

The Art of the Wild
Adventures in Protecting and Painting Wildlife
Nancy Quinn

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THE
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A B O U T T H E C O V E R A R T

I was inspired to create this drawing from my memory of a clouded leopard that has dwelled in my mind for decades. My original intention was to use it as one of the illustrations in the body of this book. However, as I clarified the image in my thoughts, I determined it was better suited for the book's cover.

Since hope and resilience are themes throughout all my books, I drew this feline looking upwards. My goal has been to convey her quiet grace, dignity, confidence, and strength. Graphite and water color pencils were my tools for portraying the shadows and details that bring her to life.



A PERSONAL NOTE TO YOU, THE READER

Lions and tigers and me, oh my! As I write this book, roughly forty years have passed since I lived the stories I share with you in these pages.

Looking back, I felt a variety of mixed emotions. For those of you who know me it's understood that I'm not one to visit the past, but prefer to set my sights on the future. However, the past is where all stories begin, and so I now present some of that beginning to you.

These vignettes originated from a five year period of my life when I was first starting out on my own. In recounting how I navigated those early adult years before I married and moved west, I have mostly focused on the fun and experiences of working with wildlife. I confess it was never my intent to build a career around them, but as I discovered early on, fate sometimes intervenes and sets us on unexpected paths.

Whether acting to protect, nurture, study, or artistically portray wildlife, I learned a great deal about them along the way. Through my later art and writing I have tried to share some of my knowledge and experiences in creative ways, which is why art and nature remain an integral part of my life and livelihood today.

The stories are true, but since they were personal experiences that I shared with others, I have changed the timelines, names of locations, organizations, and associates to maintain anonymity and simplify the storytelling.

As always, I would be much obliged to hear from you with questions or comments about my art, books, and videos, so feel welcome to

reach me through social media or my websites, quinnwildlifeart.com
or nancyquinnauthor.com.

Now laugh and learn with me! Let's begin this adventure together.



P R E F A C E

I suppose it was inevitable that I would become a wildlife artist. Since childhood I have had a love and fascination with birds and animals. Communicating with them was a very natural process for me and I would often take in strays and try to mend and heal wounded creatures. My greatest delight was catching sight of them in their natural habitat and being privy to their world. If I wasn't seeing animals in the wild, I was reading about them in books.

Having a creative side, I loved to draw and paint. I believed it was an inherited gift from my father, who was a noted artist, philanthropist, and accomplished pianist. His love of art, literature, and music has been his legacy to me. I am also told I share his values and rather dry sense of humor. While my piano skills remain sketchy, I was once an accomplished vocalist, and at one point in my life music had been my career goal. In time I decided that drawing, painting, and sculpting were the art forms that would take center stage in my life and I moved into that professional world.

When I started painting and drawing “animal art” it was not a popular genre, but within a decade or so “wildlife art” came into vogue and began to grow into a respected branch of fine art. It was the perfect marriage of my interests and abilities—pursuing my hands-on work with both exotic and domestic animals and expressing these experiences in my art.

I've always believed art has a purpose other than decorating our walls. I think it can touch our minds and our hearts. When I sit down to create art I think about how best to give an animal or bird a soul and how to foster an emotion on canvas, paper, or precious metal. If the end result creates a positive effect in someone's life, then my

work has served an important purpose. For example, I remember a particular story of a woman who lived alone. She told me of the forlornness she felt each day sitting by herself at every meal. After she framed and hung up my barn owl print in her dining room, she noticed how lifelike the image was and so she gave it a name. As time passed she began to talk to it and soon she no longer dreaded mealtime because she felt as though she had some company. It is a true blessing for me when clients write and tell me how my art has made them or a loved one happy. Each of their personal stories is remarkable and unique, and their enjoyment keeps me motivated, making my work a pleasure.

