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# *Call OF THE Wild*

**Dustin Van Wechel's** animal paintings evolve from his travels to the West's unspoiled places

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

**EARLY IN** September 2021, Dustin Van Wechel and a small group of fellow painters traveled to Alaska's Denali National Park. It was one of the journeys he regularly takes to gather visual material—photographs of animals as well as small plein-air studies of environmental details like rocks and deadfall—for his wildlife canvases.

At one point during this trek through the wilderness, a bachelor pair of caribou, suddenly spooked by the sounds of

humans, bolted away. Van Wechel captured the moment with his camera, adding it to the “well over 200,000 photo images” he now has in his digital archives, organized by the journeys he’s taken.

Back home, as he reviewed those Denali images, the two animals struck him as a likely subject. But he felt the need to include some non-human reason for the caribou to bolt. “And then a light bulb went off,” he says of a memory that came to mind: a covey of ptarmigan he’d seen

suddenly taking flight on a previous trip. Combining three birds and two caribou, each species fleeing from the other, created a sense of dynamic interaction and visual movement that is an essential part of the artist’s paintings.

Adding even more visual wonder would be Van Wechel’s portrayal of the surrounding landscape. “I’d never before seen the tundra at peak autumn color,” he explains, “and it was hard to believe how vibrant it was—an incredible sea of blueberry bushes and grasses stretching for miles and miles, with oversaturated reds and oranges and yellows, and with glacier-covered mountains in the background. It was just something to behold.”

In his studio in Colorado Springs, CO, Van Wechel combined all these elements into the painting he wittily entitled **CARIBOO!**, going on to display it in the Masters of the American West Show & Sale at the Autry Museum in



▲ **Sages of the Sagebrush**, oil, 48 x 36.

◀ **CariBOO!**, oil, 36 x 48.



## representation

**Trailside Galleries**, [www.trailsidegalleries.com](http://www.trailsidegalleries.com); **Broadmoor**

**Galleries**, Colorado Springs, CO; **Illume Gallery West**, Philipsburg, MT; [www.dustinvanwechel.com](http://www.dustinvanwechel.com).

## upcoming shows

**Coeur d'Alene Art Auction**, Reno, NV, July 23.

Broadmoor Art Experience, **Broadmoor Galleries**, July 30-31.

Summer Small Works, **Maxwell Alexander Gallery**, [www.maxwellalexandergallery.com](http://www.maxwellalexandergallery.com), August 13.

Solo show, **Trailside Galleries**, September 5-17.

**Western Visions**, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY, September 15.

**Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale**, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, WY, September 16.



**Lords of the South Fork, oil, 24 x 36.**

Los Angeles in February. The work was recognized with the Bob Kuhn Wildlife Award, named for the preeminent American wildlife artist who painted animal subjects for 50 years until his passing in 2007. Van Wechel won the same award in 2015, which was only his second time participating in the Autry event; that year he also received the Premier Platinum Award at the Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale in Cody, WY. He's won acclaim for his creations in a profusion of other top events, too.

**SUCH CONSIDERABLE** achievements seem all the more remarkable considering that Van Wechel dedicated himself

to fine art just two decades ago, following a successful career as an advertising art director. But his love of animals, and of drawing them, traces back to his childhood in Quartzite and then Phoenix, AZ, where his mom "was and still is an absolute animal lover, through and through," he says. "At one point in our home, we had three dogs, a cat, two turtles, two rabbits, and I'm sure some fish as well. She's one of those folks who has to save whatever animal she finds. That was definitely the foundation of why I just slid into wildlife art without any thought about it."

The animal drawings he did in school won numerous awards, but Van Wechel initially moved in a more practical direc-

tion, studying illustration and graphic design at a two-year college in Tempe, AZ. He then began a rapid eight-year rise through art departments and agencies in Southern California and back in Phoenix, meeting along the way his wife Yvonne, to whom he's now been married for almost 22 years.

Soon after he and Yvonne wed, Van Wechel began discussing with her his "overall sense of frustration over just not getting the time necessary to paint wildlife. I really wanted to be a fine artist and didn't want to be in advertising anymore. And we tried to figure out how we could make that possible." A visit he made to the annual Wildlife Invitational Exhibit at the Henry Doorly Zoo



▲ **Make Way**, oil, 24 x 36.  
 ► **Swan Song**, oil, 30 x 30.

in Omaha, NE, helped solidify his intentions. “I got to talk to a number of artists there, from Greg Beecham to Robert Bateman and a number of others who are heroes of mine,” he recalls. “They were very open and encouraging about what it takes to be an artist and how to go about doing it.”

Thus encouraged and informed, Van Wechel left his job, and in February 2002 he and Yvonne moved from Phoenix “to the middle of nowhere in Nebraska, and I immediately began a body of work, trying to familiarize myself with who I was as an artist and what direction I was going to take.” He began in pastels, a medium in which he was proficient and which, requiring no drying time like oils do, would enable him to “produce enough work that I could start doing a number of shows.” Though he’d given himself a year to ramp up, within three months he had a solo show at a small gallery lined up for late summer. By the winter of the following year, his paintings had been accepted into the prestigious Southeastern Wildlife Expo in Charleston, SC.





▲ On to Greener Pastures, oil, 24 x 36.  
 ► A Pika's Paradise, oil, 45 x 58.



"It all happened very quickly," Van Wechel marvels. Indeed, he continues, that show "introduced me to somebody from the National Museum of Wildlife Art, who got me into their Western Visions event." That's where someone from Trailside Galleries saw his paintings, asked to represent him, and then in turn introduced his work to the team running the Autry's Masters show.

**ALONG THE WAY**, he transitioned into oils, mastering a medium that is generally in greater demand by collectors and commands higher prices. In the years since then, Van Wechel has developed an approach that brings phenomenal presence to his mostly large-scale paintings, engaging viewers whether they regard them from across the room or mere inches away.

He begins by selecting one or more images from his data bank and working up thumbnail sketches for the painting he imagines. Then, on a primed canvas he's toned in warm sepia, he draws in his composition in thin washes of oil "to tackle maybe the top three values and a basic overall color scheme." From there, he takes what he describes as a "fat over lean" approach, applying his paint ever more thickly with brush and palette knife—and waiting, of course, for the oils to dry between stages, as he "builds up the texture and contrasts I'm looking for."

Van Wechel continues, "As the painting moves into brighter tones and brighter values, the paint gets thicker and thicker." The resulting effect is an uncanny three-dimensional quality and natural radiance. In *A PICNIC WITH FRIENDS*, for example, sunlight glints off the wings of deep purple-black crows and glows off the fur of the grizzly they're about to join in feasting. A close-up look reveals that the iridescence of the crows' wings comes from thick streaks of warm white paint; the bear's fur, which appears meticulously detailed from just a few steps away, is in fact a composition of thick brush strokes of light tan over darker ones in browns. "It's an impression of fur rather than an absolutely faithful rendering of every hair," the artist notes.

Such works feel like nothing short of true tours de force, conveying a sense



**A Picnic With Friends, oil, 40 x 30.**

that Van Wechel is working at the top of his game. Yet he continually strives to keep upping that game, traveling to wild locations old and new—including Africa—and finding ways to evolve his painting skills. "My best-case scenario," he concludes, "is that I can produce about 20 paintings a year. And I literally plan to paint until I can't hold the brush anymore." ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

**See more of Van Wechel's work at [www.southwestart.com/featured/van-wechel-d-jun2022](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/van-wechel-d-jun2022).**