



*"They should go with their hearts and paint what they like."* Michael Simon

# Brushes With Nature

by Clarke C. Jones

I can't draw stick figures without a ruler. So when I look at the illustrations that accompany articles I write for this magazine, I wonder, "How does the artist see the details to draw or paint that I don't see?" To me, a picture may be worth a thousand words because there are at least a thousand details to notice—the coarse texture in the strands of an animal's fur; the soft feathering of a bird's wing in flight; the subtle variations of color in the scales of a freshly caught fish. The Virginia artists presented here have the ability to capture on canvas or paper not only the visual aspects of fauna and flora, but also the mood or vagaries of the moment.



## Michael Simon

Michael Simon was destined to become an illustrator. After all, he was attending college art classes before he was six years old. “My father, who painted all his life, taught art at Virginia State College (now University) in Ettrick, Virginia, and would bring me to his classes with crayons, pencils, and paper,” relates Simon.

Michael describes himself as a “figural watercolorist” and is well known for his vivid renderings of fish, especially trout. His work has been featured in the publications *Fly Rod & Reel*, *Fly Fisherman*, and *Virginia Wildlife*. In 1984, he was chosen to create the limited edition poster honoring the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Trout Unlimited.

After asking Michael if he has any advice for young artists, he emphasizes, “They should go with their hearts and paint what they like. Instead of going for a fine arts degree—as I did—I would suggest they focus more on commercial art and commercial communications because you would be taught how to do work for the commercial field and how to go out and look for that kind of work. These are all things I had to learn the hard way.”



“I am still learning.” Spike Knuth

You will also find Michael’s illustrations in John Gierach’s first book, *Trout Bum*, considered a cult classic, and Norm Zeigler’s book, *Rivers of Shadow, Rivers of Sun*. However, Michael believes his greatest accomplishment may be his illustrations in the book *Freshwater Wilderness: Yellowstone Fishes & Their World* by John Varley and Paul Schullery. “That book, including over 20 illustrations of native and non-native fish in full-color page,” says Simon, “is the basic text on the fish in the Yellowstone River.” For more information, go to: [www.michaelsimonanglingart.com](http://www.michaelsimonanglingart.com).

## Spike Knuth

If you have read this magazine over the years or received a Virginia Wildlife Calendar, you likely have seen Spike Knuth’s art. Spike worked with the Department for 29 years, doing everything from audio-visual supervision to information officer to wildlife artist until his retirement in 2003. Spike’s artwork has appeared in many magazines and on the covers of various hunting and fishing catalogs.

And in the late 1970s, if you just happened to visit Edinburgh, Scotland, you might have noticed his illustration, “Yellowthroats,” as the cover art on *Edinburgh Today*.

Sitting in Spike’s studio in Mechanicsville, you have the opportunity to see how his creative process works and how important it is to him to get the technique right.

“I am still learning,” says Spike after 50 years of painting. “Having observed the outdoors from an early age as an illustrator I see too much, and then try to put it all in my paintings.”

Most duck hunters know that it is usually a gray or misty day when they are going to see ducks. The difficulty for the artist, as Knuth points out, “...is to paint what a duck really looks like in fog or shadows, and still be able to show what people buying waterfowl art expect to see—what they believe they know a duck will look like in that environment.”

Over the years, Knuth has donated approximately 500 original works of art to Ducks Unlimited and in 2005 received the Golden Teal Award by DU for his contributions to the organization.



Spike Knuth



Kim Harrell

*"My mother was a great lover of art—and made sure I was exposed to great art."* Kim Harrell

For those interested in becoming an artist, Knuth recommends that you read and study about the subject in which you are interested. "Also, look closely at other art and do a lot of sketching," he adds. More at: [www.knuthwildlifeart.com](http://www.knuthwildlifeart.com).

## Kim Harrell

Kim Harrell's affinity for art began as a young child. "My mother introduced me to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts when I started elementary school, and I began classes there from the first grade on," says Harrell. "She was a great lover of art—and made sure I was exposed to great art." Kim studied art as an elective all through high school in Henrico County, and while enrolled in a "gifted" program, had the privilege of meeting Andrew Wyeth and his wife in their home.

A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, Kim received a Bachelor of Science in Biology and then a BA in Art. When I ask Kim about her favorite art subjects and how she approaches a new illustration for a client, she replies, "First of all, I need to understand what the client is looking for from me. Then I

learn as much about the subject as I can—in every possible way. I read and study about the subject and photograph it as much as I can."

Kim's fondness for animals and plants make them particularly enjoyable subjects for her to paint. *Chesapeake Bay Magazine* published her artwork to accompany the Angler's Almanac column by John Page Williams, as well as "A Summer Guest" by Wendy Mitman Clarke. She has illustrated two books: *Perry's Baltimore Adventure*, written by Peter Dans, and *While a Tree Grew* by Elaine Rice Bachmann.

