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THE PREMIER MAGAZINE OF THE WEST

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JOHN BANOVICH

THE MONTANA-BORN ARTIST, CONSERVATIONIST,
AND STORYTELLER PAINTS TO PRESERVE WILD ANIMALS
AND THE WILD PLACES THEY INHABIT.



By David Cabela

IFIRST MET JOHN BANOVICH A FEW years ago when he asked me to help him write the text for *Beast: The Collected Works of John Banovich*, the award-winning book of his megafauna paintings. It quickly became apparent that he has a passion for wildlife—a passion that he can easily articulate both in words and on canvas.

At that time, the Montana-born artist was intensely focused on Africa's big game. One of those rare adventurers who are willing to travel to distant mountains to find the hidden stories few people ever encounter, Banovich took 38 separate safaris on the continent to study his subjects. The results of his efforts are truly spectacular.

Banovich captures with paint the thrill of an up-close elephant encounter. He relives the adventure of a tiger slipping through the jungle shadows. He shares the intimacy of a lioness watching over her cubs. He surprises with a splash of pink as a zebra trots into a watering hole, sending flamingos into flight. These are the dramatic hidden stories Banovich was born to tell.

"Among today's genre of wildlife artists, John Banovich is regarded as one of the best," says Thomas Jones, former executive director of the Museum of the Southwest in Midland, Texas. "Following in the tradition of the late 19th- and early 20th-century conservationist and wildlife artist Carl Rungius, Banovich was similarly raised

as a sportsman and wildlife enthusiast. Like Rungius, his experiences of hunting and exploration gave him direct access to wildlife and an intimate understanding of animal anatomy, which found full expression in his art. To view a painting by John Banovich is to view the rich history of animals in art, thoroughly assimilated and reapplied through his personal lens."

Recently, Banovich has turned his artistic lens on a larger-than-life subject closer to home—the North American bison.

"The Yellowstone ecosystem and Ted Turner's Flying D Ranch are two of the few places you can still find big herds of pure-strain North American bison," the artist says. "I found places on Ted Turner's ranch and positioned myself where bison would come down through the deep snow—sometimes right at me. Bison are designed to plow through snow like no other animal. They can survive in almost any environment, but the way they move in the deep snow fascinates me."

Spending time with the animals allowed Banovich to study their anatomy and behavior in the wild. He photographed them, drew raw sketches, and accumulated hours of direct observation.

"I cherish going out and learning about the subject the way it is in its own environment, and then telling the stories of these animals," says Banovich, who has



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even been known to dive into hippo-laden waters for a chance to swim beside elephants. “One of the best things about being an animal artist is to bring these places and stories to the audience as best as I possibly can. I love to share the connection we have with nature. I have literally given my life to it.”

His megafauna works often draw emotional responses. When Mary Hart, the former host of *Entertainment Tonight* and a member of the exclusive Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana, first saw the painting he did for the club, *Cold Air—Deep Powder*, she was deeply moved. “The painting sets the tone for the whole club perfectly, better than we could have even imagined,” she says. “It brought tears to my eyes.”

One of the reasons his works are so moving is that the artist himself shares a close emotional connection to his subjects.

“I became totally engaged with the bison and how they thrive and survive in the often harsh Western environment,”

Banovich says. “They are an iconic species, a symbol of the West—of freedom. They tell the story of the West like no other animal. First, they provided so much for the Native Americans and were at the center of the Plains peoples’ lives. And then these awesome creatures were used as a tool by the U.S. government to exterminate those same people by exterminating the bison itself. Later, when on the brink of extinction, they became one of the greatest wildlife restoration efforts in North America. From a few animals their numbers have climbed back to nearly 500,000.”

His conservation organization, Banovich Wildscapes Foundation, focuses on preserving ecosystems in targeted regions. “It is actually the ecosystems that need saving,” Banovich says. “People sometimes forget that wildlife does not need to be saved. If we can create and preserve the right environments, species will save themselves.”

Ecosystems are not just important for species preservation, the artist notes, but also spiritual preservation. “Wildscapes are essentially landscapes filled with wild animals



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For an up close and personal look at John Banovich's work—and to meet the artist himself—be sure to visit his booth at this year's Dallas Safari Club Convention, held January 15–18. Banovich has been exhibiting at the DSC show for more than 10 years, and it is often here that potential clients have a firsthand opportunity to see his newest collection of original artwork, which will then be auctioned off during his annual for-sale-by-draw program in Las Vegas.

The DSC event, held in downtown Dallas at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center, draws approximately 46,000 outdoor enthusiasts to peruse the world's finest outfitters, gun makers, taxidermists, and wildlife artists. Each year many exhibitors like Banovich donate items and services that raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to benefit conservation programs around the world.

Through his partnership with DSC, Banovich hopes to create bridges of common ground between hunters and non-hunters who want to conserve the wild places he stunningly depicts for future generations. —D.C.

For more information, visit www.biggame.org.

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that surround us every day to lift our minds and replenish our spirits," Banovich says. "They bring us back to our roots and wash away all the noise. They are more valuable than any of us realize."

By capturing the moments that almost always occur without an audience and too often are lost in the echoes of the West's vastness—like when a lone bison bull is run down by a pack of wolves or a herd of pronghorn races across the plains for the sheer thrill of running—Banovich reconnects us to the places and creatures too many of us have forgotten exist. And he reminds us that they can continue to exist if we work together to preserve them.

"John Banovich brings his unique, firsthand interpretation of wildlife to each canvas he completes," says Stuart Johnson, the founder of Settlers West Galleries and a partner in the Coeur d'Alene Art Auction. "Having a sincere dedication to preserving those fragile islands of wilderness, he awakens with his brush an appreciation of what wildlife art is truly all about."

What subject will Banovich turn his brush on next? "There are so many stories out there that I want to tell," he says. "Maybe the jaguar's comeback into U.S. habitat, maybe grizzly bears, and definitely more 'big things with big teeth' in my beloved Africa. I love to paint drama, and the megafauna that still roams in the uninhabitable shadows gives me so much opportunity to do that. At the end of the day, I am simply a storyteller."

For more information on John Banovich and the Banovich Wildscapes Foundation, visit www.johnbanovich.com.