

ONE LAST CAST

North Carolina's beloved wildlife artist chronicles his life among the fishes

written by Duane Raver



Newton, Iowa has at least two distinctions: It is the town where Maytag Washing Machine Co. got its start and it is where I was born. My mother used to say that my birth was about two weeks after Lindberg landed the Spirit of St. Louis in Paris. So, you historians can calculate how old I am now.

I really don't remember the first fish I caught, maybe a bluegill or a pumpkinseed sunfish from an Iowa creek or farm pond when I was 6 or so years old. Flash forward 80-plus years to my final fish, likely a crappie from a pond near our Johnston County home. If you can stand it, here is an accounting of some of the years in between.

Fish and fishing have always come naturally for me, with parents and friends from my early years showing me angling skills, from my first cane pole to a long-used 1948 split bamboo fly-rod and a 21st birthday present Pflueger Supreme casting reel.

The first urges to draw and paint fish are lost in my hazy recollections, but dates of 1940 are penciled on many of my attempts at picturing fresh-caught fish flopped on the kitchen table. Even in those early days of trying to develop drawing and painting techniques by observing skilled artists of the day, it was pretty much trial and error for me (and still is!).

I could list a dozen or more artists of those 1940s and 1950s who I admired, but few were "fish specialists." Then the name of an Iowa artist, Maynard Reece, caught my eye. My worn copy of *Iowa Fish and Fishing* dated 1951, (which I regret that Maynard never signed) with his lovely fish art, was a real inspiration for me.

Over the years, many excellent fish illustrators (and some not so good) have come and gone.

Top-notch folks include Florida's Wallace Hughes and Diane Peebles, *National Geographic's* Walter Weber, Pennsylvania's Ned Smith and, currently on top of the list, Joe Tomelleri, whom no one will surpass.

Then soon came the decision of college or art school. It was evident early on that the Good Lord had given me a measure of artistic ability, but the pull of fishery biology at nearby Iowa State College



Left: Many years ago, Raleigh News & Observer cartoonist Dwane Powell shared a small art exhibit with Duane Raver and a few other artists in a bank one Sunday afternoon. As Raver and Powell were at work on a drawing or painting, Powell was actually creating this pen and ink "cartoon" of Raver working on a fictitious drawing board. Above: Raver (center) and two fishing buddies display the results of a successful fishing trip.

(now University) won out. Still, there was time for drawing and painting on a "self-taught" basis. My first "sale" of artwork was a whopping \$5

for a sketch I did for *Fin and Feather News* of Lufkin, Texas.

While in college I spent two summers as an assistant fishery biologist with the Iowa Conservation Commission at Spirit Lake, Iowa. This hands-on experience of netting and handling fish would prove valuable. And on weekend afternoons I took the opportunity of sketching various local fish at the hatchery's large aquarium. I still have some of those stained drawings and paintings dated "Spirit Lake 1944."

Those summers were not without a couple of "adventures," including a particularly foolish one. Four of us (yes, wearing hip boots) set out in the little wooden johnboat with its struggling 5-horsepower Johnson outboard. The wind came up and swamped our craft in the middle of Lost Island Lake, leading to a close call swimming with water-filled hip boots to a nearby boat. "How deep was the water?" my rescuer asked. "I didn't go down to find out," I replied in a panting voice.

Now what? A degree in fishery biology, but no job prospects. I changed course and enrolled at the University of Iowa in, of all things, "Museum Technics!" Actually, the Iowa folks were more interested in what they had learned of my fledgling art ability and they needed designers for their exhibit backgrounds.

Fate stepped in. The car was packed when I got a phone call from an Iowa State classmate. He was leaving his job as a fishery biologist with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and he wondered if I would like it. "But they don't know a thing about me," I tried to tell him. "Oh, they know that you were a student of Dr. Ken Carlander, and that's enough for them," he

said. Talk about being associated with the right people at the right time! I had less than a week to arrive on the job since my classmate was leaving February 5, 1950.

A NEW HOME

Let's see now. Raleigh is where I want to end up. No interstates, some late winter high water on the roads, a road map at best. The pearl gray '48 Ford better not fail me now. And it didn't. On Feb. 5 or so, I drove into downtown Raleigh past a guy mowing grass at the First Baptist Church with an antique push

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mower. Mowing the grass? After near-zero Iowa weather? The promised land indeed!

I met my new boss, J. Harry Cornell, Fish Division chief. He had been on the job a couple of weeks. Actually, the Commission had been in existence only two or three years. Clyde Patton, executive director, had preceded us by a year or two.

