



David Kitler with two of his paintings in progress—a red-tailed hawk (left) and a burrowing owl.

A Tragic Beginning Has Silver Lining

BY TONY VARRO

One month before his 18th birthday, Canadian David Kitler's mother was tragically murdered, leaving the teen-ager responsible for the well-being of his four younger brothers and sisters. There followed more than a decade of struggle and heartbreak, and only today can Kitler, 47, perhaps look back and see that the terrible tragedy that befell his mother might have been the first in a series of steps that led him away from a career as a veterinarian, toward a future that he really wanted—as a full-time wildlife artist.

Though he has drawn and sketched since his earliest childhood, art was always just a diversion from the serious business of creating a successful career, Kitler recalls. "But I do remember once when my mother let me stay up late one night to finish a drawing of a dog I was doing for a friend. I left the drawing on the mantelpiece and the next morning my mother called down

to me in my basement bedroom and said, 'David, don't let anyone ever tell you that you are not an artist.' "

Throughout his school years, Kitler's artwork was praised by his teachers. "But that was just fun stuff. I had never heard of art school and had no idea that people actually made a living in art. My high school years were all focused on becoming a veterinarian," says Kitler. He was accepted into college and had attended the orientation classes when he realized that there was no way he and his siblings could eat and have a roof over their head unless he got a job. "I was in the funeral parlor, arranging my mother's hair and making sure she looked as I remembered her, when I knew college was out," he recalls.

Kitler went to work in what he still calls, "the factory"—13 years of shift work, "making toothpaste. I was physically sick

almost every morning, knowing that I was going to spend another 10 to 12 hours of my life in the factory. But I am grateful to the factory; it paid my bills," and in a roundabout way it led to his current freedom to tour the world, painting whatever he chooses, but focusing mostly on the world's birds of prey.

Inspired by Art Show

But when he was 17 years old, one seed about the world of art had been sown. "My school in Ontario was on strike and I had taken a job as a delivery boy downtown. It was October 1975 and I saw an advertisement on a bus shelter for an art show at the Royal Ontario Museum. I went to the show and saw all this incredible wildlife art. I remember Robert Bateman was there, and I was tremendously impressed. But it still never occurred to me to be an artist. Clearly all these people were old men, well into their 30s—I was 17!"

Whilst at the factory, Kitler did not forget his art. He would get up in the early morning hours and sketch before going to work. He would sketch during down time on the factory floor, and factory workers and managers started to notice his work. "They asked me to draw covers for their reports and create signs around the workplace and murals for the cafeteria walls. With his siblings able to care for themselves, he saved his money and started to travel, flying to Alberta and hiking the Continental Divide, sketching all the way.

