

ROBERT ARTHUR • LEGENDARY SANTA • LEWIS GINTER

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# NORTH OF THE JAMES®

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## THE BIRDS

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# THE BIRDS

WITH DALE VANDERHEYDEN

## ARMED WITH PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE, AND A NIKON, THIS WOMAN

has given the cyber world, through thousands of photographs chronicling the lives of the inhabitants of the cities of the air, an ongoing record of the majesty and the diversity of the avian kingdom. She has also learned firsthand how our continued degradation of the environment through the use of fossil fuels and the haphazard destruction of ecosystems is pushing more and more animal species to the rim of extinction.

Back in college, Dale Vanderheyden studied sculpture, and dated a fellow VCU student named Bill Pahnelas, who wrote for The Commonwealth Times, Throttle magazine, and later the Richmond Newspapers. After graduation, the two went their separate ways, Dale moving up to the DC area.

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administrative law judge at EPA, and he thought it'd be a good idea if I got a job with the federal government, which seemed not so cool when you went to art school to do something like that,” Dale tells me.

But Dale took her father's advice and went to work for the Department of Commerce. Then for about ten years she worked in public relations for the Hirshhorn Museum. “I loved it there,” she says. “Everyone was an art historian or an artist. It was a nonstop party, just like art school.” After that she went to work as a public affairs specialist for the Bureau of the Public Debt, an arm of the Treasury Department.

Dale took early retirement, lived in Baltimore for a while, and then returned to Falls Church where she had grown up to help take care of her father, whose health had declined. “I brought my father back home to the house I grew up in,” she says. “He wanted to die in his own home.” He has since passed.

Then, about four years ago, she reconnected with her college sweetheart, Bill Pahnelas, who was instrumental in helping her discover her next artistic passion. Bill sits in a chair opposite me in Dale's studio which is located in the house the couple shares.

“Bill had a lot to do with this,” Dale says. “He pretty much taught me everything. He bought me my first camera, a Nikon D-3500. It was a Christmas gift.”

In short order, what for another might have been just a hobby became a driving obsession for Dale. She began almost immediately capturing birds through the lens of a camera, committing them to digital memory which she freely shared online.

“It's compulsive, it's addictive,” she says. “I am out there every day, sometimes twice a day. You just want to keep getting a better shot.”

But these are no ordinary shots of wildlife. These

portraits possess an almost scientific precision coupled with an aesthetic in composition that rivals Audubon. You can make out every detail of the barbs and rachis in every feather, and the colors scooped directly out of nature astonish the eye. It's not just the bird though, much of it has to do with where and what position the bird was in, and birds are rapid in their movements so it takes real skill and perseverance to get just the right shot.

“There are four things that have to work together,” says Dale. “There is the environment, there is the bird, and there are the perches and you want a really good perch.” After a short pause, she adds, “And of course light is another really big factor. It's not like I just go out and shoot any old thing. I need all of these things working together.”

For this last reason, Dale is often up before the crack of dawn. “Lighting is always best early in the morning,” she says. “By nine the light gets too harsh. During the summer I'm at a location by six am.”

Three sites near Richmond are among Dale's favorites. “Bryan Park and Pony Pasture,” she says. “And I go out to Powhatan State Park a lot in the spring and summer. I love it there. I go almost every day. It's good for the tanagers and the buntings and the warblers.”

She shoots a fair amount at Pony Pasture, particularly this time of year when all the leaves are down. But more often than not, you'll find Dale in the Northside. “I really like Bryan Park,” she says. “It has a lot of different habitats and environments. It's got the water, it's got all that forest, it's even got a meadow. Bryan Park's got a lot going for it. And it's got the best owls.”

