than 40 small cutting tools called burs to carve detailed scenes. A pile of bighorn sheep horns are dwarfed by a pile of elk antlers, which seem diminutive compared to the nearby stack of moose paddles — the rarest to find and Baker’s favorite to carve.

“Mother Nature’s framework is such an eye-catcher,” he said holding up a paddle. Baker collects about 60 pounds of moose antlers each year, hiking the same steep avalanche paths on Togwotee Pass the animals use in search of vegetation that blooms each spring. He supplements his haul with antlers purchased from people in other areas.

Baker’s carvings begin in the wild. When he’s not collecting sheds, he quietly watches moose, elk and bears. Observing how a bear turns when its alert or an elk’s stance right before it bugles is his favorite part of his process. For him, it’s always been about the animals. He draws inspiration both from the scenes he sees and the antlers he

finds. Sometimes he’ll hold an antler and let the texture and curves inspire his carvings. Other times, he seeks the perfect antler for what’s percolating in his mind.

### ‘I like perfection’

Jonathan Jones first saw Baker’s work at the National Final’s Rodeo in Las Vegas where, for years, Baker sold his art. It took several years before Jones, who moved to Dubois in 2000, realized Baker was an artist from his same town. He had eyed several of Baker’s pieces through the years, but in 2005 he saw “Crooked Sky,” a moose antler carved with an eagle in flight over a mountain. Another eagle head appeared from the end of the antler where it would have attached to the moose’s head.

He saw in the carving the same wildness that brought him to Wyoming from North Carolina a few years earlier. Imaginative and unique, the carving embodied a feeling of the mountains he’d grown to love, he said.



Above: “Music Lessons” features one of Baker’s most requested subjects. Baker’s pieces often begin in the field. He wants his art to showcase real wildlife rather than static characters, so he observes them closely. Below: Baker sketches an eagle onto a moose antler in his studio. Although he usually props up his sketchbook to reference while he works on his pieces, he does some carvings by memory.





Monte Baker flips through a large book of dozens of sketches, some of which aren't related to Western wildlife. Baker has carved pieces with elephants, whales and Western history. Although his art take days or weeks to carve out, he says the hardest part of the process is the sketches.

Jones asked for, and received, the sculpture as a Christmas gift from his family that year.

Baker deliberately tries to capture the essence of Wyoming in his work. It is the wildlife that makes this state so special, he said.

Each piece begins as a series of sketches. Baker spends almost as much time drawing a piece as he does carving. Lines mar each sketch to note scale.

"I like perfection," he said.

Each subject is sketched in different poses; birds' wings extended or folded, animals' heads bowed or cocked to the side, but there is always at least one sketch of just the face within a piece. Baker spends the most time carving an animal's face. He is fastidious in the details — where the hairlines break, how the jaw juts and where the teeth show.

"You have to get that part perfect," he said. "That part is critical to generating the emotion in the heart of the viewer."

His carving process mimics his sketching. He first creates his backgrounds and animal bodies. He spends the most time wielding

### FOR MORE

Monte Baker's Horse Creek Gallery is at 104 W. Ramshorn in Dubois. His works can also be seen online at [montebakerantlercarving.com](http://montebakerantlercarving.com).

a drill bit as thin as a needle to capture an animal's face. From when he starts to carve to the time he mounts the finished antler can take three to 10 days, depending on the size and intricacy of the carving.

Large pieces, like the scene of a buffalo stampede Baker carved across two moose paddles, can take even longer.

No matter the subject, Baker is always aware the antlers or horns that he's working on are just as much a part of the art. He carves to accentuate the beauty of these natural canvases and lives by just two rules: "Never over-carve and let the antler do the talking."

After more than 40 years carving antlers and horns, his works in Dubois can now be found around the world. He's perfected his process and still loves watching carvings bloom under his drill, proving that the surrounding mountains still, after all these years, offer treasure for those willing to find it.

— Kelsey Dayton is a freelance writer and editor of *Outdoors Unlimited*, the magazine of the *Outdoor Writers Association of America*.



Above: Monte Baker's Horse Creek Gallery displays a variety of his work. It includes the carvings in moose antlers he is known for, but also carvings in bighorn sheep horns and furniture he has worked on with other artisans. Left: A moose antler Baker turned into a full horse's head is one of the customers' favorites. Center: Baker carefully drills away bits of antler to reveal an eagle's head at his shop. Steady hands and eyes are critical once the piece gets to the drill. Taking too much off can ruin a piece or force drastic changes. Right: Baker's "Grubby Paws" carving showcases the layers of discovery he tries to incorporate into his pieces. From a distance, the bear is easily visible, but as people get closer they might notice the detail in the tree or bear tracks.