Meanwhile, at the factory he saved his vacation time for back-to-back years



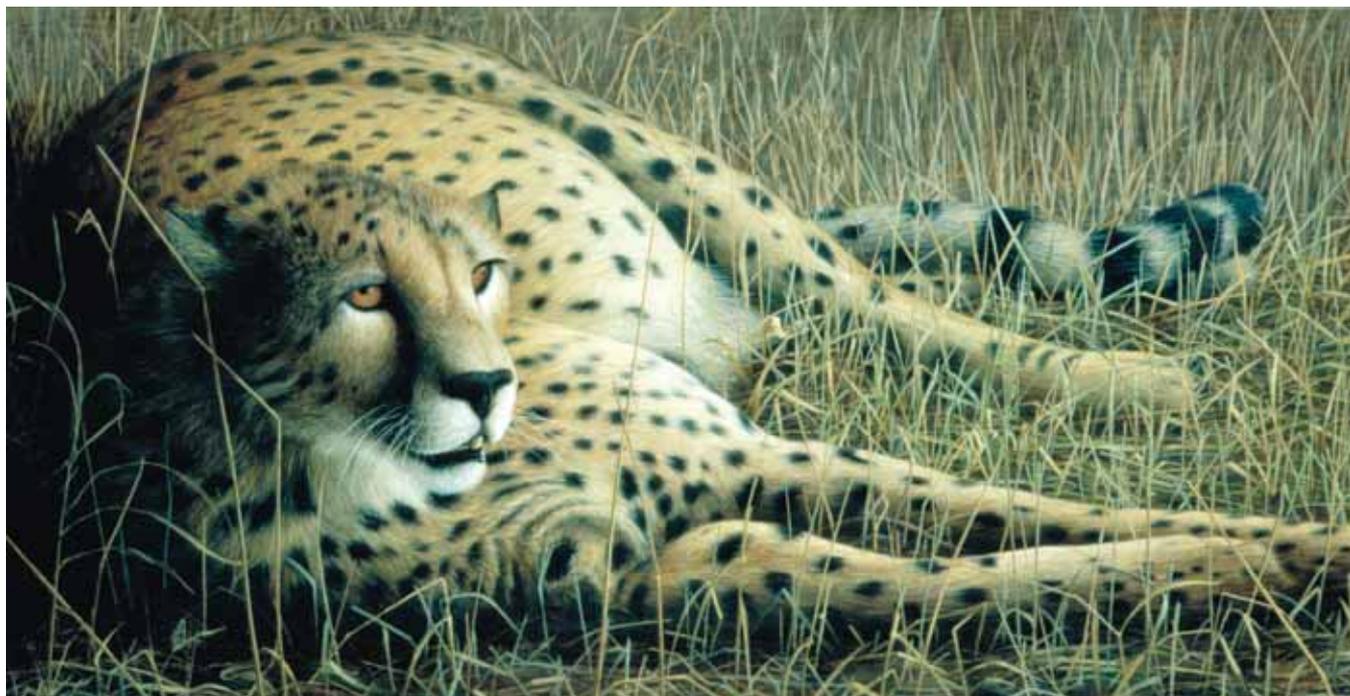
Gryfalcon—Five Poses, pencil & acrylic on Baltic birch, 14½ x 19½"



and took a trip to Africa, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and painting his first acrylic work—an African fish eagle. "I would be hitchhiking and was often standing on the side of the road when one of those hermetically sealed tour buses would whiz by and I wondered if the people inside had any idea what it smelled like out where I was." With more money and vacation saved, he went to India, climbing to the base camp on Mt. Everest.

Back at the factory, management was beginning to appreciate Kitler's

Sentinel, acrylic on Baltic birch, 10 x 8", ground squirrel



Full, acrylic on hardboard, 21 x 40", cheetah



Kestrel Up Close, acrylic on Baltic birch, 8 x 10"

skills. The company had a work/education program to give employees a year off to attend college, and Kitler used it to take classes at the Ontario College of Art & Design. But the next year, the trade union bargained away that program and he was out of college again. "I pleaded with company officials, and they gave me a steady day shift so that I could work from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and go to college from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m." He maintained that schedule until he graduated on June 5, 1992, one of only 17 magna cum laude students in the class.

Kitler's life was moving into fast-forward. He was making \$40,000 a year at the factory—a good income—but he decided that if he could make half as much with artwork, he would go full time into art. In 1990-91, with calendars, greeting cards and an uncounted number of signs for stores and shelves, he made \$17,000 and decided to "give it a go."

In the meantime, he had set his next traveling sights on South America, where he wanted to focus on the harpy eagle, which is relatively unknown, even though it is the world's largest bird of prey. Coincidentally, a woman from the company's plant in



Spider Monkey Study, acrylic on hardboard, 21½ x 16½"

Brazil transferred to the plant in Ontario. "There was an announcement inviting people to welcome the new employee from Brazil," recalls Kitler. "I did not know who she was—whether she was 50 years old with five kids or whatever—but I figured she could give me some information on my next travel goal. Three years later we were married in Sao Paulo." Today, Kitler and his wife, Lee, live in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Life's a Dream

"If anyone had told me when I was 18 years old that today I would be doing exactly what I dearly love to do—traveling the world seeking birds of prey to paint, and doing it with a wonderful and talented wife—I would have laughed out loud. But today I live that incredible dream," Kitler says.

