



LAST LIGHT, OIL ON BOARD, 2008



Brushes with Nature

A beautiful new book
showcases the wonderful,
wild world of celebrated artist
Ron Van Gilder.
by Ron Ellis



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innesota Highway 65 runs straight through the Twin Cities, then up into the north country of Minnesota, eventually passing through the growing towns of Blaine and Ham Lake, which is not far from where the wildlife artist Ron Van Gilder lives on 43 secluded acres of mixed woodlands. Within a mile of Highway 65, I find the mailbox I was told to look for – positioned next to a sandy lane that's flanked along its entire length by native grasses and stands of aspen, oak and pine. This seems a perfect setting – a natural landscape complete with bluebird houses and deer trails scribed through still-wet meadows – for Van Gilder to work quietly at making the paintings and drawings that have made his reputation as one of our finest and most respected wildlife artists.

Soon I see the house set back into the woods next to a

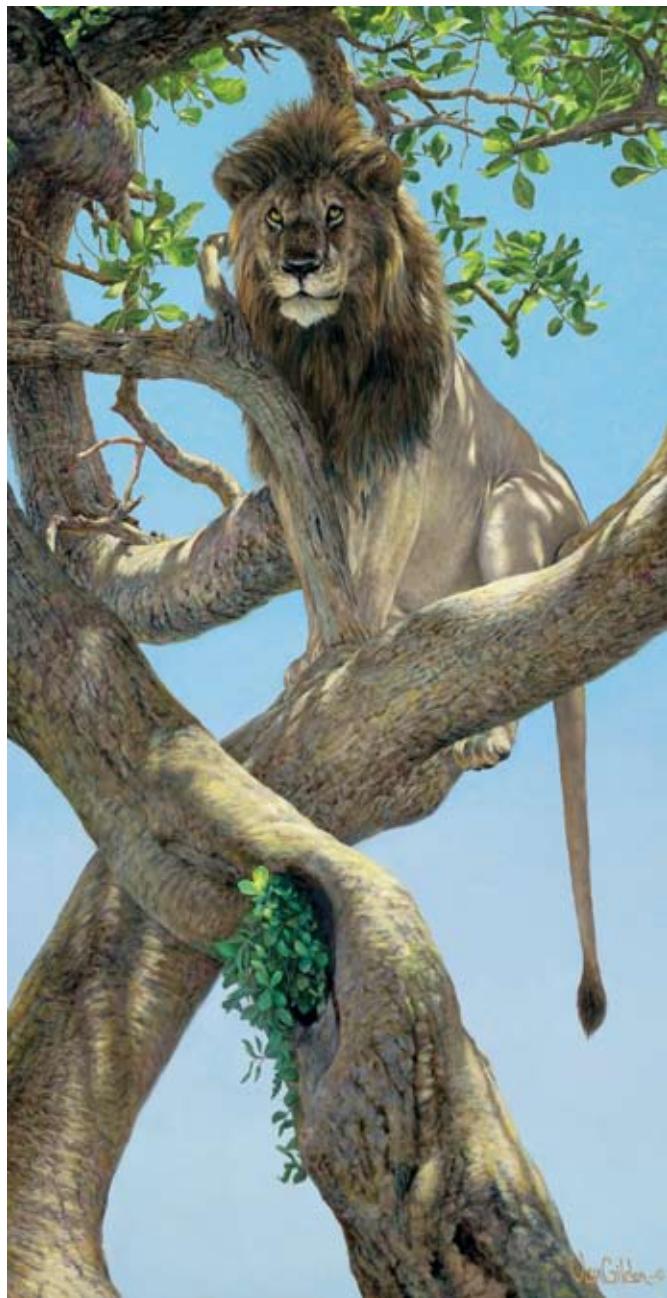
small pond. I make my way from the driveway toward the front door, hoping I have remembered to bring the gadgetry I need for the interview.