Before I create an artwork I first have to make some kind of a connection with the subject bird or animal. I prefer to physically handle and study the wildlife prior to painting, drawing, or sculpting it. I look for its individual personality, as well as what physical and behavioral characteristics are common to its species. Above all I want to evoke a feeling and understanding of what is amazing about them in nature. It is challenging work. I have laughed and enjoyed animal antics and I have also escaped some potentially serious injuries. Working with wild animals is a risk, so I handle them carefully with an educated and well thought-out plan. Happily, I rarely suffer a boring day and I am always learning something new.

To experience the call of the natural world one must be silent, so I prefer solitude when I am at my easel. Through quiet introspection I contemplate the best way to portray the special qualities of each subject, be it the fierce strength, vulnerability, graceful beauty, determination, cunning, or loyalty common to its species. I hope each time you look into the eyes and study the body language of the animals in my artwork, you will see and feel these emotions. If so, then I have succeeded in helping you find your own connection to nature through art.

To this day, when I sit down to create an artwork on my Dad's old drafting table, his self-portrait hangs on the wall above me, offering inspiration and comfort.

Life takes us down roads yet unmapped. Since I love books and the written word, it seemed a natural progression for me to begin writing. With encouragement from friends and loved ones, I pursued my literary ambitions and was honored to become a published author.

My debut book, *Go West Young Woman!*, shared our stories of my family's modern day pioneer adventures in Montana, and won the Will Rogers Medallion Award. The sequels, *Stay West, Young Woman!* and *Still West of Nowhere!*, continued chronicling our frontier life.

In this latest book, *The Art of the Wild*, I am effectively writing a prequel to my other three books. This collection of short stories takes place in central and south Florida and is written in a loose chronological format, rather than as a traditional memoir. It features stories of my life beginning when I was a young woman just shy of twenty years, starting my career in conservation law enforcement and drawing and painting most any living thing that would sit still for just a moment...

*Though I be wounded, I am not slain.
I'll lie me down to bleed a while,
Then I'll rise and fight again.*

FROM A BALLAD BY ANDREW BARTON,
SCOTTISH PRIVATEER (1466–1511)



INTRODUCTION

“YOU’LL BE BACK, you know you can’t make it out there on your own. Yes, you’ll be back, wanting rent money or asking to live with us again.” I looked at my stepfather with a blank expression. He was an intimidating person leaning against the front door frame, a glass of scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I watched the thin line of smoke rise and curl into the air before it dissipated and lost all its form.

“I won’t return to live here, only to visit.” I was both defiant and confident in my words. I had been planning my escape since I was eleven years old.

Life had taken a dramatic turn when I was only six years of age and my father died in a car accident. The date was seared in my mind—July 20, 1969, the day American astronauts first landed on the Moon. Four years later my world would change again—and not for the better, when my mother remarried.

I inherently understood the only way to protect myself physically, mentally, and emotionally during this entire period was through constant planning and prayer. My health and safety became my number one priority. I understood I would have to endure these childhood years, and I found solace in the hope of a wonderful future ahead.

During this time I worked at any job I could find—babysitting, gardening, and any task that would provide an opportunity to earn some money. I saved every penny of birthday and Christmas cash from my relatives, sold my pencil drawings and paintings, and later worked at a bakery, mortgage company, local tax office, and even taught calligraphy classes in an art supply store. I performed as a

vocalist in competitions, country clubs, and many other establishments at special events. Every penny went into certificates of deposit or bank savings programs.

I attended summer school so I could graduate a year early from high school. Only once did I dip into my savings to purchase a new car because the vehicle my mother and stepfather had loaned me for high school had bald tires and lacked functioning brakes. I needed something safer for the even longer drive to the junior college. After two years I earned my AA degree at age 19, but part-time work did not pay enough to further my education. It was enough to land me a fulltime state job and my first opportunity for true independence. Every choice I had made up till then was a calculated risk that I believed was finally paying off.

