

Dentist 'wanted to show off Cecil in special shrine - with drinks bar'

From **Hugo Daniel**

IN PELICAN RAPIDS, MINNESOTA

WALTER Palmer, the despised hunter who killed Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe, has a special 'hunting shrine' where he is believed to display the heads of more than 50 animals he has killed from across the world.

And neighbours say the building - on a 650-acre plot the dentist owns in rural Minnesota - is where Cecil's head was destined to be mounted.

The brazen dentist has also kitted out the taxidermy showroom with a drinks bar where he sits and admires his handiwork and has pals over to visit so that he can show off the spoils of his hunting trips.

On show are local elks, deer, moose and bears alongside his collection of exotic African animal kills.

Over the years the 55-year-old has also been known to have killed a polar bear, walrus, wolf, California bighorn sheep and a rhinoceros, many of which are thought to be on show in the gruesome 'museum'.

Locals in Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, painted a disturbing picture of Palmer - including stories of him walking people off his property at gunpoint, hiding out in camouflage to sabotage other hunters and accusing people of poaching deer on his land.

They also say the hunting fanatic has continuously pushed boundaries with his hunting and uses his wife's family fortune to buy himself out of trouble.

Last night the father of two, who has shut his dental practice and gone into hiding, was still nowhere

The lion hunter's house of horrors

More than 50 heads lined up in gruesome trophy display



'It's like a museum of dead animals'

to be seen and is thought to be lying low at one of several different luxury properties he and his family own in the area.

Jason Stetz - who runs a local butcher and meat processing shop called Heart O' Lakes meats - is one of the people who have been invited into Palmer's 'shrine'.

Jason said: 'He has an old schoolhouse on his land that he remodelled into a hunting shrine. He's got all his kills in there.'

'He's got so many head mounts in that thing... he's got everything in there, I mean bears, elks, deer, moose - animals from all over the United States and all his African kills are in there.'

'I'm sure a leopard was in there. All these things you see when you Google him are there. There's bear blankets on the walls. It's like a museum of dead animals.'

Jason has had an uneasy relationship with Palmer since the dentist bought the huge plot of land in 2001. Describing how he was invited

SHRINE: Where 50 kills are mounted

into the kill-trophy compound, he said: 'We were kind of on the outs for a while and then one night he was trying to have a bunch of neighbours over and bury the hatchet. It didn't last very long.'

'He was really showing them off, he was in his element. He's just an avid hunter, when you've money like that you can afford to do it.'

Jason, 43, who runs his meat business with his wife Nicki, said Palmer has brought in the 'biggest buck' he's processed in the area for the last four years in a row.

He said: 'We process probably 300 deer a year on average, for the past four years he's brought in the biggest buck of the year. Probably

upwards of 250 to 260 pounds, always huge deer. He brings it in and we process the meat for him. I capered it for him so he can mount them. He's got more deer heads than I've ever seen.'

Jason and a group of other locals share a deer-hunting stand on about 40 acres of land next door to Palmer's property.

Bryan Stetz, one of the group of deer-hunters, told how Palmer has kitted his land out with CCTV cameras and private property signs and when he is at the property he monitors it closely for trespassers.

He claimed his brother Keith was once walked off their hunting stand

at gunpoint by Palmer and feared the furious dentist might kill him.

Bryan said: 'It was the last day of hunting season. My brother's sitting up there and Palmer walked out there with a gun and started hollering at him, just chewing him out.'

'My brother's scared because he had a gun with him and Palmer doesn't hunt with guns, he only hunts with bows, so why he had a gun I don't know. It must have been to intimidate him.'

'He kicked him out of the stand, walked him out all the way to the highway right behind him and said, "You're trespassing." Keith said to him "It's my brother's land" and he said, "Ignorance is not acceptable."'

Bryan, 52, who runs a local restaurant, also once got a glimpse inside Palmer's shrine. 'I just hated it,' he

said. 'He's got all of his heads lined up in that schoolhouse there.'

'I just looked in and he was in there, all I remember is big heads. There's a bar in the middle of it - it's just a little rich guy's pad. I would guess he goes there to escape and admire his kills. I saw the African stuff, the deer stuff.'

Bryan thinks Walter may even have been specifically targeting Cecil for his trophy room.

He said: 'I think he actually wanted to kill a famous lion because of his ego. I think he's just hugely arrogant and has a huge ego.'

'He wanted a famous lion and it would have been mounted in his schoolhouse. I know him, I have had to put up with him.'

'I think he's just dumb and thinks he can do what he wants.'

Howls as a mighty beast mourns his friend

JERICHO the huge male lion stands in the moonlight and lifts his magnificent head, sending a low, heart-breaking howl through the African bush.

Last night and every night for the past four weeks he has padded through the scrub to mourn at the site where his friend Cecil was struck down by a hunter's crossbow. The two mighty beasts had together ruled their territory in Hwange, Zimbabwe's biggest national park.

Wildlife guides at a nearby lodge said they hear Jericho calling out, still looking for Cecil in the spot where he was wounded. 'It's a low

From **Barbara Jones**

IN CAPE TOWN

sound, not the roar we usually hear from territorial lions. We know that he's mourning, it's sad.'

Now, as the outside world expresses outrage at the trophy-hunters who killed Cecil, Jericho must defend their pride alone.

Lion experts who monitor him say they hope he will take care of the seven cubs fathered by Cecil, and the three lionesses who make up the pride they jointly led.

'There is a good chance that he can maintain the

territory but it will be a big task for him,' said Brent Stapelkamp, a researcher who tracked Cecil for Oxford University's conservation unit. 'We hope the family survives. The cubs are only ten months old.'

The Mail on Sunday has learnt that when US hunter Walter Palmer and his guides hid in wait for a lion on July 1, they were disappointed when Jericho turned up. A National Parks source said: 'It was Cecil they were after. He was bigger and stronger.'

On the night the hunters prowled, the 12-year-old animal had strayed from the government-protected

Hwange National Park. Professional hunter Theo Bronkhorst has denied killing a lion without authority.

Landowner Honest Ndlovu is expected to be charged with him next week.

Mr Stapelkamp - who followed both lions for nine years - said the history between them was 'touching'. 'Jericho saw his two brothers killed by trophy-hunters,' he said. 'They had [since] developed an extraordinary bond.'



PRIDE: Jericho standing behind Cecil, and with Cecil's cubs

TROPHY HUNTER AMERICA / ALAMY / DEMOTIX

BRENT STAPELKAMP / AFRICAN BUSH CAMP