At the front door the entire Van Gilder family is there to greet me: there's Ron, sporting a red sweatshirt, a neatly trimmed beard and glasses, looking exactly as he does in all the photographs I've seen of him; his wife, Holly, a petite woman with shoulder-length blonde hair and a warm and welcoming smile; and beside her, their 14-year-old son, Forrest. Last in line is Hunter, their 6-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, who I instantly recognize from Ron's painting, *His Time to Shine*.

On the walls of this interesting modern home, which Ron designed, are a number of his paintings and drawings, along with the art of friends and colleagues whose work he admires. As a lifelong grouse hunter, I am especially intrigued by a painting from the early years of Ron's career, which depicts an alert ruffed grouse on a snow-covered



Ron's painting, *High and Mighty*, refutes the long-held myth that lions can't climb trees. He spotted this big male on his lofty perch during a photo safari in Kenya. Opposite: Roan antelope gather at a small African pool in *All Aglow*.



spruce limb. Anyone who has ever hunted the bird knows when they lay eyes on this painting that Ron has been there (like he has with all of his art).

We drift toward the kitchen where a large window provides an unobstructed view of the pond, which runs the width of the house and is rimmed by marsh and oaks fitted with wood duck boxes. There is also the gleaming underside of an aluminum canoe, in classic repose against a bank-side tree, and some nicely weathered Adirondack-style-chairs beside the water. It is a favorite place, Ron says, and, in fact, the very spot where he taught Hunter to retrieve.

Over coffee and tea and slabs of Holly's home-baked breakfast bread, Ron tells me he was born in Mankato, Minnesota, and grew up around south Minneapolis. When he was 15 the Van Gilders moved to Robbinsdale, a northern suburb of Minneapolis, and family weekend trips and summer vacations were always centered on Minnesota's plentiful outdoor activities.

Ron Van Gilder's interest in art developed at an early age. "As a young person, not knowing I was ever going to paint for a living, I always liked art," he recalls. Ron's earliest influences included the work of Norman Rockwell that he saw in the *Saturday Evening Post*, along with the great illustrators who contributed to *Outdoor Life*, artists like Bob Kuhn, Frank McCarthy and Douglas Allen.

"I admired those people because they were so creative and so consistent," Ron says. "They worked under pressure and



they told stories in a somewhat realistic way, depending upon their styles. That's where wildlife art came from, out of those kinds of things.

"I also collected calendars where artists like Richard Bishop and Philip R. Goodwin kept wildlife and outdoor subjects in the public eye. Without knowing it, all of that would have an influence on my work in the future."

Soon, we drift toward Ron's studio. A north light filters into the room through a pair of large windows, allowing him to look out into a picturesque amphitheatre of grasses, conifers and hardwoods. Van Gilder, a degreed graphic designer who taught himself to paint, is also a trained photographer and an avid hunter. He devotes days afield every fall to observing, sketching and photographing wildlife, and he has drawers filled with specimens collected during those field trips.

"Most of my reference-gathering has been way in advance of when I needed it," he says. "Paintings of wild animals – and their habitat – must be authentic."

While in his 20s, when his art career was just starting to take off, Ron spent many long, cold days along the rocky shore of Minnesota's Lake Mille Lacs where he gunned diving ducks such as bluebills, buffleheads and goldeneyes. On those outings he began to wonder if "getting down to the duck's perspective on the water might be an interesting point of view, considering that everyone else was painting flying birds." To answer that question, he took his camera and waded out into the lake and started shooting low-angle photos, "just to see what the artistic possibilities might be."

What showed up was an important lesson for an aspiring wildlife artist about the range of values found in photographs versus paint. He took his pictures and the knowledge of that experience to the easel and began to experiment with painting water in that very luminous way for which he would become famous.

"I was lucky," Ron says. "After a couple of attempts, I found a way to make light appear to filter down through the water. And once I got the color mix down and those colors working a little bit, I found it was something that could be repeated in a kind of loose, abstract way. From then on it would be the way I approached the painting of water."

"When he turned to painting as a career, he chose the subject he knew best – waterfowl," wrote Don Luce, curator of exhibits at Minneapolis' Bell Museum of Natural History, in *Wildlife Art in America*. "However, rather than depicting ducks from the typical hunter's perspective, Van Gilder painted his birds and their environment from just above the water's surface. This 'duck's eye view' became his signature image, and he gained a well-deserved reputation for being a master at painting the glistening, sometimes reflective, sometimes transparent, surface of clear northern waters."

