

# David Cowdry

## Wildlife painter

From an article written by David Fielding of Carmarthenshire Life August 2005

David Cowdry is quite certain what started him out on the road to becoming a wildlife painter - and please note not wildlife illustrator - no, a wildlife *painter*. It was a pair of plastic binoculars presented to him on his sixth birthday. Even at that early age he began studying wildlife - and most importantly birds.

It was a small step from there to getting a book on British birds for identification purposes. And though now he probably doesn't need the spotter skills he's still at the business of observation every chance he gets.

The day before I talked to him he had been at one of his favourite bird watching locations - Skomer Island - studying the divers - razorbills, puffins and guillemots.

Skomer has almost become a second home for him.

At one time he was a volunteer for West Wales Wildlife Trust taking on any job which would bring him closer to his passion. He got to know warden Julian Brown so well that he is now a frequent overnight guest which means he can continue his observations with those birds which are most active during the night - such as Manx shearwaters.

This time his observations at Skomer may have a different outcome than before. He had donned snorkel and armed himself with a camera with an underwater lens, the better to observe birds ducking and diving from a position swimming on the surface. Underwater photography he has essayed before but now he feels confident enough in his painting technique that he will try to recapture on canvass the experience of birds taking fish below the surface of the sea. Underwater painting no less!

It's an innovation which will come in useful for he is planning on contributing some thirty canvasses to a three-man show entitled *Upon Reflection* to be staged at Aberglasney. The exhibition will open with a private viewing on September 11th (2005) and continue for a fortnight. So far he does not have a single canvass ready but he works quickly and is confident of finishing the work in time. The other two artists are Duncan Johnson and Jacob Buckland. All three started out on the same wildlife illustration course back in the early 1990s. They are old friends. It will be interesting to compare how they have developed over the intervening years.

He's brimming with confidence but he's not one to take anything for granted and he is fully aware that he is by no means the finished article.

"I'm developing all the time - becoming more consistent. Five years ago, for every picture I got in the gallery there'd be four or five which didn't make it. Most of my work still ends up in the dustbin or is painted over. I'm pretty harsh on myself."

He has ended up in West Wales because of family holidays spent in Tregaron - about as far as you could get from his birthplace in Kent.

"I just loved the wealth of wildlife. It was unbelievable."

When he was eighteen came a series of incidents which changed his life. Four close friends died during the course of that one year. At the time he was working on a retail management course for British Home Stores - and hating it. For no apparent reason he bought a sketch book and started 'drawing' or more precisely 'doodling' as he calls it now. And he packed in the course. Life was demonstrably too short. He would do something he wanted to do. Something he felt passionate about.

During a year on a foundation course at Croydon, he saw an ad for a HND in Wildlife Illustration at Carmarthen College of Technology and Art and the memory of Tregaron came flooding back.

After satisfying himself at interview that the course title would not prevent him from concentrating on wildlife *painting* he started at Gelli Aur with some forty other hopeful artists.

It's not a course or a course of action he has regretted for a moment. He is like many artists a painter who needs to paint. A move of house has meant five weeks without hand to brush.

"It's doing my head in. I've got bad withdrawal symptoms. I'm bursting to paint."

Painting is recapturing the moment, but not necessarily the *reality* of the moment. Thus: "When birds dive from the surface they leave a fantastic stream of silver bubbles. If I painted them as I saw them they would lose the silveriness. So I will make the background darker so the bubbles will look lighter."

And then his finale David makes the biggest confession of all. It's not the painting of wildlife which is his main concern. In fact like most painters what he's really interested in are two things: light and atmosphere. The wildlife is the tool which allows him to concentrate on getting those crucial ingredients right.