

The Birds of Vadim Gorbatov

BY STEPHEN J. BODIO

A stunning portfolio of paintings by Russia's premier wildlife artist

In the United States, at least until recently, wildlife painters got little respect. The few exceptions—an Audubon here, a Rungius or Fuertes there—stood out starkly. Exactly why this was so is hard to understand; in Europe and England naturalist-artists have always had a place.

The same has also been true in Russia, which even under the Soviet system was a nation of nature lovers. In Russia,



perhaps the best-known “animalier” is Moscow’s Vadim Gorbatov. He appears everywhere—in calendars, magazines (especially in *Hunting and Nature*, the oldest continuously published outdoor magazine in the world), books, and galleries.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he has begun to get more exposure in the West. Part of his new visibility results from his participation in the Artists for Nature Foundation. Based in the Netherlands, this organization brings together well-known artists in every medium from all over the world to what its founder, Ysbrand Brouwers,



Gorbatov is especially drawn to the goshawk, a native of his beloved northern forests. Some of the finest examples of the goshawk in art were achieved by anonymous painters in 17th-century Japan, but Gorbatov has matched or even exceeded them. Look at his adult goshawk swooping into a group of feeding Black Grouse (above) or his immature goshawk missing a Mallard (at left).



Gorbatov's evocative portrait of an adult Peregrine Falcon at rest captures the silent grandeur of the arctic. Behind the falcon, vast herds of caribou migrate across the frozen tundra.

calls "endangered locations," so that their artwork can focus attention on the need for conservation. Gorbatov has been working with the organization since its beginning in 1999 and has expanded his palette to include wildlife from Alaska, the Pyrenees, India, and elsewhere. But his favorite subjects—birds of prey, large predators, and the fauna of northern Russia, the taiga and the tundra—remain his most evocative.

Vadim Gorbatov was born in 1940. Like most naturalists, he started young. "I began to draw very early, when I was four years old. It was wartime, and, like all children of that time, I drew pictures of war. At the same time, I started to draw animals. One time in kindergarten, prior to the New Year's Day holiday, while children were sleeping, a room for games was decorated with stuffed birds and mammals, dry tree branches, leaves, and cotton. When I entered the room, I was stunned. This picture impressed me so profoundly that I remember it today, sixty years later."

He learned from books as well. "Books that influenced my childhood were *Animal Heroes*

by Ernest Thompson Seton, Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, and Vladimir Arseniev's *Dersu the Hunter*," he said. Models for his early drawing included drawings and paintings by German artist William Kuhnert: "I was fascinated and endlessly redrew these illustrations and modified them in my own way. I also liked to make small sculptures of animals out of clay and cut them out of chalk."

In rural Russia after the war, life was still simple. "Another source of my interest in animals was the fact that I spent my childhood in a village where I could interact with them, and with the beautiful, still rich and unpolluted natural environment of central Russia," he said. "Postwar times were difficult. Therefore, our family as well as our neighbors had chickens, ducks, goats, and pigs. We had dogs and cats. There was a herd of cows, and a stable of horses in the village. All these were themes for my drawings."

"When other kids were playing soccer or flirting with girls, I wandered in the woods, fields, and swamps. I had half a binocular, and I knew all the nests of the birds and dens of the mammals in our forest."

"The impressions of my childhood and the

interest in animals that emerged during that time were probably very strong. After I had been involved with new, fresh ideas of 'industrial esthetics' and industrial design, graduated from the Academy, and defended my dissertation, I returned to what was dear to me during my childhood, and resumed drawing animals."

I asked him if his parents had any interest in nature or animals. "I don't think they had any particular interest in nature, but they supported my passions and obtained books about animals for me. Most importantly, they did not mind the presence of feathered and furred creatures and other pets in the house. I kept lizards, frogs, salamanders, injured birds, squirrels, and ferrets. I had birds of prey, such as kestrels, buzzards, and sparrowhawks."

Raptors and falconry are among Gorbatov's favorite subjects. He is especially drawn to the goshawk, native of his beloved northern forests, and the Golden Eagle used in falconry by the Kazakh nomads. The fierce goshawk, used as the "kitchen hawk" for nomad and peasant alike because it will catch more edible game than the more specialized and impractical "noble" falcon, is a totemic bird in Gorbatov's art. The masters of the goshawk in art were the anonymous painters of the Tokugawa shogunate in 17th-century Japan, who worked with ink on silk, but Gorbatov has matched or even exceeded them. For perfect examples, look at his wild goshawk swooping into a group of strutting Black Grouse, or his immature hawk missing a duck (a painting almost Asian in its delicacy).

