

[From Fall 2004]

Refuge Selects First Resident Artist



"Your work is so peaceful and soft," is the frequent response from people as they are drawn to take a closer look at Nancy West's oil paintings and pastels of water birds and their environment. "I feel that I could reach out and touch that bird!" Meet Nancy Richards West, recently appointed Resident Artist for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. "Being a Resident Artist means you must be willing to interpret, on a regular basis, and explain to visitors, the artistic process involved in painting nature and wildlife," said Refuge Manager John Schroer. Nancy conducted programs for the public throughout the summer and was available for visitors while she was painting on the refuge.

The wildlife and salt marshes of Assateague Island and nearby Chincoteague Island, Virginia, are West's unending source of inspiration. The graceful elegance of egrets and herons as they move through the marsh, the impressive flight of raptors, or the antics of the constantly moving sanderlings along the shoreline provide the subject matter that makes her paintings come alive. Having been trained as

a portrait artist, she strives to capture the spirit of the bird, not just its likeness. Spending many hours in the field dressed in camouflage and carrying binoculars, a camera, and a sketch pad is essential to recording and understanding her subjects. This research is crucial to creating a painting that feels alive.

"I am captivated by the ever-shifting appearance of the marsh as it is transformed by the season, by the hour, and even by the moment," says West. Recently, the challenge of capturing these fleeting effects of light and color has led Nancy to take her paints out of the studio and into the field. Painting "en plein air" (painting on location) has become a very important part of her current body of work, and led to her current position as Resident Artist.

Visitors to the Refuge were encouraged to stop and watch her as she set up her easel and painted the vistas before her, or to stop in for one of her evening programs at the refuge's visitor center, where she talked about the research that goes into wildlife artwork and demonstrated her painting.

Whether painting the frenzied feeding of sanderlings or the quiet violets and blues of the salt marsh as evening approaches, Nancy's love for the beauty of her natural surroundings is evident in each and every piece this talented artist creates.

For more information, or to inquire about becoming a Resident Volunteer Artist, please contact Sally Bowden at 757-336-6122.