



Alison Nicholls

African Wildlife Art

By Emma Adair



Alison Nicholls is a watercolor wildlife artist who lived in the southern African countries of Botswana and Zimbabwe for nearly 9 years. In 2007 she was awarded a Conservation Fellowship Grant by the Artists For Conservation Foundation and conducted their 5th Flag Expedition, visiting the Painted Dog Conservation project (PDC) to paint endangered African Wild Dogs (known as Painted Dogs in Zimbabwe). Her work has been featured in Wildscape Magazine (UK). The US Department of State used her work in promotional material advertising the “Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking” initiative and her work has been exhibited at the Botswana Mission to the United Nations in Manhattan. Nicholls frequently gives lectures aimed at showcasing southern Africa, its wildlife and conservation issues in the region. Recent lectures have included the Explorers Club in New York City and a series of talks for volunteers at the Central Park Zoo and Bronx Zoo. Alison Nicholls is English by birth but has traveled widely throughout her life. She currently lives in Port Chester, New York.

“Colorful Impressions”

Authors are told ‘write what you know’. I believe the same rule applies to painting, so I only paint the African wildlife species I have watched and sketched in their natural, wild, habitat. I spent nearly 9 years living in Botswana and Zimbabwe, traveling extensively throughout the region and although I now live near New York City, I return to southern Africa on an annual basis. Southern Africa was, and still is, my inspiration to paint.

I am often asked ‘how can I paint African wildlife when I live in New York?’ The answer is that I find it easier to paint my “colorful impressions” when I am not in the African bush. There are two main reasons for this. The first is practical – my materials and methods don’t suit the African climate and don’t often survive the trials of traveling through heavy sand in a vehicle full of dust and supplies. In the bush I can’t stretch my paper, I can’t use loose washes of watercolor due to fast drying times and on a couple of memorable occasions moisture bees have made painting impossible by sitting on the end of my brush and totally covering anything damp! The second reason is that in the African bush I am surrounded by a myriad of detail, something I generally try to exclude from my finished paintings. So when I am in the bush I sketch, generally in pencil or pen, writing extensive notes and soaking in my surroundings. This is essential to my work, allowing me to replenish my “mental library” of images, colors, smells, sounds and sensations, all of which are an integral part of my completed paintings.



“Alert Kudu”

14 x 24

When I return home, painting ideas begin to form, usually while I’m out walking my German Shepherd dog Kim (who was born in Botswana but loves the cold New York winters). I prefer to be out of the studio when I’m composing a painting rather than being surrounded by photos and sketches. I like to ‘see’ the painting in my mind’s eye before I start drawing and I have no difficulty seeing specific places in my mind’s eye – the Savuti Channel in Botswana, Mana Pools in Zimbabwe or Okondeka in Namibia. I also have to say that when it is icy and cold outdoors or if I have had a bad day, there are definite advantages in being able to transfer myself to a quiet pan in the Kalahari, watching the sun quickly sink, listening to the clacking of barking geckoes and watching a blackbacked jackal trot out into the dusk.

Once I have my painting idea, I do several quick thumbnail sketches to work out the composition and then I sketch the animal in more detail. If necessary I check details of an animal’s anatomy by referring to my photographs and slides, but they don’t form the basis of my paintings. Once I have completed my drawing I transfer my sketch to watercolor paper (Arches 140lb cold press), soak the paper, tape it to a board, leave it overnight to dry then the following day I can begin to paint. There are three things common to most of my paintings: areas of space, “quiet times” and color.

“Space”

I pay a lot of attention to the composition of my paintings. My wildlife subjects are hardly ever centered on the paper and this allows me to leave areas of space and minimal detail, areas where I let my watercolor washes take over. Although this was initially an unconscious decision, I believe that the space in my paintings was influenced by the time I have spent in the wide-open grasslands and huge skies of the Kalahari Desert.

