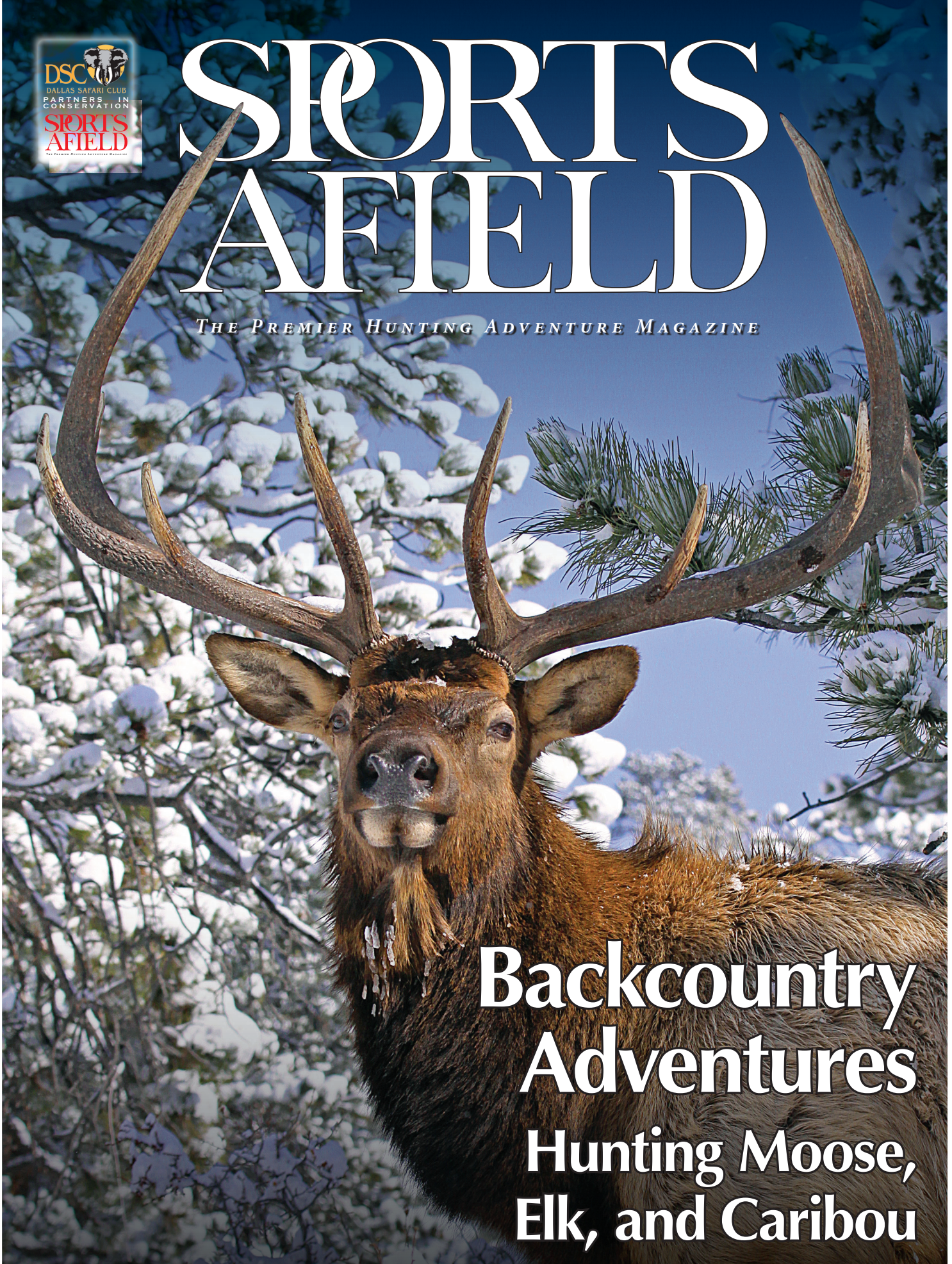




SPORTS AFIELD

THE PREMIER HUNTING ADVENTURE MAGAZINE



**Backcountry
Adventures**
Hunting Moose,
Elk, and Caribou



BRAD FITZPATRICK

THE ART OF THE GAME

A look at three of the top wildlife artists of the modern era.

With aisles of fantastic hunting and fishing destinations and one of the world's most spectacular collections of taxidermy, it takes a lot to draw a crowd at the big hunting conventions. But each year, without fail, there are large numbers of people clustered around the art booths to examine the latest work of some of the best-known wildlife painters in the business.

Three of those great wildlife artists—John Seerey-Lester, John Banovich, and Joshua Spies—have managed to consistently capture the attention of hunters and art collectors. They have done so by masterfully capturing in fine detail a single moment in a quiet place: a moonlit camp with marauding lions, a whitetail buck on a cold autumn morning, a duck dropping into a hidden pothole with glassy water, or an old elephant bull in a shroud of African dust. It's no wonder that hunters are so drawn to the work of these artists, for great wildlife art helps transport us to the wilderness and allows us to live in a moment that might be decades gone.

