Emily Mayer’s erosion cast cow’s head

Basically, the head is covered with silicone rubber and left to rot, all removed when the hair has slipped from the skin leaving only the hair in the mould. The mould is cleaned and dried and the head cast in resin which is pigmented to match the skin tones.

The severed part of the head is cast with a silicone mould separately from the erosion of the head. It is moulded of the real sever and re-created using coloured resins painted into the mould, a bit like painting on glass, i.e. the detail painted in first and building up the colour gradually working backwards.
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The Guild of Taxidermists
Having watched some internet videos that showed *Dermestid* beetles hard at work enthusiastically chowing down on a variety of carcasses, I became fascinated by these busy little creatures and thought about keeping a colony in order to prepare small mammal and bird skulls. Then, after overhearing some Guild members chatting about the beetles at a Guild seminar last year, I decided to take the plunge.

In January this year I purchased a small colony (around 300+ beetles and larvae) from the very friendly and helpful Ken Hansen of Kodiak Bones and Bugs Taxidermy in Alaska (www.bonesandbugs.com).

After a few days, paranoia set in: perhaps they would arrive with a label on the outside saying ‘CAUTION! LIVE ANIMALS!’ and representatives from the Royal Mail, DEFRA and goodness knows who else would turn up on my doorstep to tell me I had broken the law by importing highly destructive creatures into the country! Despite carrying out numerous internet searches, I was unable to find any information about the legality of bringing the beetles into the UK, and so eventually decided that, as they are already resident here and several museums and other institutions already have colonies of them, it would probably be OK. (If anyone knows something to the contrary, please share!)

Eleven days after placing the order, the colony arrived in a suitably innocuous-looking brown cardboard box. Phew! Inside the box was a small plastic tub which had a lid that was sealed firmly around the edges with tape, and was punctured with tiny air holes. Little rustling sounds from within the container confirmed that the beetles had survived their trip.

**Getting to know the little critters**

There are many different species in the *Dermestidae* beetle family: the ones that Ken Hanson sells are *Dermestes maculatus*, a.k.a. ‘hide beetle’ or ‘leather beetle’.

When the beetle larvae hatch from the eggs, they are minute and hairy. As they get bigger and bigger, they moult several times over the course of about a month and a half until they get to the size of an adult beetle.

The larvae are fast moving: they scuttle about much quicker than the adults and they wiggle their backsides as they go.

When they are ready for their final transformation they burrow into whatever burrowing material is to hand, and then turn into a pupa. Approximately a week and a half later, they will emerge as adult beetles which are approximately half an inch long, black on top and mottled white underneath, with a long and slender body.

Their entire life cycle is around four to five months.

**Accommodation and environment**

I keep the colony in a plastic tank that’s approximately 16” x 10” and about 12” high.

I have yet to see any of the beetles or their larvae manage to climb even half an inch up the plastic, so I’m (cautiously) confident that they won’t be escaping out of the ventilation grilles in the lid. One website said that that they can chew through plastic but I have not seen evidence of this so far: it probably depends on the rigidity and/or tastiness of the plastic.

I’m making a new replacement lid out of very fine metal mesh – not because I’m concerned about escapees, but in order to keep other small insects from getting in.
Different information sources suggest slightly different optimum temperatures for the beetles; the average is somewhere between 60 and 85 degrees. If the beetles are too cold they won't be very active or feed as much; if they are too hot they will die, and high temperatures can also cause the adults to fly.

To keep the colony warm, I taped a reptile heating mat to the underside of the tank, which is plugged into the mains 24/7. It doesn’t have a temperature regulator but the addition of a small thermometer helps to keep an eye on things. The mat keeps the tank at around 65-70 degrees depending on the temperature of the rest of the room. As I don’t want to expand the colony, this temperature is sufficient to keep the beetles active and happy to work on the occasional small bird or small mammal head, but not so active that they are breeding in vast numbers.

If more heat is needed and/or if the colony is bigger, overhead reptile or incubator lamps can be used. The beetles and their larvae are not fond of bright light so filters can be used with these. I keep the tank’s sides wrapped with a length of dark cloth which also helps to keep the temperature cosy.

The ventilation grilles in the lid provide enough air circulation so that the colony does not get too humid. Too much humidity can cause mould; it can also cause mites to start breeding and these can be fatal to the beetles.

**Bedding**

Various materials can be used to create a bedding layer - for example, shredded paper, mattress padding, wood chips or squares of corrugated cardboard (they like hiding in the holes between the layers).

I have seen some colonies that have no bedding in them at all. Although the beetles seem to work just as well without it, I like the idea of providing them with something to burrow into when they want to have a snooze, and a safe place to hide when it’s time for the larvae to pupate.

If you’re going to use the beetles for preparing very small bones, it’s best to use just layered squares of corrugated cardboard rather than any kind of loose bedding, as the beetles will often carry off tiny bones and hide them in their bedding. Also, loose bedding can make it very difficult to separate out the beetles when it comes to cleaning out their home.

As the beetles had arrived in vermiculite, I wanted them to feel at home, so I bought some more of that from a garden centre and created a bedding layer with it. On top of this I put a layer of corrugated cardboard squares which double up as little food tables. At one end of the tank are some cubes of polystyrene for the larvae to burrow in, prior to pupating.

