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Jake Heckman [00:00:12] You know it's a good question. I think it's just something I've always done since I was a little kid and I can't really remember the first time I fished. My mom would drop me off at the Fish and Game ponds in Bozeman. That was my babysitter while she shopped once a week and. I grew up right off the Gallatin River. So I'd ride my bike down and go fishing since I was a real little.

Jake Heckman [00:00:46] The first one I remember catching you know I guess I haven't really given that much thought.

James Thull [00:00:53] When you're a kid and you got dropped off at the ponds, what was it that you catch?

Jake Heckman [00:00:58] Just trout that they would stock in there. Down on the Gallatin River I've gotten some really.

Jake Heckman [00:01:06] Cool fish that I'm not even sure what they are. One had a black belly on it and a big underhooked jaw. You know. Yeah. I've done a lot of sea fishing. Spear fishing. Had a 14 year diving career and lived in Louisiana for a while. I have a lot of really interesting fish stories there.

James Thull [00:01:45] Why don't you tell us one of those.

Jake Heckman [00:01:47] Well. All right. One of my favorites is one of the first really deep dives that I did. I was probably like 23 24 years old. And we went down past 700 feet. But on our way down we were doing an installation on a platform. We were about 600 foot down and we lived under pressure the entire time. Well, you get down that deep and there's not a whole lot of sea life. But everything you see is totally out of this world and my belt partner he was and he'd been diving for 20 years and there was a nine foot grouper down there. And, right before his six hours by six hours it was up he had the supervisor send him a whole bunch of Vienna sausages and he feeds this grouper, and this grouper his back's this tall and he's got spikes that tall on top of his back. His mouth is like this big. His eyeballs are like this big. You know.

Jake Heckman [00:03:10] He feeds him all these Vienna sausages and his time's up. Well he comes back, gets in the bell and he tells me man there's this vicious grouper out there, just be careful. If you got to smack him smack him you know. And I'm like, all right whatever I throw my stuff on and he clips a can of tuna fish to the back of my bailout bottle, pokes it full of holes right before I locked out of the bottom of the bell. And I'm scooting over there and there's all these I don't know what you call him I call him cigar fish because they look like a cigar but, they they kept hitting me and pelting me cause I'm chumming basically cruising over there. And I get there and I got one hundred some foot a quarter inch rope that I got to clean up. I was doing some surveying and stuff with this rope and it's mid water the bottom of the platform was seven hundred eighty five feet, and we were, you know a few hundred feet off a bottom a hundred or so. And you gotta watch a depth you can't fall off and you can only go so high up. If you fall off then you're kind of stuck down there because of decompression. So. I get over there and there's this grouper that's the size as big as Sophia's car pushing me around nudging me trying to eat you know always like trying to get the stuff it's chumming and he knows there's food there the other guy fed him a dozen cans of vienna sausages, so.

Jake Heckman [00:04:48] And groupers are like a pet too. They're always hanging out they're like a dog we name Fido or whatever. Well I got this rope and underwater the rope floats up when you're coiling in your hand. This grouper was behind me and he swallowed my arm up to here. It was like getting your arms sucked into a dredge like. There was nothing I could do. If he if he were to went like this he would ripped my socket out like. But he instantly like spit my arm out. And I was very grateful that he did. But yeah that's one of my fish stories out of many. You know that's that's a great question. There's definitely way more people out. When I was a kid it was really cool because I lived between two bridges on the Gallatin River. I was five miles from one and 20 miles from another one so I could ride down to this old lady's driveway and jump over a fence and I was in the middle of nowhere. Every, I'd cast three times in a hole if I didn't get it by I was moving to the next hole. Where now you know you can walk in five miles up the Galliton River and there's still, good you're going to come across several people on that trip and. There's just a lot more people moving to the state over the years but. Still fun. Just getting out and lettin everything else just go away. Enjoying nature. When you catch that fish or, you know you get that strike and it's like, sweet you know. It's exciting. It's an adrenaline rush a little bit. And they're good eating. This is one of my older pieces. A few years ago. Back when I was kind of learning where I was going to go with Trout and wildlife and my metal sculpture.

James Thull [00:07:43] Nice. So can you tell me a little bit about piece what is it. What is it made out of.

Jake Heckman [00:07:48] This is all plasma cut by hand, hand ground hand polished. All the colors are from heat patina. So.

