



Jay Norwood “Ding” Darling’s original Duck Stamp



The Art of the Duck

In October Sanibel hosts the famous Federal Duck Stamp competition as it celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary

by Chelle Koster Walton

What’s a wildlife artist’s wildest dream? To win the Federal Duck Stamp competition. “It’s a huge thrill to win the federal,” said Richard Clifton, a Delaware wildlife artist whose ring-necked ducks portrait won the 2006 contest for the 2007-2008 duck stamp. “It’s a really good notch in your paintbrush and great for your career.... You think about how it goes all the way back to 1934, and you’re part of that long history, and that’s pretty neat.”

In 2007, the duck stamp program celebrates the judging for the seventy-fifth stamp and at no other than Sanibel Island, where the “father of the duck stamp,” Jay Norwood “Ding” Darling, established a national wildlife refuge later named for him.

“This is huge!” says Jim Sprankle,

president of “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society, the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge’s friends organization. As an eminent duck- and bird-carving artist himself, Sprankle was asked to judge the duck stamp competition back in 1998 and is being considered as a judge for the 2007 judging. (Usually, judges can sit only one competition, but for the seventy-fifth anniversary, the duck stamp office is making an exception.)

“It’s the first time ever the competition has been held outside of Washington, D.C., and Memphis,” Sprankle continued. “We had to pull more than a few strings to get it here. But here is where it belongs.”

Darling, as chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, the precursor to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), saw the duck stamp program into law. As an



Jaye Boswell (in green), who began the Junior Duck Stamp program while an art teacher at Sanibel Elementary, casts her vote in the 2007 Florida Junior Duck Stamp Contest held at the “Ding” Darling Refuge, along with fellow judges Bill Riley, Janet Courtney, Don Wildman, and (not pictured) Ernie Simmons.

PHOTO BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON



Jay Norwood “Ding” Darling pushed through legislation to create the Federal Duck Stamp program and designed the first stamp in 1934.

award-winning and influential syndicated political cartoonist for the *Des Moines Register*, he designed the first duck stamp in 1934.

From Darling’s first design through the 1949 stamp, the FWS appointed an artist to create the stamp. In 1950, the government started an annual juried contest to select artwork for the stamp. Since that time, a panel of five judges with expertise in waterfowl biology, stamp design, and artistic detail have been chosen for each year’s contest.

“The criteria for the judging is simply the life-like bird,” says Sprankle. “There have been mistakes made in past years as far as a bird’s eye color or what not, and I think now they’ve realized they have to have someone on the panel who knows what the bird looks like—a sculptor or an owner of an aviary who is with birds every day.”

In 2006, 297 artists competed for the honor of winning the nation’s only federally sponsored art competition. More are expected for the seventy-fifth anniversary, and for this one judging, all previous duck stamp winners are eligible to enter. Typically, a winner has to wait three years before competing again.

While the winner receives no money from the federal government, the year’s duck stamp artist benefits from the increased visibility and sale of prints and artwork. Winning artists stand to make hundreds of thousands of dollars off limited-edition prints of their duck



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stamp designs. Artists often compete annually in the hopes of attaining this career summit.

"I don't know how many times I've entered," said 2006 winner Clifton "But at this point it was starting to add up. After a while it's just a big relief to win. I'm just tickled to death.

"Every year you figure out a few things," said the artist, who has won several state duck stamp competitions. "You usually start thinking about your next entry after you realize you lost the last. You look at the five species they pick. I've learned you have to stick with the species that you have the most reference for. The safe plan, if you will, is to go with a simple background, and you really truly have to make the duck look really good."

Clifton will be on hand for the 2007 judging and subsequent "Ding" Darling Days at BIG ARTS and the refuge. Duck stamp winners are required by contract to attend "Ding" Darling Days for a reception and presentation and have for the past seventeen years. "Ding" Darling Days participants get the opportunity to hear the artist talk about his or her process, to ask questions, and to have the artist sign purchased duck stamps.

This year, wildlife art enthusiasts and duck stamp collectors will be able to view all of the artists' entries for the following year at BIG ARTS' Phillips Gallery beginning Oct. 1 and can attend two days of judging in Schein Hall on Oct. 12 and 13. Artists have a choice of five waterfowl to portray for the 2008-2009 stamp: the Mallard, American Green-winged Teal, Pintail, Canvasback, and Harlequin Duck.

"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society has plans for a wildlife art auction that same week. The Society's eighteenth annual "Ding" Darling Days will run concurrently with the judging, culminating in Family Fun Day, which moves this year from a Saturday to Sunday, Oct. 14.

"We're excited to host such an important national contest," said refuge manager Rob Jess. "Part of our mission is to celebrate Ding's legacy.



The work of the winners in the Junior Duck Stamp Competition remain on display for a year at the "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Education Center.

When he created the first duck stamp, I wonder if he knew what a tremendous influence he would have on conservation in this country."

The \$15 stamp forms the cornerstone of one of the world's most successful conservation programs. Money from duck stamp sales is a vital tool for wetland conservation, with 98 cents out of every dollar generated going to purchase or lease wetland habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since the stamp's inception, nearly \$700 million has been raised to acquire more than 5.2 million acres of habitat and hundreds of refuges, according to the Federal Duck Stamp office.

But, according to Kip Koss, Darling's grandson, that dollar estimate is low when viewed in light of inflation. "Adjusted to 2005 dollars, duck stamp sales from 1934 through 2004 actually total \$1,922,780,770, or nearly two billion dollars," says Koss.

Dollars aside, art also benefits wildlife through the duck stamp program's high-profile educational

value. This is particularly true of the spin-off Junior Duck Stamp program that was conceived on Sanibel in 1989 by then Sanibel Elementary art teacher Jaye Boswell. The program, now in its fifteenth year, has spread nationwide, and some fifty-thousand kindergarten through high school students enter every year.

"The Junior Duck Stamp program is so important," says "Ding" Darling Ranger Toni Westland, coordinator of the Florida Duck Stamp program. "It teaches the kids about waterfowl conservation and how saving the wetlands affects the entire web of life. And it also makes them aware of the Federal Duck Stamp program and its importance to conservation. Maybe one day they'll go on to win the federal contest," she said. And have their wildest dream come true. 🦆

Travel Editor Chelle Koster Walton is the author of Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book and The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's West Coast.