For a different kind of portrait—one of ferocity in repose—look at his old Kazakh resting with his trained "Berkut" or Golden Eagle. And notice the contrast of its rich desert colors with the chill grays and dark greens of his Russian paintings.

He remains intrigued by falconry to this day. "Hunting with birds of prey has a special place in my mind. I am fascinated with this kind of hunting; it is simply a part of nature's process . . . profit and trophy hunting have no place in it. In falconry, everything is in the process, not in the result."

Gorbatov does not hunt, but he respects ecologically sound hunting. Hunting in Russia remains respectable. "I was not a hunter when I was a child, but I made bows and slingshots like other boys. Later, during my youth, I hunted Hazel Hens with a gun. I have a positive attitude toward hunters and do not consider them enemies of nature. The true hunters among my friends with whom I travel

to hunt (I do not take a gun, only binoculars and a notebook) are nature lovers who care about the preservation of wild nature. These hunters are excellent pathfinders, knowledgeable in biology and animal behavior. To them, hunting is primarily an interaction with nature and a reason to get away from the big cities. Among Russian artists whose work I value, among writers and actors, there are many true and passionate hunters."

Gorbatov has traveled and studied widely (one of the consistent features of all his art is attention to historical and cultural detail), first in the old Soviet Union—to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—and later to India, Alaska, and South America. Of these travels, he speaks warmly: "To the artist-animalist, it is absolutely necessary to work in wild nature and visit the wild places where the animals that you draw live."

Recently he has become fascinated with Karelia, the boggy, forested, subarctic region on the borders of Russia and Finland. Any North American can see similarities between this region and Minnesota and parts of Canada. A few of its creatures, such as the Capercaillie, the world's largest grouse, are unfamiliar, but both ecosystems share ducks, corvids, cranes, grouse, moose, shorebirds, and weasels, either identical or similar species. Gorbatov plans to complete a series of books on nature there.

The Karelian paintings have a damp chill to them that makes me nostalgic for my northern youth as I write these words in the midst of a droughty New Mexico summer. Gorbatov paints changing seasons, mud, and melting snow. Look at his Capercaillie crossing a rutted track amid puddles and falling leaves, his duck and redshank in newly ice-free ponds, his swallows in the brief window of summer with darkening skies overhead, his woodcock on a mud island.

European Russia, including Karelia, is a long-inhabited region despite its wildness. Gorbatov, who has spent his life exploring these edges, loves to paint the subtle interactions between man and nature. He will depict, as did Audu-



Vadim Gorbatov is one of the best-known wildlife artists in Russia. Here he shows an example of his work printed on a Russian calendar.



Gorbatov's study of an old Kazakh resting with his trained "Berkut" or Golden Eagle is a different kind of portrait—one of ferocity in repose. Notice how its rich desert colors contrasts with the chill grays and dark greens of his Russian paintings.

bon, human figures going about their business in the background—a horse and sled behind feeding redpolls, a bright window under a Great Gray Owl, or a cabin under that totemic goshawk again, perched on a snowy branch in the winter twilight. The redshank alights on a rotting boat, or a spaniel retrieves a duck in the sunken wreckage of a German tank. Many western artists depict a nature in which people never existed, but Gorbatov paints history, dogs, farms, and more. He will depict 19th-century Russian princes and peasants, hunts with spear and borzoi and falcon, and fights with bears. In his landscapes, an abandoned chapel's roof lets in the snow; icons and a cross keep vigil in a corner even as crossbills fly above. A Capercaillie might perch above a laika dog that barks to summon an unseen hunter. His work with Artists for Nature continues this tradition.

Though Gorbatov has not yet visited the Rocky Mountains and the Southwest—he plans to come in the fall of 2006—his work has already started here. First, he was commissioned to create the art for a Korean translation of Ernest Thompson Seton's late 19th-century book *Lobo*, about a cattle-killing wolf and his tragic death. With

typical thoroughness, Gorbatov requested that my wife and I send him nearly 200 photographs of New Mexico backgrounds, trees, arroyos, rocks, and other details.

The results were stunning. That he got everything from rock formations (and wolves, another totemic animal) to 19th-century American firearms right was no surprise. But how did he know that in New Mexico there is always a raven in the sky?

And now his first U.S. work is soon to be published by the Raptor Education Fund in Denver: *Fidget's Freedom*, a children's book about Peregrine Falcon reintroduction and hacking. The young falcon's first attempts to fly and her narrow escape from a hunting eagle are perfect subjects for Vadim Gorbatov, who manages to teach and amuse even as he creates images of great beauty. I can only hope that his new audience and his forthcoming trip make this the first of many American works for one of the finest depictees of birds and mammals of this or any other century. ■

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