



BACKGROUNDER FOR PRESS RELEASE (March 6, 2006)

First WNAG Flag Expedition into the jungles of Panama a raging success.

About the Worldwide Nature Artists Group (WNAG)

The Worldwide Nature Artists Group is an exclusive, international, non-profit society of world-class nature artists dedicated to the celebration and preservation of the natural world. With a total membership of nearly 500 members, the WNAG is internationally recognized as one of the largest and most prestigious organizations in the nature art community. The Group's mission is to build a community of world-class artists who share a common interest in nature art and nature conservancy. Invited members derive exclusive opportunities to showcase and sell their artwork to a global audience, while promoting the sustainability and conservation of the natural world through art, education and special initiatives. Founded in 1997 by Jeffrey Whiting—renowned Canadian artist, author and biologist—the Group's membership reads like a "Who's Who" of nature art, and includes John Banovich, Robert Bateman, Glen Loates, Rosetta, Gamini Ratnavira and David Shepherd, to name a few. For more information, please visit www.natureartists.com.

About the WNAG Flag Expeditions Program

The WNAG Flag Expeditions Program was launched in association with the recently incorporated non-profit Worldwide Nature Artists Group Foundation (WNAG Foundation). The WNAG Foundation was created in support of the Group to focus on fundraising and some planned major initiatives, one of which includes the new Flag Expeditions Program.

The objective of the program is to make possible the field study and artistic rendering of endangered species or habitats deserving of greater public attention. Strong emphasis will be placed on the study of unique and threatened habitats and rare or endangered species in remote parts of the world. WNAG Signature Members can apply to the Program for financial support and the privilege to carry the WNAG flag. WNAG's intention is not to subsidize members' regular field trips, but rather to help make possible some ambitious trips off the beaten path that draw attention to a worthy environmental issue.

Funding for the program is provided through donor support of the Foundation, and not through membership dues. The Foundation is grateful for the anonymous financial support received to date, which helped launch the inaugural Flag Expeditions Program.

Upon return from the expedition, participating artists will be required to submit to the Foundation, a written journal and sketchbook of their journey, photos with the WNAG flag in situ, and video footage when possible. Apart from the funding, which the Foundation provides for each expedition, artists will also be given prominence on the WNAG Web site as well as at other venues, where details of the artists' expeditions and findings will be highlighted.

To date, funding has been secured for at least two Fellowships for 2005 of up to US \$5000 each. Interested members may download an application information package from the WNAG Flag Expeditions Program information page at www.natureartists.com/flagprogram.

About David Kitler

Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, David Kitler's appreciation of nature began in his youth as he explored the Canadian outdoors. Later he embarked on longer reference gathering trips and taught himself to paint, experimenting with a variety of media and techniques. Because of his love of wildlife, Kitler had initially geared his education towards becoming a veterinarian, believing that art could only be treated as a hobby. However, due to tragic events involving his family, he had to find ways to support himself and secure his future. So he gave up his dream of attending university, and started working at a local factory.

Soon, however, Kitler's sketches and paintings, which he continued to work on whenever he had a free moment, began to garner attention, opening a door to a world he never knew existed. It was then that he decided to pursue a degree in art. Fending for himself, he overcame incredible odds and eventually graduated with honours from the Ontario College of Art. His paintings have since gained recognition, having received a number of "Best of Show" and Excellence awards, and are part of collections worldwide. His detailed portrayal of birds of prey also earned him a feature article in *Wildlife Art* magazine (Jan-Feb 2006) and *American Falconry* magazine (Spring 2004). Besides being a member of the WNAG from its very early days, Kitler is a member of the Society of Animal Artists, and his work has been included in some of North America's most prestigious exhibitions and art shows.

His expedition into the jungles of Panama, adds a unique dimension to conservation efforts: it will lead to the creation of images (i.e. a visual record) that will make Harpy Eagles, and the problems they face, more accessible to a larger number and wider variety of individuals, than could be accomplished by any scientific paper. It is expected to be the most extensive artistic study of the Harpy Eagle ever attempted, and will complement the scientific projects currently underway. The paintings created as a result of this expedition will (a) directly support current conservation projects by providing financial backing, raised through the sale of artwork, and (b) be a vehicle to increase public awareness and education about the birds, their habits and habitat.

For more information about David Kitler, please visit www.natureartists.com/david_kitler.asp.

Why Harpy Eagles?

In this inaugural expedition (WNAG Flag Expedition #1), Kitler travelled to Panama to observe, study, and gather reference material for the subsequent portrayal of the Harpy Eagle and its habitat. The resulting artwork, as well as the publicity the Expedition will generate, will be used to support conservation efforts currently underway to restore the Harpy Eagle to its historical ranges, while helping to educate the public on the key role this species plays in the maintenance of a healthy ecosystem.

This amazing raptor once ranged from Mexico to Argentina. Unfortunately, the Harpy Eagle has disappeared almost entirely from these areas, and has become one of the most critically endangered species, its numbers declining sharply. The most powerful bird of prey in the world (around 3 feet tall, with a 7-foot wingspan), the Harpy Eagle has few, if any, natural predators. Only humans are a threat to this species, mainly through the practice of killing the birds for food and/or feathers, and destroying the birds' habitat through development, logging and agriculture. Deforestation, Panama's worst environmental problem, has impacted heavily on the survival of the Harpy Eagle.

Conservation of the Harpy Eagle in Panama received a helping hand when the Harpy Eagle became the country's National Bird in 2002. This status has translated into greater public awareness, mingled with national pride at being the home of such a majestic bird. It has also provided the legal clout necessary for the enforcement of anti-poaching laws. Panama has the largest concentration of Harpy Eagles in all of Central America, and is the home of the Neotropical Raptor Center, a facility funded and managed by The Peregrine Fund for the captive breeding of Harpy Eagles for subsequent release in the wild. The Center utilizes the same species restoration techniques that were used to re-establish Peregrine Falcon populations, and to date almost 30 captive-bred Harpy Eagles have been released in Panama and Belize. If everything continues to go well, some of these Harpy Eagles should start reproducing by 2007.

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The presence of Harpy Eagles is said to indicate the health of the forest's ecosystem, as top predators are among the first to disappear when pristine habitat is altered. Where the Harpy Eagle thrives, the tropical forest thrives as well. Protecting the Harpy Eagle also protects large areas of rainforest – along with everything that lives in them. Rainforests cover only 5-6% of the earth's landmass, yet they contain 70-90% of all species. Supporting the conservation of Harpy Eagles and their habitat is akin to supporting biodiversity and a healthy ecosystem.

For More Information

Worldwide Nature Artists Group: www.natureartists.com
WNAG Flag Expeditions Program: www.natureartists.com/flagprogram
David N. Kitler – Nature Artist: www.natureartists.com/david_kitler.asp

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