"To have any success in wildlife art, or any art form,

if people can remember you for one thing, for a look, then you can continually go back to that effect," Ron says. And over the years, he has continued to paint waterfowl in his now-famous style, though he's diversified his offerings along the way.

There was another world beyond the water and that famous "duck's-eye view" perspective that Ron was eager to explore. It was his passion for big game hunting that led him to begin painting North America's large mammals. In 1993 Ron demonstrated his talent in painting white-tailed deer in a unique seven-print series, "The Legends: World Record Whitetails," produced by Wild Wings, his longtime publisher.

Unraveling the stories behind the great bucks and taking great care to gather exact details pertaining to the animals and their habitat is a Van Gilder trademark, according to Wild Wings' President Randy Eggenberger. "Technically, Ron's works are among the best in the business. His formal art education is apparent in both his flawless compositions and precise handling of color. But training alone doesn't often result in success. It must be balanced with a genuine, deep-seated passion for the subject matter – and Ron certainly has that."

Ron began to paint and draw other large animals, including black bears, grizzlies, caribou, sheep and moose. He also completed a memorable series of loon paintings.

And then Ron painted *The Tales We Tell*, his highly successful attempt at underscoring the importance of stories and memories as fuel for the evening fire in hunting camps. This "campfire painting" was the last of six prints in his very popular "The Art of Hunting" series, which depicts hunters caught up in exciting encounters with big game animals.

"Embarking on that project sparked memories of my childhood as I reflected on the works of Allen, McCarthy and Kuhn from the covers and story illustrations of *Outdoor Life*," Ron recalls. "In addition to being enriched with wonderful reference material and experiences, I have learned one thing – there is a great deal more to being a hunter than just the things we hunt."

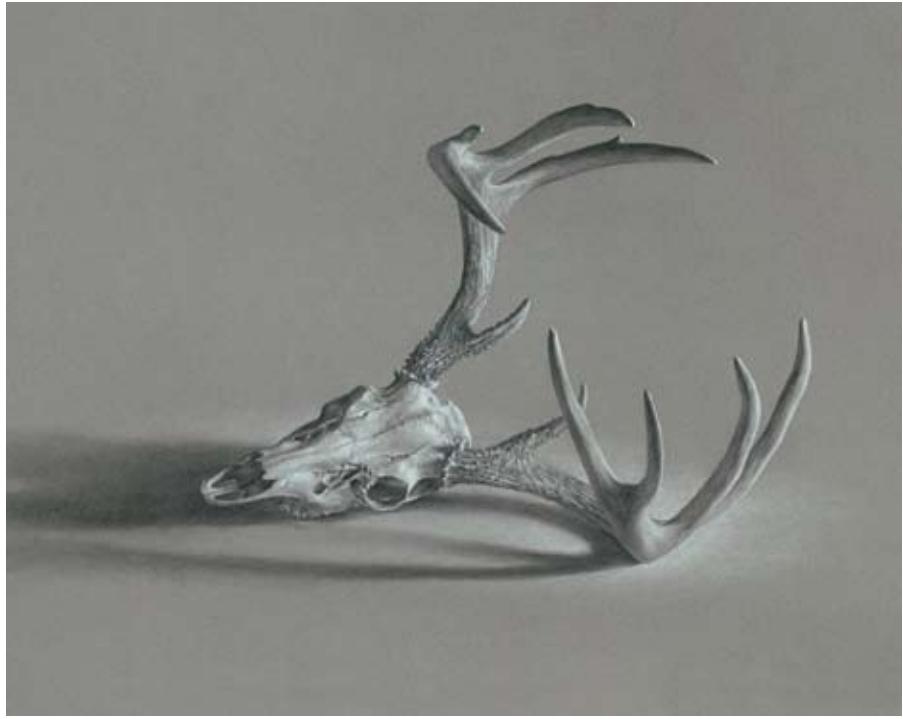


Longtime friend Oscar Carlson (left) and Van Gilder enjoyed a fabulous Dall sheep hunt in the Chugach Mountains of Alaska where the artist took this fine ram. Below: On another sheep hunt in the Yukon, their floatplane was enveloped in dense clouds and the pilot was unable to see a sudden rise in the terrain. "It was like the mountain rose up to meet us," Van Gilder remembers. "If it hadn't been for the pontoons absorbing most of the impact, we might not have walked away from the accident." Opposite: Winter White, Winter Bright, oil on canvas.