I was still so young that I had to convince the apartment manager to allow me to rent a unit. It almost didn't happen, but I was persistent and she reluctantly agreed. Now I had my own apartment in a safe and beautiful part of town where I could enjoy the simple pleasures of peaceful gardening and swimming. My plans were finally coming together.

I had grown accustomed to people telling me I was too young and too inexperienced to achieve my independence. I constantly worked at achieving a balance of "holding on" and "letting go." My life was akin to a tight rope act, and I was used to living without a safety net... and this is where my future really begins.

1

The Interview

I PAUSED ON the rickety porch steps of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission trailer before I opened the door to enter. I straightened my black blazer, adjusted my royal blue shirt underneath it, and smoothed the crease in my dress pants. Turning the door knob with a mixture of determination and trepidation, I entered the building and faintly heard my black high heels tap across the floor.

“Come in, Nancy, and be seated,” said a tall man in a gray and kaki uniform. He held out his hand and I shook it, remembering to offer a firm grip.

“I’m Sergeant Ron Blackwell. Let me introduce you to the interview board, Lieutenant Adams, Lieutenant Rickins, and Sergeant Wills.”

The board members looked impressive. Each officer wore a crisp starched uniform adorned with his rank, a large shoulder patch, and above their left breast pocket a silver badge bearing the seal of the state of Florida against a blue field. Every man sported a thick black belt and holster containing a 357 Magnum revolver. Spare cartridges rested in speed loaders along the belt, which also contained a set of handcuffs. If the sight was meant to intimidate me, it did. These were serious men, but I pretended not to notice as I nodded pleasantly when introduced to each one, politely saying, “It’s nice to meet you.” They then seated themselves behind a long table. Only Sergeant Blackwell remained standing. He shuffled some papers in his hands and we exchanged a few pleasantries before the formal

interview began. Then Sergeant Blackwell asked if I understood the rank system in state law enforcement and I admitted I had no such knowledge, so he explained the hierarchy.

With this new information I wondered why a sergeant was leading the interview instead of a lieutenant, but I remained silent. He continued by criticizing my lack of law enforcement experience and questioned why I was applying for this job. Did I understand the duties of the position I was applying for, that of Duty Officer, entailed much more than reading dispatches over the air? I nodded in acknowledgement. He next expressed his concern that I was very young to be holding a position of such great responsibility. In fact, if I did get the job, I would be the youngest Duty Officer to be hired by the state of Florida.

I explained my love of wildlife and my desire to help protect them. I also stated that with proper training I believed I was very capable of handling the position. All of the officers seemed to accept this information, but Lieutenant Rickins boldly commented, "How does your boyfriend feel about you applying for this job? It's a male dominated career choice."

"I don't have a boyfriend," I replied.

"I find that hard to believe."

I was startled and slightly taken aback. *Is he calling me a liar?* "I assure you, I'm being quite honest with you," I responded, feeling very uncomfortable.

"A pretty girl like you? Why don't you have one?"

Sergeant Blackwell chimed in, "We don't allow dating the other officers, you know. It's against the rules."

"That is not why I'm here," I firmly replied.

Sergeant Blackwell eyed me suspiciously and continued. "Let's say you are working on a midnight shift and I show up. Suppose I make a suggestion or an advance towards you. What would you do?" As he spoke he glared down at me in my chair.

I looked up at him, rather puzzled. "I would politely decline."

"And if I became persistent?"

“I would be persistent in my answer of ‘no thank you’.”

“I can be quite determined.”

I leaned forward in my seat, looked directly into his eyes, and firmly stated in no uncertain terms, “Sergeant Blackwell, perhaps you have met someone who is just as determined as you are.”

I paused, feeling very uncomfortable, frustrated, and angry. Then I rose from my chair. “I don’t think this job is right for me; I’ll look elsewhere. Thanks for your time.” I felt a mix of disdain and a little fear as I looked at all four imposing men.