Although they don’t seem too keen on eating feathers, the larvae love to use them as bedding before they pupate, and will drag them into the tunnels that they make in the polystyrene.

**Odour**

While there’s no getting away from the fact that the colony has a unique smell, I wouldn’t describe it as being unbearably unpleasant. However, as one person’s stink is another person’s perfume, if you are thinking about getting a colony it might be a good idea to sniff out someone else’s first, and make up your own mind about it! I would describe the odour as robust and somewhat musky – a combination of beef jerky, wet dog, and a bucket of Southern fried chicken.

The smell’s intensity is increased greatly if the colony becomes too humid, if the bedding is allowed to get soggy, or if the room in which the tank is kept is very warm. Also, if there is more food than the colony can handle and/or the food contains too much moisture, the increased smell actually comes from the decomposing food rather than the beetles themselves.
 Needless to say, the larger the colony, the larger the smell! It might not be a smell that you’d want to have hanging around in your kitchen or living room. It can be kept at manageable levels of intensity if you keep the colony in a shed, or even a spare room indoors if the tank is located near an open window or some other source of ventilation. An array of different types of automatic air fresheners placed at strategic points around the room can also be a great help.

**Hygiene**

The beetles’ poop (called ‘frass’) is very fine, dusty and off-white in colour. As my colony is quite small, their tank hasn’t yet needed to be cleaned out, but when the time comes the best way would probably be to transfer all the cardboard and polystyrene into a temporary container, and then move the bedding up to one end so that half of the tank is empty. Putting food on the empty side should coax the beetles and their larvae out of their bedding and they can then be removed and put into the temporary container. Tempting them out with pieces of food would probably need to be done several times in order to try and get as many critters out of the bedding as possible.

**Water**

The colony should stay quite dry, but once a week I put some folded up squares of kitchen paper into the tank and then lightly spray the squares with water. Sometimes the beetles and their larvae get enthusiastic about this and other times they’re not interested at all. Whichever happens, I take the paper out after a couple of hours, so that the tank and the bedding don’t become damp.

**Food**

After initially settling the colony into their new home, I gave them a whole mole as a welcome snack but they were not impressed with this at all and ignored it. They prefer their food to be on the dry side and took offence at the mole’s excess of bodily fluids. I swapped the mole for a couple of hotdogs but with limited success: it seemed that the beetles were not fond of junk food.

I wanted to find something that they would like to eat, for the times when I didn’t have any ‘work’ meals for them. I tried things such as Spam and corned beef which they nibbled at half-heartedly until eventually I hit on something that made them immediately come shuffling out of their bedding with great excitement as soon as they smelled it - little jars of chicken paste sandwich spread.

As their food should be as dry as possible, large items should first have the skin, feathers/fur and muscle etc removed. However, small things that have a relatively low moisture content can be given whole. I gave the colony an entire sparrow and they reduced it to feathers and bones in just under three days. Two mouse heads with everything left on and in were finished in under two days.

A skinned rat’s head with only its eyes taken out was picked clean in three days. At first, the fresh head conjured up no interest whatsoever. It just didn’t smell interesting enough:

Beetles and larvae, where are you?!

Putting some of the magic chicken spread nearby was enough to get the beetles and their larvae racing out of their beds. Within 60 seconds, a great deal of snuffling about had begun. Adult beetles were crawling all over the food and larvae of all sizes were joining in.
By the end of the second day, all the chicken spread had been eaten, together with most of the wet material that had been on the skull.

At the end of the third day (right image, above), the skull was almost completely clean.

I’m still experimenting with different types of food, but at the moment chicken spread is still their favourite. Also, a fresh rabbit’s head vs dried-out Spam = no contest.

When a skull has been picked clean and is ready for de-greasing and bleaching, I hold it above the tank, brush it off and then give it a few taps so that any attached beetles and larvae can drop back into the colony. I then put the skull into a sealed container for anything up to two weeks, together with a lump of chicken spread. There are always a few larvae of various sizes, hiding away in nooks and crannies from which I’m unable to extract them and this is the best way to get them all out. Alternatively, I could just put the skull straight into a de-greasing solution and then into the hydrogen peroxide, but I try not to kill anything if I can help it, so I attempt to retrieve as many beetles and larvae as possible.

After a few days, the remaining larvae migrate from their hiding places within the skull and many can be found on the fresh food which I then put back into the colony. There are usually a few larvae wiggling around inside the container, lost and wondering where the rest of their friends have gone. So that I don’t accidentally squish them, I use a small, fluffed-out paintbrush to scoop them up and put them back into the tank.

Recently, I was mortified to find a tiny larva floating around in the hydrogen peroxide after I was sure I had retrieved all of them from the skull that I was bleaching. I fished it out and even though it had been in the chemical for over ten minutes, it started wiggling about on the paintbrush. I kept it in a container on its own for a few days with some food and it continued to eat and grow as normal so eventually I returned it to the colony. The tenacity of these little creatures is amazing!

Finally, I’d like to thank Ken Hanson and Emily Mayer for their invaluable advice on how to look after these fascinating little creatures. I would love to hear from anyone else who has a colony of beetles - any more hints and tips about their day-to-day care would be much appreciated.