And the dream just got an extra boost with an award from the Worldwide Nature Artists Group (WNAG), which selected Kitler to receive the group's first \$5,000 Flag Expedition Program award. His proposal, an "Expedition to Observe and Portray the Endangered Harpy Eagle and its Habitat," takes the Kitlers to nesting sites in the jungles of Central America for what, WNAG says, "will likely be the most comprehensive artistic study ever of the powerful and extremely rare bird."

It is not Kitler's first encounter with the harpy eagle. "I was a wildlife television program junkie and got to learn about this eagle there. It is huge—the largest bird of prey in the world, standing more than 3 feet high, with a wingspan of almost 7 feet and talons longer than those of a grizzly bear." Kitler has led tourist groups to the eagle's nesting areas and in so doing, changed the local farmers' attitude toward the birds.

"The farmers would kill the eagles because they attacked and killed their sheep. But today the farmers and village people understand that

tourists coming to see the eagles are a good source of dollars. Now they shoo the birds away from their sheep, but they make sure nobody tries to kill them," he says.

As for Kitler, who still pinches himself to make sure it's all true, he makes one solemn promise. "I promise you," he says, "that I will never, ever, paint another sign." 

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Images courtesy of the artist.



Harpy Eagle Sketch, pencil, 7 x 8 1/4"

CONSERVATION CONNECTION

In his efforts to draw attention to the endangered harpy eagle, Canadian wildlife artist David Kitler hopes to expand his conservation work to include large swaths of the Central American rain forest, where the harpys live, in what he sees as a program that could save many other threatened species in the area. Statistics show that the rain forests cover only 5 to 6 percent of the Earth's surface, but contain 70 to 90 percent of all species.

The eagle, which can stand more than 3 feet tall with a wingspan of up to 7 feet, is named *harpe* after the bird of prey mentioned by Greek scholars, referring to a mythological winged creature with sharp claws, a woman's face and a vulture's body that harvested dead souls.

The bird's existence is threatened largely through destruction of its rain forest habitat and through poaching. Kitler's efforts, backed by the Worldwide Nature Artists Group (WNAG), gained additional support recently when the nation of Panama declared the harpy eagle to be its national bird. As a result, instead of being fined \$15, poachers can now be jailed.

Worldwide Nature Artists Group

WNAG's financial support of Kitler as the first winner of its Flag Expedition Program is only the beginning of the organization's plans to back artists' desires to study endangered species and habitats. WNAG will fund two Flag projects annually, and more, if finances permit, says Jeffrey Whiting, a Canadian artist who is the founder and president of the group.

In addition, WNAG encourages its 415 members to support their favorite conservation groups by pledging to share the proceeds of certain artworks with specific causes through its Art for Conservation program. Since the program began a year ago, more than \$3.4 million has been pledged through the sale of 447 original and 327 limited edition artworks, Whiting says. He points out that with members on six continents, this program would not be possible without the Internet.

Each month, the nonprofit organization presents its Conservation Artist Award to a member who is making "extraordinary contributions to the conservation cause." Then one of the year's 12 winners is honored with the Simon Combes Award, recently presented to English artist David Shepherd.

Since its founding in 1997 with 40 members, "WNAG's mission has been to build a community of world-class artists who share a common interest in nature art and nature conservancy," Whiting says. Prospective members are juried in—with 9 out of 10 applicants rejected—and the total membership will be capped at 500 to "maintain the prestige of the top 500 club of nature artists," he says.

As part of its conservation efforts, WNAG maintains a list of recognized conservation groups, some of which have been suggested by member artists. The list, which now numbers almost 100, can be found at www.natureartists.com.



Wren on Thistle, acrylic on Baltic birch, 16 1/2 x 5 1/4"