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40 days and 40 nights

Larry Eifert paints nature murals on grand scale for America's wildlife refuges, national parks

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Art is the only job he's ever had, and he's been doing it for more than 40 years.

In a day and age when many full-time artists are scrambling to pay the bills, nature artist Larry Eifert, 64, has work. Lots of it. But he still has to scramble. Especially when he's given only a little more than a month to paint a mural for the new visitor center at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

No problem. "I just thrive with that kind of pressure," he said.

Even so, Eifert is good, and he's fast, but he's not fast enough to finish a 14-by-130-foot painting done in two separate connecting sections by the deadline all by himself.

While working on the details, Eifert's wife, Nancy, as she often does, has helped with what doesn't meet the eye – the underpainting – i.e., color that is applied to give the piece the right tonal value and depth before applying the actual artistic renderings.

In acrylic painting, you start with dark and work up to the lighter stuff on top, says Eifert.



Larry Eifert works on a mural to be installed in a visitor center at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. Eifert, who has lived in Port Townsend for the past 15 years, has always been a full-time artist who specializes in painting nature. Photo by Nancy Cherry Eifert

“It speeds it up. Somebody’s got to do it.”

But even with Nancy’s assistance, Eifert knew the deadline was still out of reach. Plus, making a painting this large isn’t easy. His studio can’t handle a canvas that big, and neither can a space above Union Bank (formerly Frontier Bank) on Sims Way, where he goes to create oversized work, this project included.

The next logical step, then, was to turn the painting into pixels.

“This is painted 30 percent of final size, and we’re going to roll both of them up and ship them to Georgia, where there’s a 48-inch scanner, and they’re going to blow this thing up at 300 dpi [dots per inch, a printing press term] and print it and put it up like wallpaper.

The scary part is that I really don’t know what this is going to look like,” he said.



Larry Eifert started this project with sketches, which were increased in size by 300 percent into paintings, which were then scanned and blown up another 300 percent for printing onto vinyl paper that can’t be torn, folded or creased. Here, he shows the same tree in the mid- and final sizes. Photo by Kathie Meyer

If his track record is any indication, it will probably look pretty nice. Eifert has more work in America’s national parks, refuges and preserves – including the Badlands National Park, Joshua Tree National Monument and Big Bend National Park – than any other artist. More than once, his interpretive panels have received top awards from the National Association of Interpretation.

Drawing giraffes

This time, the scene Eifert is painting is not an actual place, but it is representative of Wisconsin’s varied habitats, from wetlands to meadow to forest. Initially, he was given about 20 reference photos and a species list, but the species list of about 300 birds and animals didn’t tell Eifert what is the most common or what is most important, he said. Suffice it to say that Eifert has to do a lot of homework to get his work done.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service especially are really picky. They go so far as to measure the distance from the end of the nose to the nostril in relationship to the center of the eye. So I have to know all of this stuff.”

Eifert also has to know what a plant looks like as it comes out of the ground (something that books don’t always illustrate), how big a bush will get if growing in the shade, and how big that same bush will get if growing in full sun. If he doesn’t already know such things, he knows whom he should call to find out the answer.

This is the kind of thing Eifert has lived with all of his life, ever since he was a small boy. Both of his parents worked at the Illinois State Museum, where a lot of the early, big dioramas were made and their backgrounds were painted. The artists of those dioramas were his baby-sitters,

day and night. Sometimes they shoved him off to a corner and said, "Here, draw this giraffe, and don't bug us," to keep him out of the way.

"I basically lived in that museum in the back," said Eifert.

His mother, Virginia Eifert, was an author and illustrator of 20 books, most of them about nature; and his father, an ecologist and English major, often said, "Shoot a gun, you're out of the family." So right out of high school, Eifert knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to paint nature.

He didn't, however, go to art school, but built his career one mural at a time, and now he doesn't have to go looking for work. It comes looking for him. Typically, he gets his jobs by being in the loop.

"I'm just in the Rolodex of everybody," he said.

Normally, Eifert does what his mother did when creating work and pays an in-depth visit to the site, taking notes, sketching and talking to park personnel. Nancy, a professional photographer, accompanies him and takes the reference pictures. The two of them have lived in Port Townsend for the past 15 years. Locally, both of the Eiferts show their work at [Gallery 9](#), 1012 Water St., downtown.

This time, though, the Wisconsin project didn't allow for that kind of exploration. From beginning to end, Eifert had only 40 days to get it done, which he did with five days to spare. In the beginning, he only had a couple of days to make all of the sketches for the first submittal.

"I look forward to waking up in the morning and knowing that I have to do 10 feet of drawing in two days. It's what I live for."

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