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America's Artists: Insight Into Life as a Natural Science Illustrator

Natural science illustrator, Marianne D. Wallace, shares her experiences as a freelance illustrator and author of children's books

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If you have young children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or cousins, you may already be aware of the natural history books written by natural science educator, illustrator, and author, Marianne D. Wallace. Highlighting common plants and animals found throughout the year in different habitats across the United States, Marianne's books encourage children to become more aware of nature and all of its unique wonders.



Marianne in her studio.

Even if you aren't around little ones regularly, glance over at your bookshelf. Do you see a copy of the book, *Flowering Plants of the Santa Monica Mountains* by Nancy Dale? If you do, then you have an example of the kind of illustration work Marianne has been doing for the past 30 years.

Children's books are one of Marianne's passions and when BAGSC News had the good fortune to speak with her, a lot of time was spent talking about children's books, freelancing, and teaching.

America's Landscape

Marianne's illustrations have appeared in over 20 books and publications. She has served as both author and illustrator on three books with more books to be released later this year and in early 2005. While Marianne has worked as an illustrator for other authors, she prefers to choose her own subject matter. When she writes and illustrates her own books, she has this freedom. To date, Marianne has taught thousands of elementary school-aged children about America's deserts, mountains, prairies, and grasslands in three separate books.

Each of Marianne's books follow the same basic format. First, there is an introduction describing the characteristics of the featured habitat. This is followed by a map of where these habitats occur and then by descriptions of the individual plants and animals which live in these areas. Each book highlights six examples of the featured habitat that can be found across the U.S. The plants and animals of each of these areas are featured on their own own two-page spread in which Marianne goes to great care to pair up plants and animals accurately.

She wants to make sure that kids' first exposure to natural history is accurate. In fact, Marianne spends a lot of time researching the habitats, plants, and animals which she writes about.

Marianne travels quite a bit and visits many visitor's centers along the way. It was during these visits that she noticed that there were not a lot of natural history books for children on the market. So she decided to apply her experience and skills as a natural science educator and elementary school teacher to fill this niche. Marianne lists the visitor's centers she has traveled to in the back of her books. If unable to travel to a particular visitor's center, she researches it thoroughly before placing its information in her books. She speaks with staff members over the phone, visits centers' websites, and checks to see if they are referenced by other resources. Marianne travels a lot with her husband. She says that she and her husband, a botanist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, work in the field very well together. They both don't mind eating on-the-go and they both don't care where they sleep. Marianne takes her digital camera with her everywhere she goes and she says that her camera has proven to be the best addition to her field bag.

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Marianne is so intent on visiting the areas she writes about, that advances from book publishers have been known to be spent on costs associated with travel and research. Marianne feels that field work is vital for the accuracy of the text, art, and resources found in her books. She says that she wants to make the books interesting to children because she recognizes that kids are good at getting their parents involved in a variety of things, including natural history.

The illustrations in Marianne's natural history books are created using pen & ink and gouache. All of her illustrations begin as loose pencil sketches which are drawn with a soft #2 pencil (she doesn't see any reason to purchase expensive drawing pencils). Marianne's pencil sketches eventually become pen & ink line drawings that are then colored with gouache. She uses Strathmore Bristol Plate 500 Series paper for her pen & ink work. The color illustrations in all of her field guide books are done on large sheets of Fabriano Uno watercolor paper (HP). The line drawings in Marianne's children's books are done carefully and serve as simple representative illustrations of each of the featured plants and animals. These line drawings are different from the line drawings Marianne creates for adult field guides.

For example, Marianne's original pen & ink illustrations of plant and animals living in California's chaparral community, which will be featured in an upcoming book, are far from simple. Accurate, beautiful, and informative, Marianne's illustrations will no doubt contribute greatly to this book to be published by UC Press next year.

Freelancing

An illustrator for 30 years, Marianne is quick to point out that she has had to keep a "traditional" job on the side to make ends meet. She also points out that she wouldn't trade the lean years for anything, however. It was during this time that she learned how to improve her skills as an illustrator.

Marianne's art career began in the 1970's at CSU Northridge. It was at this time that this self-taught illustrator (she has only taken one art class in her entire life), landed her first professional assignment - drawing a Venezuelan frog in two different postures for an animal behavior professor. She was paid \$5 for each pose. When her illustrations were published in a scientific journal, she was suddenly a published illustrator who had earned \$10 as a professional.

Marianne honed her skills by studying line art in several different publications. She would trace photographs of animals & plants and study line art & other illustrations to learn how to illustrate hairs, fur, and other plant and animal textures. She also learned how to use a reducing lens to view her pen & ink work and learned how to think through pen size and paper type while operating the printing press at the L.A. County Arboretum in the 1970's. Hired as a Tour Guide/Field Leader, one of Marianne's responsibilities was to operate the printing press and to help publish brochures for the Arboretum. Since she also drew illustrations for the Arboretum's brochures, she was able to learn about preparing illustrations for publication firsthand.