The mood of the group immediately changed. Sergeant Blackwell’s face broke into a smile and his demeanor became friendly. “Please, please, sit back down, Nancy. I was only testing you.”

“Testing me?”

“Yes, I didn’t mean any harm. Who knows what kinds of situations you may find yourself in with this job, so let’s continue on with the interview. I want to tell you more about what’s involved.”

I had to wonder myself, *exactly what are the responsibilities of this job?* I decided to continue the interview and settled myself back into the chair and listened to the list of duties that would be required of me.

Sergeant Blackwell began again. “It’s more than a dispatcher, although you will be on the radio a lot. You will have to track the movements of as many as 50 or more officers at a time, covering 14 counties on every shift. You will take complaints from the public and decide which issues are our responsibility and which ones need to be handed off to other departments or the county sheriff. You will code tickets, among other clerical paperwork duties. You alone will decide which officers to send to any location that requires our response. You must be able to multitask and remember to prioritize and check on any officer that is engaging in a vehicle stop or dealing with real outlaws. Your decisions and quick thinking could save the life of an officer—or hasten his death.” He paused a moment to allow his words to sink in. “You will work different shifts, but mostly midnights, that is, midnight to eight in the morning. You will be working in the regional office alone, unarmed, with only a radio and

phone line at your disposal. It's the most dangerous, demanding shift we have and it often contains special detail requirements such as stakeouts or search-and-rescue operations."

Lieutenant Rickins interrupted, "What will your boyfriend think of you working a midnight shift? Will he approve?"

"As I told you earlier, I don't have a boyfriend." *Why does he keep asking me that?*

The sergeant continued his lecture. "We use only 24-hour military time references here and the ten code radio call system which you will have to memorize. Let's try an example."

He handed me a pencil and paper, then instructed me to respond accordingly to his verbal requests and relay them to members of the interview board as required. He began the test by giving me rather confusing directions to a remote location and asking me to provide them to Lieutenant Rickins. I did so, making notes so I could repeat the information accurately. Lieutenant Rickins responded, often with more questions and instructions, which I would pass to a designated board member or Sergeant Blackwell. This exercise continued for about 20 minutes, during which time they did their level best to confuse me as all four men began to instruct me at once.

Soon their voices became raised and much more intense. Lieutenant Rickins announced he had made a stop and had a man in custody. He ordered me to relay the information to Sergeant Wills. As I was doing so, Lieutenant Rickins screamed out that he had been attacked and needed help. By now I was completely focused on this role playing and proceeded to ask the other officers to aid Lieutenant Rickins. Over the conflicting orders I heard Lieutenant Rickins cry out that he had been shot. I was stunned for a moment, but continued with the exercise amid the chronic shouting of the other officers. After a few more minutes of drama, one voice bellowed over the others.

"Okay, stop! That's enough." Sergeant Blackwell ended the stressful event as quickly as it had begun.

By now my heart was actually beating faster, but I sat quietly, trying to maintain a normal composure. Lieutenant Rickins broke the silence. "Do you still want this job?"

I replied without hesitation, "Yes, I want the job."

“Are you sure your boyfriend will approve of you working midnight shifts?”

I turned to him and replied, “I don’t have a boyfriend, and I answer only to myself.”

Sergeant Blackwell turned to me, “You did well, Nancy. One woman broke down in tears during her interview, although, I must admit, we took it way too far with you. You proved quite a challenge. You must understand this job is a heavy load. We have some other applicants, so I will let you know in a week or so if we decide to offer you the position.”

Thanking everyone for their time, I picked up my handbag and stepped outside into the fresh air and warm Florida sunshine. I shut the wobbly door behind me, and as I rested my purse on the handrail to retrieve my sunglasses and keys, I heard an uproar of laughter inside. I suddenly felt humiliated. *Oh, no, they’re laughing at me. Was I that bad? Did I respond so poorly?* I heard an utter cacophony emanate from the interview room and I felt my stomach lurch. I recognized Lieutenant Rickins voice. “Ron, that hundred pounds of girl sure put you in your place!” I heard my own words ring out two octaves higher as Rickins mimicked my voice, “Perhaps you’ve met someone who is just as determined as you are! You should have seen the look on your face, Ron! I nearly fell out of my chair! Oh, man, it was priceless!”

