



VARNUM CRAFTED this loggerhead sea turtle from a fiberglass mold, then added paint and gloss so it would appear to be swimming under water. The turtle can be seen in the reef room at the Museum of Coastal Carolina at Ocean Isle Beach.



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# Museum At Ocean Isle Houses Varnum's Critters

BY DORI COSGROVE GURGANUS  
**G**o for a tour of the Museum of Coastal Carolina at Ocean Isle Beach and you may end up asking, "Where did they get all these animals?"

The not-for-profit museum, which opened last spring, was established to educate visitors about the native wildlife and environment of coastal Brunswick County.

Only creatures naturally found in this area can be found in its growing array of exhibits. In fact, most of the furs and skins used for mounting were killed or found locally.

Tony Varnum of Varnumtown, a part-time taxidermist, preserved many of the specimens in the animal room, including the bear and raccoons, but he takes special pride in being responsible for almost every creature seen in the reef room.

Visitors to that exhibit, with its soft, indirect lighting and up-close views of sea creatures, get a nearly lifelike glimpse of an ocean reef habitat.

Furs and skins are donated to the museum for the most part, and its staff passes on the materials to Varnum, who works out of a shop behind his house.

What started out as a hobby for the Brunswick County native has become a full-fledged work of biological documentation, as Varnum is scheduled to provide many more Brunswick County critters to the museum for this season.

Coming soon, he says, are a coyote, beaver, muskrat, rabbit, weasel, mink and of course, opossum. A taxidermist in Texas will provide some snakes and frogs as well.

Stuart Ingram, the volunteer who has developed the museum's exhibits, says that plans are under way

for a cypress room, featuring a "Green Swamp" environment for some of the existing animals and some of Varnum's new arrivals.

The animal room will become a bird room, Ingram says.

He also wants to feature more shallow-water marine fish such as croakers and spots.

"The quality of what we have now is excellent," Ingram said of the work done by Varnum and assorted

that's been dead for a while. "Those will taint your stomach a bit," he said with a laugh.

Still it's a pastime he prefers to keep on a part-time basis.

Work on a tugboat on the Cape Fear River pays his bills and being a husband and father keeps him busy, so Varnum admits that he does just enough taxidermy to stay interested in it.

His humble attitude belies his talent, however, demonstrated by a box of ribbons and best of category awards he keeps tucked away.

Varnum started competing with real skins and replica fish in 1985, and never went home without an award until he stopped in 1990, he says.

Only a few plaques are displayed in his home, along with a few of those prize-winning fish.

That's surprising after hearing that he started out hating to mount fish.

"Now, that's my best thing," Varnum says.

He recently took a seminar on bird mounting, and plans to try his hand with those.

The real surprise is learning that most of the fish Varnum mounts and puts on display at the museum are fiberglass replicas.

Varnum orders molds of different fish species and paints them to appear real.

To look at one of the shiny, realistically-colored fish or turtles is to realize that there's more to this hobby than arranging fur on a cleaned skeleton. Perhaps taxidermist/artist should be the title, to correctly classify a taxidermist's actual skills.

To get the full impact, you'll have to go to the Museum of Coastal Carolina and see Varnum's work for yourself.

## Want To Visit?

Want to visit the Museum of Coastal Carolina?

It's located at the corner of Third and Laurinburg streets on the island at Ocean Isle Beach.

Through May 31, hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays. Effective June 1, the schedule expands to seven days a week, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. except for Sundays, 1 p.m.-5 p.m.

Admission is \$2 for adults and \$1 for children age 12 and under. Books of 15 tickets are available for \$25.

Volunteer Stuart Ingram says 13,000 visitors came through the museum during its first season, 1991.

other donors, but he has plans to bring even more preserved animals to the museum.

Soon a sample of every native animal may well be housed at the Ocean Isle museum.

Helping make that possible is Varnum's task and he brings 11 years of experience to his work.

It can be difficult to make paws and fins look untouched, but that's part of the job.

Taxidermy is usually enjoyable, unless he's asked to stuff an animal



AT WORK IN HIS SHOP, Tony Varnum displays the models, paints and chemicals used to make each animal he preserves look like it's still alive and kicking.

PHOTOS BY DORI C. GURGANUS

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