Now what do we do? A former college professor, a green fishery biologist, an infant organization that some folks liked and some didn't. What had I gotten myself into? Just try to appear like I knew more than I did and hope for the best.

I was shown my desk in the basement of the State Education Building. I sat beside a fair-haired lad who looked as if he was right

out of high school. And on the other side was a few-words guy who looked all business. The lad turned out to be Garland Avent (yes, the future dad of expert gardener, Tony Avent). The laid-back fellow was Dave Nolan, Commission engineer.

We all struck it off just fine. They both accepted the Yankee quickly. Garland shuffled papers and Dave looked after the Commission's fish hatcheries and an obsolete game farm, and so forth. And me? I was handed a box full of a hundred or so fish scale envelopes. I was to read the dried scales and determine the age of the fish that they came from. Somehow my experience with age and growth of fish had preceded me from Iowa State.

Mistake number one: "Where is the fish scale projector?" I inquired. "The what?" was the reply. Fortunately, an adequate binocular microscope served quite well, and I set to work. So far so good, I thought. Days later Harry handed me a list of a dozen lakes and reservoirs that had not been surveyed or studied recently, or probably ever. I was told to go to N.C. State and pick out three of their best wildlife students to join me on the surveys. Harry said that Dr. Fred Barkalow would help with this selection. They would be my "crew" for the formidable summer task.

F. Eugene Hester, Don Baker and Frank Richardson were selected. Little did we know what awaited us. I did what I could to locate gear we might need: a 12-foot Alumacraft boat (it looked like it hadn't been used in years), a 10-horsepower Mercury outboard (would it even start?), a few usable nets and a musty old Higgins camper that would be the crew's sleeping quarters (while I slept in nearby hotels!). Yet with all these uncertainties, I heard few grumblings. They

Duane Raver doesn't just enjoy painting fish, he likes catching them too. Former N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission photographer Jack Dermid captured this image of Duane Raver trying his luck on a mountain stream around 1958.



JACK DERMID/NCWRG

all worked out well and all went on to bigger and better careers—in spite of their "first boss."

The following spring, construction of farm ponds were happening statewide. Almost each one came with various fish management problems. Although the U.S. Soil Conservation Service took care of the construction of these ponds, it was the Commission's responsibility to assist with pond management.

We soon hired a couple of biologists and eventually went to the present system of nine wildlife districts, each with its own personnel. We were blessed with a bunch of good biologists in those early Fish Division days. Some had to handle everything from temperamental trout problems to farm ponds to experimental reservoir trials as they came along.

Some projects required new thinking and procedures. We knew of the Weldon fish hatchery that had been used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for years to produce striped bass fry. The Roanoke River at the hatchery's doorstep had spawning runs of

"rockfish" as the sea-run striped bass were known locally.

It was late winter, and the Roanoke would soon be filled with spawning sea-run stripers. Time to check out Weldon hatchery. I met John Asbill of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the hatchery one early spring day to look over the aging wooden structure. We opened the creaking door and I noticed that the floorboards had an inch or so space between each of them.

"What is with these spaces?" I asked John. "Oh, that's to let the water out," was his reply. "What water?" I thought.

John pointed over to one wall. There were two highwater marks a couple of feet from the floor. "That one was from the spring of 1939 and the higher one from 1943," John said. To let the water out! Remember, Kerr Reservoir was being finished and yet to harness the Roanoke River's spring floods that often swamped the helpless hatchery.

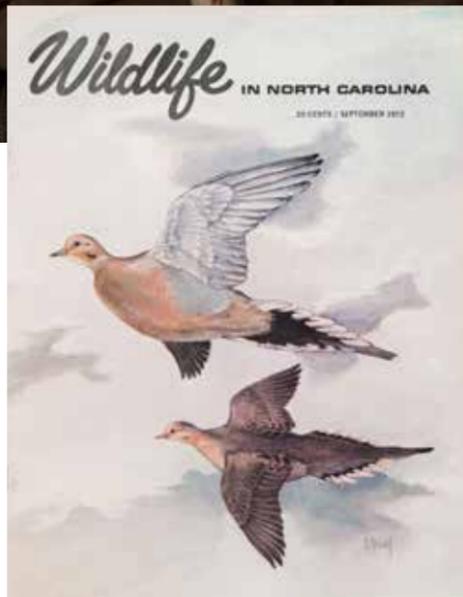
We weren't looking forward to any high-water prospects, but we fixed things up a bit and proceeded with hatchery operations.

We had a lot to learn in a hurry. We found 20 or so large, tall hatching jars and lined them up on sturdy platforms. Weldon city water was piped into a large elevated tank outside the building. Unfortunately, the float valve stuck now and then, letting the overflow cascade before we could shut it off. It woke me up several times the next month or so.