I quickly stepped down the stairs, uncertain if I wanted to hear the rest of their conversation or get caught eavesdropping. Sitting in my car, I waited in the parking lot for a moment to regain my composure. I didn’t know what they would decide. If I was offered the job, part of me wondered if I really wanted it or would accept it. What was I getting myself into? Then reality stepped in and reminded me of a few essentials such as car insurance, gas, rent, food, health, and dental coverage. Yes, I wanted this job, even if it was more challenging than I originally thought.

Early the next morning I was typing a letter at the mortgage company where I worked when I received a phone call. I ducked into

an unused office and picked up the phone. It was Sergeant Blackwell offering me the Duty Officer position and he wanted my training to start immediately.

“I’m sorry, sir, I have to give two weeks’ notice at this job.”

“I need you here now; should I offer the job to someone else?”

“I hope not, I want the job, but would you want me to walk out on you without notice? If I were ever to leave the Commission, I would give you time to find my replacement.”

I heard an exasperated sigh over the phone line. “Nancy, I’ll see you in two weeks—to the day, 8:00 AM, in the main office.”

“Yes sir, I’ll be there.”

2

A Bearable First Day

IT WAS MY first day as a law enforcement Duty Officer with the state of Florida's Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (generally referred to as the GFC or simply the Commission). Even with my love and knowledge of wildlife, there was much to learn, not so much about animals themselves, but the laws that protected them and how they were implemented. With all the time I had spent outdoors, I didn't realize how many statutes were in place for the protection of fresh water fish and mammals that roamed the state where I lived.

In the beginning there was no formal school or course of instruction. Other than requiring certification from the Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC) and National Crime Information Center (NCIC), nearly all training was conducted on the job. My very first day I found myself alternating between answering radio calls from wildlife officers, speaking to the general public on multiple telephone lines at once, and studying the regulations that were quickly becoming a major part of my new world.

The day was passing quickly and there was hardly a moment to catch my breath between tasks. I looked longingly at my fast-food breakfast which had been sitting by the radio since morning. I was surprised when one of the staff secretaries interrupted my work to ask me if I wanted to place an order for lunch.

"Is it lunch time already?" I pointed to the white paper bag shoved into the corner of the radio communications area. "Thanks anyway, I'll just try to eat my breakfast instead."

I returned to my work and unconsciously reached for the Egg McMuffin that was several hours old. I didn't even have the bag half open when my new sergeant approached me. I quickly closed the bag and gave him my full attention.

"Sergeant Blackwell," I said.

"Nancy, I want you to come outside with me; there is something I think you'd like to see."

I followed him down a long dark hallway of seemingly endless offices until we reached an exit. As we stepped outside, the sudden change to harsh sunlight left me momentarily blinded. As my pupils slowly adjusted to the brightness I could discern a group of uniformed officers standing in a semicircle. With each introduction I had to squint my eyes in order to read their name tags. I still found the rank structure confusing, so rather than concentrate on the pecking order, I committed each name and rank to memory while matching them with the right faces. I was acutely aware they were watching me and assessing my demeanor, so I remained pleasant but formal.

Following the introductions I became aware of an object that was laying on the trailer bed of a nearby truck, but I kept my attention on my superiors. Sergeant Blackwell smiled and pointed to the truck. "I bet you've never seen anything like this before."

"No sir, I haven't." My eyes were transfixed by what must have been the largest black bear in the entire state.

"It was hit by a semi-truck on Rural Route 7. He must be over four-hundred pounds; they just don't get that big around here. I can hardly believe it myself."

