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For Earth Day, birds-and the wetlands they call home

By Mary Cummings



Portrait of a great blue heron by Rosalie Winard.

Complacency is not an option in light of the numbers. A National Academy of Sciences report states that since the late 1700s the lower 48 states have lost roughly 50 percent of their wetlands.

Development has destroyed fully 95 percent of southern California's wetlands, according to Rosalie Winard, whose book of stunning photographs, "Wild Birds of the American Wetlands" (Welcome Books, \$39.95) makes the best possible case for the preservation of this endangered terrain, without which her magnificent subjects would be bereft of their habitats—the marshes, bogs, swamps and ponds they count on to find food, respite and mates.

That said, the book is a celebration, and Ms. Winard, who spoke recently by phone from her home in Manhattan, is not one to dwell on the downbeat. After more than a decade of traveling the country—on foot and by canoe, airboat and ATV—taking pictures of some of the country's most beautiful birds, she is clearly elated by the opportunity that publication affords to share her passion with the public and to advocate on behalf of her avian subjects.

"My hope," she said, "is that this book opens the door to appreciate what is there. I'm not just shooting pretty pictures," she added. Rather, she is delivering a visual message: "This is what is there. This is what can be lost."

"Beauty is a tool if used well," she said, and it is a tool that she wields with a distinctive touch. Her bird portraits have been praised as "alternately meditative and exhilarating, abstract and literal," magically capturing her subjects' remarkable habits and prehistoric forms, as well as their "ineffable elegance and humor."

The author Oliver Sacks called Ms. Winard's portraits of great blue heron, white ibis, snowy egret, sandhill crane, roseate spoonbill, American white pelican, wood stork and others "haunting," and environmental activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has hailed the book as "a poetic reminder of how ancient and essential the wetlands and waterways are to our communities," adding that the photographs "tap

something deep, almost primal” in viewers.

No one without a deeply contemplative side to her nature could have produced such photographs. Yet, in conversation, Ms. Winard is a high-velocity talker, prone to enthusiastic asides and amusing digressions as she attempts to cover the extraordinarily varied and adventurous path that has brought her to this moment.

Birds, she confirmed, have been “a longtime love.” Having entered the experimental New College in Florida at a precocious 16, she was headed for a career as an ornithologist. Thriving in the college’s progressive climate, she found herself involved in “graduate type field research at the end of my second year.” Though the basics of science had been skipped over, she was soon working on a “very technical” study of pelicans and it was love at first sight. (Anyone wondering how that could be should take a look at page 120 of her book. The brown pelican landing in Sarasota Bay is as endearing a dork as any creature alive.)

So fond is she of pelicans to this day that her apartment is filled with their likenesses. “It’s a pelican palace,” she laughed.

True love notwithstanding, Ms. Winard reversed course after spending a summer among musicians and deciding that her future was in music.

“I was 19,” said Ms. Winard. “I knew I wasn’t really cut out to be a scientist. I was not disciplined, not methodical enough.”

But music was not quite the right fit either, so she decided on a career as a documentary filmmaker. Eventually she settled on photography, which, among other things, had the advantage of being a cheaper medium.

“I could afford to play with ideas,” she said.

Another advantage, as things turned out, was that photography brought her back to her first love, birds.

While it might seem that photographing such flighty subjects would require extraordinary patience, Ms. Winard demurred.

“Basically, I consider myself fairly impatient,” she said, explaining that just being on the water, near the water or in an isolated place—her usual bird-stalking haunts—“is like therapy. Some people like to go to a spa,” she said, “This is my spa.”

She also laughed off the suggestion that her quest might have meant hours spent waiting for cranes while lying in the bottom of a boat with her camera aimed at the sky.

“My favorite thing is to walk,” she said, adding that she has pleasant memories of walking around Cedar Beach on the North Fork where she spent some time photographing and hopes to spend more.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, “a combination of very wild but accessible.”

She also confessed to photographing a great blue heron at Cedar Beach from her car. At one time, she had disdained the idea of shooting through the window of a car, she said, but she has had to accept that sometimes it is the only practical option.

“I drove back and forth 10 or 15 times to get close in,” she recalled. “In a weird way it is almost like I’m fishing for birds.”

A self-taught photographer, Ms. Winard credits the documentary filmmaker Errol Morris for putting her

on to the possibilities of the black and white infrared film stock that she has used to such extraordinary effect in her bird portraits.

“In a way it’s counterintuitive,” she said. “The times to shoot birds are at dawn and dusk. This film needs bright light, but there was an essence,” she added. “Finally, visually, I was seeing what I felt.”

There are times, she acknowledged, when colorful plumage would seem to demand colorful images “but black and white accentuates other things.” That special quality in her photographs is perhaps best identified by Errol Morris himself, who used the word “oracular” to describe the bird portraits and called the book a “passport into a new and very strange world.”

Having revealed her choice of film stock, Ms. Winard was reluctant to pursue the subjects of gear and technique any further. The camera, she said, “is just my tool. It’s not what informs the book. The book is about my passion, my relationship with the subjects, and more important, it is about the birds, not about how I produced it.”

Ms. Winard has a full schedule of book-signings, exhibitions and other events coming up this spring and summer, including in mid-August at East End Books & Gallery in East Hampton. Meanwhile, the book, with a foreword by Temple Grandin and an essay by Terry Tempest Williams, is scheduled to fly into book shops on Earth Day.

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