Nothing underscored that belief more than his trips to Africa. Ron's first African journey was a three-week photographic tour to a number of game reserves in Kenya and Tanzania, and later he experienced a safari in Zambia with *Sporting Classics*.

Those trips provided reference for a number of oil paintings and figurative drawings. Among those is an elephant painting, which depicts three of those



great, gray creatures passing before a line of acacia trees on the Serengeti, with snow-covered Mount Kilimanjaro set prominently in the background, and yet another with zebras being pursued by a lioness, whose muted presence in the trailing dust is a surprise when first discovered, as are the long, graceful necks of a pair of giraffes, jutting up from behind acacia trees on the horizon. All of his African paintings are incredibly fine, but his drawings are equally evocative, and Ron is quick to admit that drawing is his first love.

"I was working on some drawings and I realized I hadn't just sat down and done finished drawings or sketches for a long, long time," he recalls. "So I just started drawing for a couple of months and I didn't do anything else. After a dozen or so drawings, I was getting pretty comfortable."

Accomplishing a particularly difficult drawing that came out of his African experiences, an absolutely stunning portrait of three African girls, strikes a deep chord in Ron Van Gilder. "You know," he says, "drawing is never easy. Years ago when I was drawing as a child, that's how I always wanted my efforts to turn out, like that African drawing."

An accomplished photographer, Ron often adds 35mm slides to his research materials, both as a hunter and an observer, in both hunting and non-hunting situations. He's not looking to duplicate a photograph, he says, but rather, he's searching for a "great piece of reference" to work with.

"Ideas don't all come from the same direction," he says. "If the idea starts with a photograph of an animal that has a great pose or great lighting on it, I'll just stick by that. You couldn't do that by field-sketching – you wouldn't be able to capture that fleeting moment when the sun hit the animal in a certain way. It's simply not possible to sit out there and paint it. The only way to get that is to be there with a camera and be observant – and lucky."

"When I paint, if there's one thing I try to do, it's to make the painting look like a window through the wall. In other words, I don't want to stop at the surface of the painting. I want to try to fool the person's eye that's looking at it, to make them believe there's more than just the surface of a photo, that there's something they pass through to look outdoors into this world I've painted." 





Van Gilder

RON VAN GILDER'S BEAUTIFUL NEW BOOK:

Brushes with Nature

This story was adapted from *Brushes with Nature: The Art of Ron Van Gilder*, a new, large-format book from *Sporting Classics*. With a fascinating text by author Ron Ellis and a foreword by TV celebrity Ron Schara, the 216-page book (including four big fold-outs) features more than 200 paintings and drawings by this passionate and accomplished artist over his 40-year career.

The Trade Edition (hardcover with full-color dust jacket) is \$60, and the Deluxe Edition, at \$125, is limited to 400 copies each leather-bound with a linen slipcase. Deluxe copies also include a beautiful giclee-on-canvas of *Alaskan Moose* signed and numbered by the artist. To order *Brushes with Nature*, call *Sporting Classics* at 800-849-1004 or visit www.sportingclassics.net.

The artist demonstrates his uncanny ability to paint water in His Time to Shine (above) and The Singing Winds (below), which became a special fund-raising print for Ducks Unlimited. Churning through decoys is Hunter, the Van Gilder's yellow Lab. Opposite: The artist's beautiful new book, *Brushes with Nature*, features more than 60 drawings, from this riveting charcoal of a whitetail deer skull and antlers to the pencil below, which he entitled The Negotiator.

