

## Hunting for the kids

### OUTDOORS:

Arkansas lodge offers hunting opportunities for terminally ill children

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**ALMYRA, Ark.** — For Trey Miller, the owner of Bayou Bread Hunting Lodge in Almyra, helping other people get involved in the outdoors is a natural for him — what now feels like is a mission for him to do.

Miller, a Louisiana native, moved to Arkansas a little over seven years ago. He enjoys the area because of the duck hunting, fishing and other hunting available across the Grand Prairie.

“I do all kinds of hunting during the fall and winter,” Miller explains. “In the off-season I love to fish.”

The Stuttgart Daily Leader reports that a little over a year ago, something in his life changed him forever. His father, Dutch Miller, died after being diagnosed six months earlier with cancer. Miller realized then that his life's meaning had changed. He inherited his love for the outdoors from his father, as well as his grandfather, Donald Miller.

Miller decided that he wanted to do something for people and give back to the community with the love of hunting that he has grown up with.

“I wanted to give back and make a difference,” Miller said. “I realized that maybe I could do something for kids.”

After his father died, Miller began growing his hair long, longer than it normally was, searched for a website that he was comfortable in giving his hair to and chose Wigs 4 Kids, based in Michigan. Wigs 4 Kids advertises to be committed to improve a child's quality of life by helping them deal with the appearance-related side effects of the treatment and to help build self-esteem.

The young patients are dealing with hair loss as result from various illnesses such as cancer, alopecia, trichotillomania as well as a result of burns.

“I just kept searching for something to do with children, since I have one of my own, too,” Miller said. “So then I had another idea.”

Miller, who had already had the idea of the hunting lodge and that idea was becoming a reality, decided to follow through and offer free duck hunting for terminally ill children.

“All they have to provide is the traveling expenses,” Miller said. “I supply the rest.”

The feeling that would be the least he could do for a young child or teenager who is facing the last stages of life and wanted to do something in the outdoors, Miller explained.



A single antler sits in the leaves, removed from a deer's head. While antlers like this might look like nothing special, to Heath Merry, they look like dollar signs. | AP Photo

# Ahead of the game

## Kansas outdoorsman turns discarded antlers into big business

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**DELPHOS, Kan.** — As he embarked on adulthood, Heath Merry hopped on a typical path, but what happened in the process sent him on a nonconventional and lucrative adventure that continues to grow.

Pulling from an outdoors passion, collecting deer antlers has evolved into a full-time gig that features travel and a six-figure salary.

“I'm livin' the dream,” said 36-year-old Merry of Salina, Kan., the founder, owner and operator of Antlers4Me.

From the thickets, river banks, fence lines and shelter belts around Delphos, he found a way to turn a sustainable supply of discarded antlers into a career that has taken him to urban jungles on the East Coast and vast frontiers way north and west of home.

The Salina Journal reports that his products are antlers from deer, elk, caribou and moose, just to name a few; mostly the whitetail deer in his environs.

“They are works of natural art,” he said. “Wild antlers have the most beautiful color.”

Those animals discard their racks in the spring, and then grow back a fresh set of antlers in a few months.

“To the deer, it's just like cutting your fingernails. It's the fastest-growing tissue on the planet,” Merry said.

Antlers are left in the wild, and folks gather them up for their own needs or offer them up for sale,

many on eBay.

Merry started by hunting antlers — called sheds in the wild — in his spare time, but now the hobby has evolved into a full-time business.

Merry is an “antler broker,” and he claims to be one of just two in Kansas.

Merry buys from collectors — from Amish farmers in Pennsylvania to ranchers, hunters and deer farms in middle America — and sells them for all sorts of uses. Many are shipped from his shop, an old grocery store building in Delphos, where he grew up.

“People say, ‘What are you going to make with these antlers?’ and I say, ‘Well, to be honest with you, I make money,’” Merry said.

Basic antlers are used in medicines, vitamin supplements, an Antler broker flourishes in his Delphos business dog chews or in decorations and furniture. Other uses include lighting fixtures, coat and hat racks, church crosses and enhancements in homes and offices where the lodge look is posh.

“Western states are really into that rustic decor,” Merry said.

The more ornate, unique or rare antlers fetch a hefty price. So, what do they fetch?

He pays \$6 to \$8 a pound for the best grades of everyday antlers, and sells them for a dollar more a pound. Some are cut into lengths and sold as dog chews at pet stores, for about \$20 a pound.

Trophy antlers, with lots of points and large in size, are sold separately. Some carry a hefty price.



Antlers lay in snow. | AP Photo

A high-scoring antler — based on the North American Shed Hunters ranking — might fetch \$500 or more. Other associations score full racks of antlers.

“I've seen single sheds worth \$2,500 to \$20,000,” Merry said. “No two antlers are alike.”

The most he's paid for an antler was \$1,800, or up to \$5,000 for a full rack, i.e., both antlers. Before he buys something so expensive, however, a sale to a collector is arranged in advance.

A legendary set of shed from a magnificent whitetail buck in northern Minnesota — known as the Minnesota Monarch — is valued at \$250,000, Merry said.

“Will he get that? Probably not,” he said of the seller.

It's OK for anyone to grab an antler in the woods, Merry said, but there are rules. For instance, if you find a skull and a full rack in Missouri, you can take it, but it can't be sold.

“It's against the law,” he said. “In Kansas, you can take one, but (state) fish and game has to come to the site and issue you a salvage tag. It's so people aren't out shooting deer for the antlers.”

Merry said he's never knowingly bought antlers from deer that have been poached, other than those that he has purchased from state fish and game auctions.

“If the proper paperwork isn't included, you just don't buy them,” he said.

Merry does business with deer farms, but he can tell the difference between those antlers, with blunt tips, and ones from the wild that sports short tips and a natural sheen.

Some people are satisfied with farm antlers, or artificially made ones, Merry said, but authentic antlers are still preferred.

He makes road trips by sport utility vehicle; a small one for short runs and small amounts, and a large one for long hauls or big loads. He has a GMC Yukon that can carry up to 1,300 pounds of antlers.

“You have to know how to stack them,” Merry said.

He tells of waiting to meet with Amish clients at Pennsylvania farmsteads, and “a horse and buggy pulls up.”

Roughly a year ago, there was a trip through downtown New York City with his SUV, its back windows covered with see-through photos of antler stacks. The rig received some especially curious looks while passing through China Town.

It stands to reason that Merry would gravitate to an occupation hinged to nature.

He spent much of his childhood in the wild, hunting, fishing and trapping with his maternal grandfather, Allen Copple, said his mother, Jody Merry. She works at the post office in Delphos. Allen Copple, who died 2011, lived most of his life east of Delphos, in the country.

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