It's also worth noting that these artists, through their work, have generated millions of dollars that directly helps wildlife through conservation organizations like Dallas Safari Club and Safari Club International. The art that is auctioned at these conventions provides much-needed funding to help support wildlife projects around the globe.

Here's an inside look at three of the great modern wildlife artists—a look behind the canvas. Every painting has a story, and so does every artist.

John Seerey-Lester

In the late 1970s, John Seerey-Lester of Manchester, England, was working as a journalist, editor, and a press officer for local government, but his



John Seerey-Lester in his studio.

true passion was painting. He'd found commercial success as an artist whose work captured nostalgic scenes from the Victorian and Edwardian eras, but he says he "had never been enthused about painting badgers and harvest mice." That all changed in 1979 and 1980 when Seerey-Lester took his first trip to East Africa and found inspiration in the Dark Continent's exotic and dangerous big game.

"Once I had been exposed to the wildlife of Africa, there was no going back to painting street scenes," says Seerey-Lester.

The following year John immigrated to the United States and spent the next two decades painting the world's greatest wildlife, from wild giant pandas in China to jaguars in Central and South America and mountain gorillas in the equatorial forests of Africa. He traveled to

Asia, India, and the Arctic in search of scenes of the world's great wild animals. That exposure to nature provided the inspiration that Seerey-Lester needed to produce over 400 limited edition prints with Mill Pond Press and gain worldwide acclaim as one of the most sought-after wildlife artists of the modern era. His work has been displayed in the White House and in permanent and private museum displays around the globe.

Many of Seerey-Lester's best-known works combine elements from the historic paintings he did in his early years with his passion for nature.

"I renewed my interest in historic scenes, which led me to do paintings of early safaris in British East Africa and shikaris in India during the British Raj," says Seerey-Lester. "I eventually got so caught up in the hunting heritage not only of my birthplace, England, but

also America, that it led to a series of historic predicament paintings, and paintings of the legendary hunters such as Theodore Roosevelt. My interest lies chiefly with the period from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Hunting practices have changed considerably over the last 150 years; I like to show what it used to be like—I find that far more interesting, from the clothing and guns to the antique camping equipment.

“I paint mainly big-game animals. I enjoy showing the power and strength of large mammals. In most of my paintings there is an element of danger—someone is in trouble. I like to paint drama and strive for my paintings to tell a story. Not illustrations, simply paintings that record an actual incident in the field, preferably of historic interest.”

Though he has developed a style all his own (and a loyal following of collectors in the process), Seerey-Lester says his inspiration came from a variety of sources.

“Many artists have inspired me over the years, in particular L.S. Lowry and his tutor, French impressionist Adolphe Valette, who in 1905 were both at the Municipal College of Art, in Manchester, England—my hometown,” says Seerey-Lester. “Before turning professional artist in 1974, I was greatly moved by all the French Impressionists, but after becoming a full-time artist, I was motivated by wildlife artists such as English painters David Shepherd and Simon Combes. When I moved to America, Andrew Wyeth and Robert Bateman were inspirational.

“My wife and I are wingshooters, quail and pheasant. We do this mainly in Georgia, where there are some wonderful plantations that still offer hunting in the old southern style, which has also been of help to me in my art. I have done several paintings depicting historic wingshooting scenes, particularly where dogs are involved.”



TR and Skip: Headin' Out, by John Seerey-Lester.

John and Suzie (who is herself an accomplished artist) live in Florida but spend a great deal of time traveling in search of inspiration.

“We always travel and paint, hunt and fly-fish together—we inspire each other,” John says. “Our favorite places to visit, besides Africa and Alaska, are the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone National Park, Glacier National Park, and the Everglades. We travel some four months of the year doing research, shows, Master classes, and book signings. We undertake classes all over America and Canada, as well as Africa and Central America, and at one of our studios in Florida. I have done Master classes for more than twenty-five years and find them to be a two-way learning experience and inspirational.”

John's works have netted him more awards than can be listed here, but he

was presented with the Patricia Allen Bott and the Award of Excellence from the Society of Animal Artists and he has been named Artist of the Year or Featured Artist by the Southeastern Wildlife Expo, Pacific Rim Wildlife Art Show, the Florida Wildlife Expo, and others. His works are on permanent display in the Bennington Center for the Arts and the Nature in Art Museum, and have also been displayed in the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa and the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Wyoming. More recently he and his wife had a major retrospective exhibition comprised over fifty paintings at the prestigious Roger Tory Peterson Institute in Jamestown, New York. He and Suzie received the Simon Combes Award for Conservation. In 2013 John was knighted by his Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke Andreas of Austria.



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Joshua Spies, artist and sheep hunter.