Jake Heckman [00:08:00] Hit them with a propane torch or bake them in the oven. Get those different temperatures down. And basically I'll start with the hottest temperature first which is blue. That's around six hundred degrees five ninety six hundred. and then I'll sand them or grind into them more and add the next colors up. This one's just a two tone one. It's not one of my better ones. I don't have a better trout with me right now but I definitely have better pieces than this. Kind of portray the coloring process a little better. Well I grew up trout fishing. This is a trout area. It's one of those things, I'm an animal person. All animals are cool and Trout's just one of those things that I really enjoy doing is going trout fish and take the kayaks out the gates of the mountains is fun. There's huge big trout in there. There's a lot of streams and stuff that are really fun. I used to fish on Ted Turner's when I was a kid. Crawl underneath the fence I don't think that you can do that anymore. But. That was really good brook trout fishing. I try to stay out of favorites when it comes to wildlife. I mean I appreciate any animal as soon as you look it in the eye and you see it and there's just like. To me it's a magical moment. Really.

James Thull [00:09:57] So is that what inspires your art. Is just been in nature.

[00:10:02] Yeah and the wildlife that live there. I always knew I wanted to be a wildlife artist doing metal sculpture when I was a kid. And I didn't really realize how much it was going to take to get to that point of actually producing quality stuff. Being able to walk away from everything else in life to just do that. Well I started working for my dad when I was 10 years old for an irrigation company we started. We built a shop and, I don't know maybe by the time I was eleven I was welding. Nothing fancy by no means but by the time I graduated high school I did all that fabricating all the pipe flange work. That that we did down there and.

Jake Heckman [00:11:11] So that kind of. I really enjoy welding I love working with metal you build something it will last forever. It's not. You can always cut it off. You can always stack more on, weld it, you know you can do anything you want with steel. And when I was in high school I was in careers class and they you know everybody wants you gear's you to go to college in school. And I just did not want. I was so sick of school. I knew I need to be working with my hands. And learning on my feet. So I was fighting college, like I really want to do electrical engineering and I really like electricity since I was a kid. I live on solar power all this work's done on solar. But I did not want to sit down shut up pay attention for four more years and go into debt massive debt and get a job sitting at a desk doing. I was ADD. I had to be out moving around. And our careers class teacher brought up underwater welding and I was like I can do that. That was. It gets me out in nature. I'm not in office. I do not have to go to college. But it was not an easy ride either. It was a lot of work and a lot of fun and. So that is what paid for me to be able to set up my shop up here off grid. And do what I love to do which is wildlife and I'm really excited to get into the sea life more. I never, you know going into it, I was going to do elk and trout and my native animals but the more I ventured out and saw different things it just really blew my mind even more. The the intensity of nature is all the different animals. And what they're doing and how they act and.

James Thull [00:13:34] So by venture out do you mean like your time diving and seeing like life in the oceans.

Jake Heckman [00:13:39] Yeah. Because it's a feeding frenzy in front of you. You have a hatlight on little bugs are coming in. Little fish are coming to eat those bug,s bigger fish are coming in to eat the littler fish. One day. Well when I got to the bottom of a deep job I was at seven hundred eighty five feet and there was thousands of these little eels like this big. You know. Playing with them grabbing them and they're trying to bite me but I got a little garden gloves on. They couldn't hurt me and the guy on the radio is like, mommas gonna come get you you know. And later that day they were launching a. 16 ton piece of equipment that I was going to install over the side of the boat. So the divers go up underneath the boat. While they launch if it falls, hopefully the current doesn't take it and smash it anyway but at least it's safer. You know you don't want to be back there where they're launching. And I was kind of up towards the bow because I want to be well clear of it and I was looking at these little, I have no idea what they are. I was calling back battle axe fish or bat wing fish. Kind of like a flounder or a stingray but they're only about this big and they're really creepy looking and they're only really seen in the real deep depths. And the mud was coming up from me walking around, the silt cloud. And I seen this head. It was about this big and it was pink. And I was like Man that's a weird red snapper, Lonnie. And I leaned down to look at the head sucks back in to the cloud and I can't see it but the currents kind of taken that silt cloud out. And his head comes out of it and this thing comes and swims right underneath me and he was this bigger around.

Jake Heckman [00:15:50] I have no idea how long he was. I saw like 12 feet 10 feet of him and he never started. That is the biggest eel I've ever seen in my life. And he was totally cool. He wasn't like, I mean he could or shredded me apart like he had a mouth bigger than any dog and it's a snake they think could of swallowed me whatever dude and he was just chillin. And eaten fish that were underneath the bow because it was attracting light. Well with the blue herons I just. Every time you're out fishing on the Gallatin river the Madison river there's always a blue heron out hanging out alone. Or a pair of them sometimes but not, they're generally by themselves and I'm generally by myself too you know. And they're just they're beautiful they're amazing. They have these huge wingspans, they fly right over the top you and don't even hear sound hardly until they flap their wings.