Since then, Marianne has created illustrations for biologists, other scientists, and public agencies like Vector Control. Marianne considers her biology background to be her biggest asset. In instances where she competed against another illustrator, and where the quality of the artwork was the same, her biology background would get her the job because the hiring biologist was more comfortable communicating with her because she was already familiar with the subject matter. Unfortunately, Marianne eventually stopped illustrating for biologists because she could no longer afford to keep doing so. She found that she was spending more on art supplies and on research-related costs than she was earning.

Marianne dabbled in retail early in her career. She created sets of cards featuring graphite illustrations of different animals and line art of plants and animals on note cards and sheets of notepaper. This was a very busy time for her. The most valuable thing she learned during this time was how to promote her products. Up until this time, Marianne never liked to pitch her own artwork - it made her feel too self-conscious.

Making a product separated her from her own art. She could then focus on pitching her product and not the artwork. Eventually, though, the business side of running her retail business took over and she was left with little time to create. She left the world of retail and focused her attention on other projects.

With 30 years under her belt and a well-established portfolio, Marianne feels that she has enough experience to turn what she does into a solid full-time business. She is currently looking for someone to represent her and to free her from tasks such as contract negotiation and spending large amounts of time chasing down her next job. Marianne is going to turn her attention to writing. At this stage in her career, she is willing to let go of the art part of a book project and focus on being an author. However, she still plans on illustrating her own children's book, especially if the book emphasizes natural science. The accuracy of the illustrations for such a book are of great importance to her and she would rather draw the illustrations herself.

Teaching Others

With all of this going on, Marianne still teaches her nature drawing class from time-to-time. Currently, Marianne teaches *Nature Drawing* at science teacher conferences, library conferences, and at children's book writers' conferences.

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She has been teaching educators, librarians, and authors for over six years. As a natural science educator and former science teacher of elementary school children, she knows that when children learn how to draw, they learn how to see. She wanted to create a class in which she could teach teachers how to draw natural science subjects with the intent of enhancing the classroom experience. So she created her nature drawing class in order to provide teachers with another tool they could use in the classroom - art. With a ream of printer paper, #2 pencils, Staedler-Mars white erasers, black 0.2 mm Uni-ball pens, and see-thru rulers, Marianne teaches educators how to measure and draw plant parts so that they can teach these skills to their students. Prior to teaching at national conferences, Marianne taught botanical illustration classes at the L.A. County Arboretum & Botanic Garden in the 1970's. She has also taught weekend wildflower classes at the Santa Monica National Recreation Area, as well as illustration classes for kids at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a class for adults at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

Marianne feels privileged to have the ability to draw and loves that she can teach children through her books. She says that it is the greatest thing in the world when someone says that they like your art and admits that "it's a kick to walk into a bookstore and see your name."

Marianne's Tips for Aspiring Illustrators

- Get published. Work for free if you have to do so.
- Enter juried shows. It never hurts to say that you were a finalist in this or that show.
- Don't sell yourself short. There is always someone else out there who will be able to promote themselves better.
- Network. The biggest struggle a freelancer faces is working alone and not interacting with others.
- Identify yourself. Keep reminding your target audience that you exist. This task alone is a lot of work. It takes up to a year to build up a client base.
- It will take a while to get comfortable with telling clients how much a project will cost. I have learned that the worse they can say is, No.
- Not only does it take a long time to get comfortable with asking for money, it also takes a long time to stop being altruistic.
- After you sell an illustration, it doesn't belong to you anymore. Learn not to get terribly upset if your work isn't reproduced the way you intended it to be. I have found that by separating myself from my work this way, that it makes looking for new jobs much easier.

Books Written & Illustrated by Marianne D. Wallace (www.mdwallace.com)

America's Desert: Guide to Plants and Animals (1996). Fulcrum Publishing,
America's Mountains: Guide to Plants and Animals (1999). Fulcrum Publishing,
America's Prairies and Grasslands: Guide to Plants and Animals (2001)
America's Wetlands: Guide to Plants and Animals (Due Fall 2004)
America's Seashores: Guide to Plants and Animals (Due Spring 2005)

A Sampling of Books Illustrated by Marianne D. Wallace

Dale, Nancy. 2000. *Flowering Plants of the Santa Monica Mountains*. L.A./Santa Monica Chapter & CNPS Press. ISBN: 0-943640-40-9

Quinn, Ronald and Sterling Keeley. *Introduction to California Chaparral*. (Proposed title, due to be published in 2005)