As we approached the dead bear I kept wishing I had my camera with me. Sergeant Blackwell continued, "He was in the road early this morning around daybreak. The poor fella couldn't get out of the way and a truck hit him. The impact damaged the semi too. Then we got the call to come pick him up."

"May I have a closer look?"

He nodded and I approached the bear. Most of the injuries must have been internal because there was very little blood. One of my first impressions was the smell. It was overpowering and I wanted to cover my nose with my hand, but I refrained. I was glad we were out in the open air where a light breeze provided some relief by carrying away part of the putrid odor. I visually studied his paws— huge pads with long dark claws that dwarfed my own petite hands and nails. I looked into his face and was overcome by a sudden feeling of sadness, so I diverted my eyes to the girth of his midsection. In my mind I pictured him alive again and foraging for food, doing what bears do. I snapped back to the present. “What will happen with him now?”

“Rumor has it that the Regional Director will get to keep the hide.”

“Is the meat too spoiled to use? I know when a deer is struck by a car, if it’s salvaged quickly enough, the meat can be consumed, so it’s donated to the children’s home.”

“True, I imagine some of the meat can be used, but I really don’t know for sure.”

It was quite an experience to see such a large bear and it was a popular topic of conversation for the remainder of my shift. As much as I wanted to join in, I knew I had to set aside my thoughts and concentrate on the regulations and codes that I was required to memorize and comprehend.

In all the excitement I had forgotten about my breakfast and was once again answering phone calls, taking complaints from the public, and learning the ten-code communication system that would soon become my new language.

After a couple more hours passed, my stomach reminded me of my still untouched breakfast. I rummaged through the bag and unwrapped the cold sandwich, but before my first bite, Sergeant Blackwell reappeared at my desk.

“Nancy, this is your lucky day. Have you ever seen an alligator up close?”

I looked up and replied, “No sir.”

“Then come back outside, you’re getting a real education today!”

I jumped at the chance, not just because I wanted to see the alligator, but I also needed a break from my studies in this chaotic environment. When we reached the door, I was again greeted by the glare and decided I really needed to start carrying a pair of sunglasses in my pocket.

Other than the officer who had brought in the alligator in the bed of his pickup truck, we were alone. I couldn't help but notice this officer was missing a finger and I secretly wondered if an alligator was to blame. My musings were interrupted by the voice of my sergeant.

"You know, Nancy, alligators are a protected species. This one, however, was a nuisance gator. He posed a threat to a neighborhood. He was in a local pond and the residents were afraid he might harm one of the children or pets. He already had an encounter with one family's dog. Whenever you take a report of this nature, it's imperative you get all the pertinent facts and then make a determination if the gator should be removed. We can send a trapper to get him."

"Are they always killed? Do you ever relocate them?"

"We can't relocate them. They may be too familiar with people and no longer afraid of them. When this happens, they often return to where we found them. Their hides are highly prized. Want an alligator purse? They're quite popular among the Miami crowd."

I just grinned, "Not on my salary."

I took one last glance at this prehistoric looking creature. While his skin looked soft on his underside, his back had a tough rippled texture. His head was the most intimidating feature and it gave me the willies as I felt his vacant eyes staring back at me. Some of his teeth were barely visible amidst his slightly curled mouth and I then understood the meaning of the term "crocodile smile."

I was soon back at my desk in the midst of all the comings and goings, listening for radio calls, phones ringing, and the nonstop chatter of teletype machines. While I worked on my newly acquired skill of coding tickets for game violations, I was surprised to see my replacement coming through the door. My eight-hour shift was over. I briefed him on some ongoing situations that the officers were

covering and got ready to leave. I jotted down a few last minute notes and picked up the white grease-stained paper bag from my desk. I never did get a taste of what was inside, nor did I want to at this point. Instead, I looked forward to a large supper, but thankfully nothing involving wild game.