“Quiet Times”

Most animals spend most of their time feeding and resting and this is how I like to paint them. Often the animals in my paintings are looking away from the viewer or walking away from the viewer. At one stage I it seemed that I only painted wildlife backsides! The animals in my paintings are relaxed, undisturbed and acting naturally, exactly how I like to see them in the bush. I call this the “quiet times” factor.



Alison sketching in Hwange National Park

Color is perhaps the most obvious aspect of my work but although I may paint a purple zebra or an orange cheetah, I want my wildlife subjects to be instantly recognizable, their anatomy to be correct, their posture and gait to be realistic. When it comes to choosing a color scheme for my paintings, I make that decision based purely on the colors that will best indicate the time of day or a particular atmospheric mood. I use color to show whether it is dusk or dawn, midday or midnight. In Botswana before the annual rains there is a huge amount of dust in the air and the sun often appears to set long before it reaches the horizon. These conditions cause wonderful light effects and flatten the landscape. Animals and trees become silhouettes, an effect I particularly love and often use in my paintings. In many paintings I begin with a wash of yellow, perhaps Naples Yellow mixed with Lemon Yellow. This wash must dry completely then I continue with the next wash, reds & oranges to show heat or blues and purples to show shade or dusk. I often use a limited palette of colors and normally use only two or maybe three washes of color on a painting before adding some final detail. Watercolor is a demanding but beautiful medium. If you put a foot (or brush) wrong it has an uncanny ability to produce unending combinations of muddy colors. My challenge is to avoid these so if I feel I have lost the light and airy feeling in a painting I have no choice but to start again. This is infuriating but necessary in order for me to paint in the colorful impressionistic style I love.



“Under African Skies”

12 x 16

This brings me to the final step in the life of one of my paintings. I leave it out of sight for a few days and then look at it again, along with my husband, Nigel, who is not an artist but is certainly my most honest critic and can almost immediately spot problems I have struggled to locate! This is make or break time. Will it pass the test? In my heart I know that answer before I put it away for a few days but it is always good to look at a piece afresh and see if it is really finished. If it fails, it won't see the light of day again. If it passes you will find it on my website, until it goes to a good home with another African wildlife enthusiast.



"Dogs at Dusk"
15 x 15

“Painting the Painted Dogs Artistic Study of an Endangered Hunter”

“Painting the Painted Dogs” was the 5th Artists For Conservation Flag Expedition. Alison Nicholls stayed at the Painted Dog Conservation project (PDC) for 6 weeks during Sept/Oct 2007.

PDC is located just outside Hwange National Park in the north-west of Zimbabwe. The project aims to conserve highly endangered African Wild Dogs (known as Painted Dogs in the area).

During the Expedition I spent time with PDC staff tracking and sketching Painted Dogs. This involved many long hours in a hot vehicle listening on headphones for the beeps from a dog’s tracking collar. Only a small percentage of dogs in the area are collared for research purposes and the dogs are highly nomadic so finding them is not easy. I kept an expedition journal of sightings, sketches and notes about the trip.

PDC is a conservation project, which works closely with the local community to educate and inform about the dogs. There are numerous parts to the project including a wonderful Children’s Bushcamp, a new Visitor Center and a Dog Rehabilitation Facility. PDC Conservation Officers visit local schools and villages and PDC Anti-Poaching Units patrol the bush to find wire snares. The project employs approximately 60 people and has had far-reaching positive effects on the surrounding communities. In many respects this contact with local people was the highlight of my expedition.

Since the expedition finished I have created a traveling exhibition, which visited 5 separate venues and a lecture series. My monthly email newsletters contained articles about PDC for the lat quarter of 2007 and the whole of 2008. My journal has been reproduced by AFC as a leather-bound collector’s edition. My most recent lecture was at the Explorers Club in New York City where I lectured along with Gregory Rasmussen, Director of PDC. I continue to donate 25% of sales from Painted Dog artwork to PDC.

Association memberships

Explorers Club, New York City, Resident Member
Salmagundi Club, New York City, Artist Member
Artists For Conservation, International, Signature Member

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