Human beings have an ineluctable tendency to disrupt the natural order. How many times have you heard a jet-ski ripping through the serenity of a spartina-ringed estuary? Or a gxxxamned leaf blower scattering the habitat of a pile of fallen leaves?



by CHARLES MCGUIGAN



Two years ago on one of her daily outings, Dale discovered a truly rare site—the nest of a great horned owl high atop a tree in Bryan Park. She kept its location a secret, but just this past summer someone else posted its location on eBirds. And that was the beginning of the end. What followed was disgraceful. People from all over thronged around the tree for weeks on end, while the parents were trying to get their babies ready for the world. When Bill saw a photograph of the crowds he said “That looks like a \*xx\*ing rock concert.”

“It was appalling,” Dale remembers. “It just broke my heart. People came and camped out for hours. People were coming from Williamsburg, from Fredericksburg. It was a nightmare, and I know it stressed those parents. I’m afraid they’re going to reject that nest this year.”

She considers the entire art of bird photography. “It’s not as authentic to just be told where the nest is, and then set up your tripod for three hours,” she says. “You’re supposed to go out and find it yourself, alone, and photograph it.”

The pair sometimes travels far afield to seek out a particular kind of bird. They once headed down to a pine savanna in southeast Virginia. Their quarry was an endangered species.

“Bill and I went to a wildlife refuge,” says Dale. “We went to look for the red cockaded woodpecker. On that refuge they thin out the pines by burning them to create a habitat for those birds which are going extinct. So stuff like that is really interesting to me because we’re losing birds fast.”

Dale mentions the causes of this environmental cataclysm, all of which are perpetrated by the most hideous version of greed imaginable, one that values money over life, human and otherwise, a sickness of the soul, an absence of love and conscience, evil incarnate. To sate their hunger for profits, they would destroy our entire planet. “Climate change, loss of habitat,” she says. “All of this horrible development. I

don’t want to depress you too much, but everywhere I go I see a drop.”

In the four short years since Dale started this project she has witnessed a rapid decline in bird populations. “This is kind of sad, but two years ago there were so many birds in the meadow at Bryan Park that I worked there almost every day,” she says. “Last year, hardly anything. That’s why I had to start going to Powhatan every day.”

When COVID hit a couple years ago, Dale found herself in the field even more frequently than before. “That’s when I started posting a lot online,” she says. “I wanted to do something uplifting for people at home. Some people thank me for the pictures. A lot of people can’t get out and see the stuff I see.”

Since the time Dale first began photographing birds she has shot hundreds of thousands of frames. “I wore out a Nikon D 500 in a year,” she says. “That was two hundred thousand frames on that one camera and I was using another camera, too.”

On more than one occasion people have encouraged Dale to produce a calendar or a coffee table book with her work, but she has no immediate plans to do so.

“What I’m interested in is the process,” she says. “And I love looking for birds, and I love the hunt, which is a big part of it. I love looking for these things, getting the pictures, coming home and editing. I’m not into having anything permanent.”

There’s more to it than that though. “The other reason I do it is this: We’re losing these birds at an alarming rate,” says Dale Vanderheyden. “I want to see every single one I can. If you’ve got something you love, and it may go away next year, you’re going to work your ass off to make sure you can see them when they’re gone.” 

You can view Dale’s work on Facebook or Instagram, and if you’re interested in purchasing a print visit [fine-artamerica.com/profiles/dale-vanderheyden/shop](https://fine-artamerica.com/profiles/dale-vanderheyden/shop)

*Above left:*  
Dale Vanderheyden shooting in the wild

*Above right:*  
Great Horned Owl, mother and child, Bryan Park

*Below:*  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Tuckahoe Gardens

*Preceding page:*  
Ruby-throated hummingbird, Tuckahoe Gardens

*On the cover:*  
Great Blue Heron, University of Richmond





*Above:  
Dale Vanderheyden on the lookout*

*Top right:  
Male Goldfinch, Tuckahoe Gardens*

*Below right (left to right):  
Blue Grosbeak, Bryan Park*

*Evening Grosbeak, Maidens Landing*

*Red-headed Woodpecker,  
Tuckahoe Gardens*