"Ripe" eggs and milt to fertilize the eggs came from local, hardy fishermen who ventured out onto the Roanoke, spotting "rockfish fights," gatherings of large female stripers, and eager much-smaller male fish in their spawning rituals.

The fishermen positioned their boats near the "fights" and used large, long-handled dip nets to capture the amorous fish. With any luck, the fishermen would bring us a 15- to 30-pound female and a couple of the much-smaller "bucks." This happened at all hours of the night at the height of the spawning season. Little sleep did we get.

A big fish yielded thousands of eggs that were extracted from the fish and fertilized. The Commission paid the successful



Duane Raver continued painting fish from his studio (top) after retiring from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission in 1979 (bottom right). This 1972 issue of *Wildlife in North Carolina* (bottom left) features one of the many covers Raver painted for the magazine.

fisherman so much per estimated number of eggs. And he still took the fresh fish home.

One dawn morning I emerged from the hatchery's tiny "bedroom" to look over the jars full of swirling eggs. I must have blinked when I saw, not glassy live eggs, but tapioca-white dead eggs. That night, Weldon's water department had added a water purification chemical to the water supply. Every egg in the row of jars, dead! Better luck from now on. And it generally was quite successful with tiny striped bass fry stocked in suitable North Carolina lakes and reservoirs.

PAINTING OUTSIDE THE LINES

In the meantime, quite early in my Fish Division career, "they" discovered that I had some wildlife art abilities. How about doing a cover painting for *Wildlife in North Carolina*? It was in the early 1950s (you may still have an ancient copy of the magazine), and I think it was a jumping bass or a walleye. This opened a bit of a door. How about another painting—maybe an article or two on fish or fishing? The door opened wider and led to a hundred or so cover paintings, assorted fish book and poster illustrations, and the obvious consideration of my switching from the Fish Division to what was then the Education Division.

The transfer was made in 1960. The Education Division staff was rather limited so we all had to wear several hats, but the then-monthly magazine became pretty much my design and layout (no computers or graphic electronics to punch). Jim Dean came aboard and then David Williams. What outstanding contributions they made to the magazine and our program. And a big relief to me.

Twenty years went by swiftly. Time to leave things in good hands and fade away?

Freelance wildlife artwork beckoned and in June 1978 I parted ways with the agency that had done so much for me. Really, I just switched jobs—again. I was, and still am, grateful for opportunities to help with artwork from time to time for the Commission.

Years before "retirement," I had watched a lady artist with the N.C. State Fair Village of Yesteryear work her magic in the old, drafty building near the new, round Holsouser building. I thought maybe I could do

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something similar someday. In the summer of 1978, Village Director Mary Cornwell brought a quick surprise. "Come on to the Village in October," she commanded. You did not argue with Miss Mary. I really hadn't prepared much art for display, but I went that first year, "demonstrated" painting odds and ends during the week-long fair. It turned into 36 years of 12-hour days at the Village.

Then, out of the blue, Chuck Manooch (Dr. Manooch, please) came to me with an offer to illustrate a fish book he was considering writing—only if I would do the 150 saltwater and freshwater fish paintings. Why not? No time limit, but I began the work very soon after we made the deal. Wayne Starnes, then with the Museum of Natural Sciences, furnished

countless preserved fish specimens and I dug out my old field sketches. Publication date was scheduled for spring of 1984. The book did so well that we did three printings. The completed illustrations have been, and still are, used in many places. I am so glad that I said yes to Chuck.

Such detailed art projects are pretty much out of my reach now. The time has come to seriously examine my brushwork. It never has completely satisfied me over the years and the brushes are now cooperating less and less. I have moved my studio out of our daughter Diane's taxidermy shop and set up a much smaller version in a room in our nearby Johnston County home.

I am fortunate to be able to work at all at 93 years old. How many fish scales and bird feathers have I painted on paper, wood, fabric and canvas since those first attempts? But as Lunette Barber, a longtime educator with the Commission, said many times in her declining years, "You can't win against Father Time and Mother Nature."

Now my hand-crafted fly-rod, a gift from a friend many years ago, stands in a safe corner of our garage wistfully waiting for one more cast and one more tugging fish. I have my family and generations of friends to thank for their encouragement over these many years. Not all of these years have been as productive as I should have made them. So just remember: Old fish biologists never die, they just smell that way. ♡

Though Duane Raver has been threatening to hang up his brushes for several years, he continues to create artwork in his home studio in Garner.