They're ninjas like snap fish right out of the water. They're just cool like they're inspirational to me. Any any kind of wildlife though that I've seen pretty much. I can find the beauty in it and I appreciate it. I had no idea where I was going with this piece when I started it. I just started going down the river and watching blue herons looking at photographs of them and getting online looking and stuff and I was like Man I really want to do a blue heron. I don't know why I just got to do it. And if I'm going do one I want to do two. So I started two of them. I only got one finished but. Yeah I just started working on it and didn't know how I was going to frame it in or anything and. It just kind of comes together, I guess. The dragonfly is actually like one of the coolest parts of the piece to me and that's why I named it after. Because I knew I need something else and I was like thinking what can I put into this piece that's going to tie it and make it what I want. And I just knew it needed a dragonfly. So I started making one and then I started looking at all the other metal guys online and looking at their dragonflies. I was like Oh yeah I'm doing good. And then I saw one guy I was like man, throw this away, I gotta start all over and I made four of them before I got to the point where I wanted to be because I wanted to make the best quality stuff that I can which is the most important to me to really take care about the time frame of it. But to me the joy is of creating something that.

Jake Heckman [00:19:21] Hasn't been seen before hasn't been done and I'll get there. I have about a year into that piece but not full time. I figured the hours were around two hundred eighty eight hours. Was the best I could come up with. But I didn't stamp the time clock every day, I was scratching it with chalk on a piece of metal on the back of it. All right I got a full day into it, make a mark you know. That's a good question. When when I left high school, I knew I needed to make enough money to be able to fund my art that I wanted to do. And I wanted to live on solar power because it's just, it was kind of just starting to happen I guess at that time. Late 90s you could actually start buying stuff and people were doing it and it was expensive. Not very many people were doing it. And I really wanted to be able to connect with nature. And being in town off the side of a highway, cars rolling by all day, run in the rat race. I just I yeah, it's not very inspiring. I'd have to make special trips and this kind of distanced me from the everyday life it is distracting of what I want to do and the art work that I want to make and I don't know I just like I said too I really wanted to do electrical engineering too. And it really intrigued me that I could you know, live for free. Well it's not free. You got it. As you know, you got to buy batteries you got to do maintenance when you're your own power company. You know lights go out, you can't just sit around and cry about it and make phone calls. You got to fix it. So it's a little different but I enjoy it. I like the puzzle. I like the the fact that I can take power from the sun and produce something like this to me. Is this just phenomenally you can't put a price tag on that. I just really want to get closer to nature get away from people and.

Jake Heckman [00:22:20] I do enjoy people I appreciate people. But city life is.

James Thull [00:22:25] Just wanted some space.

Jake Heckman [00:22:26] Yeah. Oh man. Well just the other day there was a white ermine, which is a little weasel, about the size of four mice stacked end to end. And we had two feet of snow so he turned white. But then on the snow melted. And he's running round white little weasel in the brown thinking he's totally camouflaged. And I watched him for about ten minutes. That's just recently. One time I was laying in bed and I thought I saw a moose, which there aren't moose up here very often where I'm at. And I stared out for ten minutes in the twilight first thing in the morning and I was like, waiting for it to move. It wasn't moving. I was, man I need to go back to sleep but I couldn't close my eyes. And

finally it lifted its head up and looked at me and I was like, told Sophia like there's a moose in our backyard right now, you know. Bull elk. One day I was butchering a mule deer buck and came up to eat, sitting there and doing my thing and there's three bull elk just run right across the ridge. I couldn't get one but that was pretty cool. There's mountain lions or I seen a wolf up on the ridge up here during hunting season one day with my brother in laws and.

James Thull [00:24:03] Was that this year.

Jake Heckman [00:24:04] No that was I think it was in 2011. I have my elk hanging in the garage and one of my brother in law's was like wanting to go hunting I told him I said well I said Al said we can hunt up on his ridge over here. And I pointed up there and there is a wolf up there, was a big- he thought it was an elk and I was like no- It was huge. I was like, that ain't an elk he's like that's a big mule deer. I was like, that looks like a dog. And just the way it was moving and he was over a thousand yards away. And that kind of hit the tree line and the skyline and wrapped around some trees and I was like. So we went down there. And talked to Al and hiked up there and there's dog tracks this big. That was kind of fun. Never seen a mountain lion. But I catch them on game camera all the time at the spring. There's bears all the time up here. Really cool bears. Yeah we we don't really buy meat. We work on an organic veggie farm in the bottom once a week all summer and.

