

Spies Wins Duck Stamp Honor

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Watertown native Joshua Spies feels fortunate after winning first place in the 2008 Federal Duck Stamp Contest with his depiction of a male long-tailed duck floating with a wooden decoy.

"It's a great honor." he said about the award from the oldest and most prestigious wildlife competition in the United States. "I wasn't expecting it, but it's pretty special."

Spies' 7-inch by 10-inch acrylic painting, one of 270 judged entries, will grace the 2009-10 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp. It will go on sale in late June at post offices, national wildlife refuges, some national retail chain stores and various sporting goods outlets.

Federal Duck Stamp sales generate about \$25 million annually to support wetland habitat acquisition for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsors the federally juried art competition.

"Raising that kind of money....that's unbelievable really," Spies said. "It's nice that people appreciate what I do."

Although the Federal Duck Stamp Contest winner doesn't receive a cash prize, the artist gains worldwide recognition and, because they retain the rights to the original art, can profit from selling limited edition prints.

Some of Spies' clients are excited about his paintings increasing in value.

"Maybe now I don't have to die in order for my work to be worth something," he said, laughing.

Letters and phone calls continue to pour in from all over the world.

"A buddy of mine in Portland, Ore., who was drinking his morning coffee, picked up the paper and said 'Hey, I grew up with him,'" Spies said. "So it was like 'Wow!'"

Julie Ranum, executive director of the Redlin Art Center, said the organization was ecstatic when it heard about Spies' accomplishment.

"He's such a talented artist and we're delighted that he was selected as the Federal Duck Stamp winner this year," she said.

Spies, 35, a first-time winner after years as a finalist, became the second artist from Watertown and the third from South Dakota to win the coveted prize. John Wilson won the contest in 1981 with a gouache painting of a pair of ruddy ducks, and, in 2005, Mark Anderson of Sioux Falls took top honors with his acrylic painting of hooded mergansers.

"It's great (placing as a finalist) but it stinks because it's like second place is steak knives and first place is everything," Spies said, laughing.

Jim Hautman, of Chaska, Minnesota, who won the top honor in 1990, 1995 and 1999, placed second in the Federal Duck Stamp Contest this year with his acrylic painting of a Canadian geese.

"When I first started looking through the entries, that was the one I feared the most," Hautman said of Spies' painting. "I had it pegged from the get-go. It will make a great stamp."

Gerald Mobley of Claremore, Oklahoma, whose depiction of a cinnamon teal was featured on the 1985-86 Federal Duck Stamp, took third place with an acrylic rendering of northern shovelers.

Spies, a graduate of South Dakota State University in Brookings, chose the long-tailed duck out of five eligible species in this year's contest because he thought it would be the least painted.

"So I figured that if you paint the best of that species it will probably be in the finals anyway," Spies said.

The last time a Federal Duck Stamp featured a long-tailed duck was on the 1967-68 stamp painted in tempera by the late artist Leslie Kouba of Minnesota. Formerly known as Oldsquaw, the long-tailed duck breeds in the Arctic and winters along both coasts of North America. This year also marks the first time in the history of the Federal Duck Stamp Contest that a waterfowl species has won under two names.

Spies purchased the early 20th Century mason style wooden decoy - "simple but unique and something that would stand out" - for about \$200 from eBay.

"I believe that decoy was what turned the trick for him," Wilson said.

Spies credits the "wonderful, supportive community" of Watertown for his success and helping him get started as an artist.

"They were excited about what I was doing, buying my prints or originals and helping me pay the rent," Spies said. "I feel very lucky in that regard."