For any person interested in a career in illustration, Harrell recommends that, "If you decide to make art your job, approach it realistically, learning and practicing the business skills required of an artist in addition to your drawing and painting skills." Surprisingly, Kim takes the most pride not in a particular piece of artwork she has created, but any time one of her paintings either inspires or influences someone else or helps them learn. "I don't hear about it often, but it is very gratifying when someone makes the time and effort to tell me about it," she maintains. Contact Kim Harrell at [flyingfish1@erols.com](mailto:flyingfish1@erols.com).



## John Obolewicz

As the winner of multiple Virginia Duck Stamp Awards, John Obolewicz feels he has developed a style of watercolor that is pretty much his own. "It is not one that one would call 'traditional'. I tend to use some gouache and I tend to make the colors a little stronger." He aims constantly to perfect his craft—to make his next painting better than his last. "One of the things I strive for, if I can do it, is to try to create some kind of mood, whether it is the lighting of an early morning or evening. I then start with a detailed drawing and work toward the painting process," John explains.

Obolewicz, who lives in Powhatan County with his family, has a BFA from New Paltz State University of New York. His mother was a dress designer who taught him how to draw when he was ten years old. "Over time you learn how to paint better," says John, whose career has spanned almost 30 years now. "You start looking at paintings not so much for whether the subject is waterfowl or dog, but what is the mood or atmosphere."





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John Obolewicz

John admires Robert Bateman, Ogden Pleissner, and Bob Kuhn and he recommends that new artists, “Paint things that keep you interested and excited, then practice and study techniques used by other artists. I will always be learning and looking to find new and different ways to paint.”

View John’s art at Green Top Sporting Goods and on greeting cards by Pumpernickel Press. Contact John Obolewicz at [Johnart@comcast.net](mailto:Johnart@comcast.net).

## Bill Bolin

“I don’t really remember when I haven’t messed around with drawing and painting,” recalls Bill Bolin, while taking a break in his studio in Chesterfield County. “I have a story my mother saved of a man duck hunting that I did when I was four—done with colored pencils. I guess I really became serious about painting around the early 1970s.”

Although Bill has never had any formal training, his colorful paintings and drawings of waterfowl and decoys have made him one of the most sought-after artists at Ducks Unlimited venues for many years. His work has been featured in *Southern Living* and *Virginia Wildlife* magazines.

“I like to paint all sorts of wildlife,” Bill says. “I started out doing anything waterfowl related and have since evolved into all sorts of animals and plants.” In one of his favorite paintings, the award-winning “Mrs. Lovett’s Geraniums,” Bill combines the best of both—decoys on a windowsill alongside a pot of red geraniums.

Bolin advises artists, “If you love it, keep at it ... always strive for doing your best. Practice may not make you a perfect painter, but it does make you a better painter.” He likes the works of William Redd Taylor and John James Audubon but relies on his own methods to create the paintings so many people treasure. Go to: [www.billbolinwatercolors.com](http://www.billbolinwatercolors.com).

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Bill Bolin



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*“I started out doing anything waterfowl related and have since evolved into all sorts of animals and plants.”* Bill Bolin



## David Wickline, III

David Wickline grew up around art in Lynchburg because his father was an architect and painter. Wickline learned on his own by studying the fine works of those artists he loved, such as Winslow Homer and his overall favorite, Richard Schmid.

“Ultimately, any artist has to teach themselves, although a good mentor can help a lot,” notes David. “Sometimes you can’t see your work for what it is and you need an experienced set of eyes to give you feedback.”

He began his art career by working in watercolors but now has switched to oils. David finds oil painting challenging, but says he has taught himself to mentally edit out all the unnecessary clutter of a subject, so that

less is more. Wickline reveals, “This has led me to working more impressionistically and abstractly.” The cover of the January/February 2013 issue of this magazine—created by Wickline—featured a vibrant scene of a fly fisherman releasing his catch mid-stream. Even though David has won a number of awards for his paintings, he enthusiastically considers cover illustration a pinnacle in his progression as an artist.

David exhibits his paintings at LinDor Arts in downtown Roanoke. Contact him at [Davidwickline@hotmail.com](mailto:Davidwickline@hotmail.com) or go to: [www.davidwicklineart.com](http://www.davidwicklineart.com).



If you include cave paintings, wildlife art is at least 30,000 years old. As primitive as that art

seems today, cave images allow us a glimpse of what that unknown artist experienced. In the 1800s, the artistry of John James Audubon and his son, John Woodhouse Audubon, refined our understanding of the nature of wildlife. For those of us who do not live in a rural setting or are unable to spend time afield, wildlife artists and illustrators continue to offer us their personal interpretation of the spectacular life inhabiting our forests, fields, and streams in ways that no photograph can. ❧

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*Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at [www.clarkecjones.com](http://www.clarkecjones.com).*



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