Joshua Spies

Forty-three-year-old Joshua Spies grew up in northeastern South Dakota in the same town as renowned wildlife artist Terry Redlin (Terry's wife, Helene, was Joshua's mother's babysitter, so the Spies and Redlins were well-acquainted). Redlin, who passed away in early 2016, was a prominent artist and his work and lifestyle influenced young Joshua, who grew up hunting birds, deer, and ducks. John Wilson—artist of the 1981 Federal Duck Stamp—also lived in the same small town, and, like Redlin, was influential in Spies' decision to pursue art. But it was Joshua's family's connection to the outdoors that became the true foundation for his later career.

"A lot of my influence came from where I grew up. When I was young I spent a lot of time hunting with my father and my grandfather," Spies says.

As a college student, Spies began entering—and winning—art competitions. That success led to international competitions, Ducks Unlimited art package painting, winning the Federal Duck Stamp competition, and being named DSC and SCI artist of the year. His studio is currently in Sioux Falls, where he resides when he isn't in the field hunting or drawing inspiration for his work.

"I still hunt quite a bit," he says. "I've had the chance to hunt around the world, but my passion is sheep hunting. Mountain hunting. I like the challenge of it." Spies has been successful in all aspects of his hunting career; he completed the Ovis World Slam two years ago and has hunted a variety of African, South Pacific, Asian, European, and South and North American species. That exposure has helped Spies connect with his subject matter and with his audience, many of whom are hunters themselves.

"I have had an opportunity to travel the world, experience a variety of different things, and meet interesting people, primarily through my art," says Spies. "I am truly blessed."

Spies says that, like other artists, he has evolved over the course of his career. In his earliest days he was interested in

"super realism," but his subjects, his focus, and his technique have changed.

"When I graduated from college in 1996 I thought I knew a lot," says Spies. "So it's been almost exactly twenty years since I started doing this. I wish I could go back and tell my younger self some things regarding the work, the marketing, and the challenges of being your own boss."

One thing that has remained, however, is Spies' commitment to conservation. His work still helps fund projects to protect habitat and fight poaching. He is currently working on a portrait of an elephant that will provide funding to help Ivan Carter's conservation efforts in Africa. When he's not in the field, Spies balances his work with the responsibilities of having a family; you're just as likely to catch Spies at one of his two children's baseball games or out for a family dinner as you are in the studio.



Bunning Whitetail by Josh Spies.



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John Banovich is a conservationist as well as an artist.

John Banovich

Born in Butte, Montana, John Banovich has developed an impressive resumé as an artist since he began painting full-time in 1993. That year, he won Best of Show at the Pacific Rim Wildlife Art Show, and has since produced work displayed in private and corporate collections as well as many museums. Banovich has been featured on ABC's *Entertainment Tonight* as well as on The Outdoor Channel, PBS, NBC, and Versus, making him one of the best-known wildlife artists in the country.



Tembo Tsunami by John Banovich.

Banovich completed his first oil painting at the age of seven, which was titled *Meeting of the Gang* and was based on characters from Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. His first dedicated collector was actually one of his elementary school teachers.

Winning the Pacific Rim competition provided Banovich with the inspiration and publishing contract he needed to begin his long career, but even after more than two decades of full-time work, John still treats every piece individually, working to capture the essence of the animal.

"Being a professional artist has a tremendous responsibility with it," says Banovich. "I feel that each time I set out to capture an animal on canvas it must be perfect and the best work I have ever done. An animal in the wild has beat the odds of survival. He has arrived at his or her moment, summiting the difficult climb to arrive and be a thriving member of the wild kingdom. This is a monumental feat and I feel that I, through my art, must honor that, paying homage to the perfect creature, representing millions of years of perfect evolution."

That respect for nature comes, in part, from Banovich's background as a hunter. At the age of twelve he began accompanying his father, an avid hunter and fly fisherman. Banovich's work has carried him around the world in search of game, and he has hunted extensively in North America, Africa, and Asia. His experience as a hunter has helped Banovich not only appreciate wildlife but also understand the conservation challenges these animals face in a world with an ever-expanding human population.

"Through my art, I hope to move, reveal, and inspire people to seek a deeper understanding of the world around us and bring together groups of individuals to unite on a common ground," says Banovich. "Now, more than ever, our natural world is severely threatened and with this increased pressure, a new paradigm must emerge. Conservationists, sportsmen, and environmentalists must come together and join forces in areas of overlapping interests and consider bridges for those areas of similar interests. In 2007 I started the Banovich Wildscapes Foundation with a mission to awaken and inform the people."

Banovich says that the animal that is the most compelling to him is the African lion. "There is nothing more spectacular in the animal kingdom than a large male lion," he says. In 2019, the Nevada Art Museum will feature Banovich's work in a one-man exhibition titled *The King of Beasts: A Study of the African Lion*.

"As an artist who has studied lions for decades and the founder of Banovich Wildscapes Foundation and the Lion P.R.I.D.E. Initiative, I created the body of work for this exhibition to serve as an homage to these animals and explore questions about mankind's deep fear, love, and admiration for these creatures," Banovich says. 📍

For information on these artists, please visit their websites: seerey-lester.com; joshuaspies.com; johnbanovich.com.