Jake Heckman [00:25:25] We get all our eggs and stuff from there all winter. So. Now we get honey and beets and all the different colors of carrots and potatoes and tomatoes and melons. Yeah. We eat really good. But it's a lot of work too. It's enjoyable. I really enjoy gardening you know, enjoy processing all my meats. I mean I have a lot of people on Instagram that I really enjoy and respect and I've just met them over the last six eight months that I've been on there. But as a kid I mean it was Jim Dolan for sure. Seeing his geese in the airport, the Elk in front of the bank, old rusty. All All the wildlife stuff that he does it's right up my alley and I really. Ever since I was a kid I was like man, I could be working on pumps all day or I could be making the coolest animals on the planet out of metal. So yeah he really inspired me. And he's been a lot of help in the recent past too. You know, I go stop and talk to him and he gives me tips of Hey try this try that as far as the art goes because I'm not a trained artist I don't have any formal training in art. And. I just really love doing it and I have a knack for it. So. Well definitely the patina will change. In this lighting, it's hard to give it justice because every sunset through the clouds every different way the light shines on it shows a different color through it. So as you're walking past it it changes colors.

James Thull [00:27:43] Does metal age will this look different in 20 years than it does today.

Jake Heckman [00:27:48] We'll find out. It's coated with a sculpture coat that I use. I'm really happy with it. Took me a long time to find out the right type a clear coat to put on this stuff. The stuff at the hardware store doesn't work for me but Jim Dolan told me he doesn't coat any of his stuff so you definitely get a richer color for it if you don't do that. But as soon as somebody touches it you have a rusty fingerprint on it. And everybody is going to want to, let me.

Jake Heckman [00:28:28] Cut myself on that real quick, let me it fingerprint it up. So it's just nice to put a coating on I can wipe it off. I have no idea how long it's going to last. This is, you know I've only been coating them for a couple of years now. I've got so much in my head the next project I've been working on all summer is a life sized bull elk that has real

antlers that I found on Easter Sunday hiking in the backyard. And it's kind of something I've been working on in my head for quite a few years that I wanted to do. So. It's fun but it's taken a lot of time it's a massive project it's going to be hundreds of pounds. And I plan on starting a few other things aside on the side so that just to break it up a little bit. I really want to get more into sea life and do. I got to do some octopus and some squid. I want to do some native trout species in Montana. Some cutthroat. Maybe a Grayling or something. Something different. I have a lot of prints available and that's what I've been working on in my business model is that. At first I was doing trout like the trout I showed you. And trying to sell each piece and manufacturer each piece. And keep it inside of someone's budget when I'm using 20 some thousand dollars worth of solar equipment to do it and I gotta wait until the sun's just right. And. So I've been working to try and take the production end out of it. And just work on a few pieces at a time that are of the best quality that I can make. And not worry so much about selling the originals. Because that's a hard market too. Until somebody starts offering me what I feel they're worth.

Jake Heckman [00:30:58] Giving me reasonable offers I will accept them. But for now I want to try and make a product that resembles the original as good as possible that I don't have to produce that I'll have to manufacture and. I learned that I had to figure out how to do photography and take pictures and research a bunch of different printing companies and find the best one that I could find. And that way I can have product that people can afford. That displays my artwork and I really enjoy too is taken little parts of that and blow it up and showing the detail it's in the work in a big piece. Now I almost think that it's a better piece of art in the end. More comparable. But I don't have to spend two hundred and eighty eight hours for each person and find someone that's going to paying for all of that work.

James Thull [00:32:01] Is that the part of being an artist that you like the least. The marketing.

Jake Heckman [00:32:05] For sure. Yeah. I mean. I wouldn't be on Facebook and Instagram.

Jake Heckman [00:32:16] If it wasn't for my artwork. I'd be out catching a fish somewhere, sneaking up on an elk or taking a picture of a black bear in my backyard you know.

James Thull [00:32:31] Excellent. Excellent. Well we'll link. I guess you have a website where people could buy prints if they wanted to, right?

Jake Heckman [00:32:39] I will have my store link to my Facebook and Instagram, is Jake Hackman dot art. I'll probably have it by the time this video rolls out. We got a few shipping things we're working on before we go public with it. Just get out and enjoy it. Walk away from it and take some time for yourself. That's what I'm doing.