



Fill Your Plate

**Rhea Knight's artwork will be featured on
DNR's new elk license plate.**

WRITTEN BY ZACK HAROLD



When Rhea Knight learned that elk would be returning to West Virginia for the first time since the 1870s, she knew she had to see the animals for herself. She was so excited, she did not want to wait until the state Division of Natural Resources trucked the elk to West Virginia. So, one day in early December 2016, Knight and her husband, Jason, hopped into their Subaru Outback and made the seven-hour drive from their home in Mason County to Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area in western Kentucky. They had dinner at the park's lodge and spent the night in a little hotel nearby. Then, early the next morning, they paid the \$5 entrance fee to drive the paved loop around the 65-acre elk and bison prairie. Land Between the Lakes imported elk from Elk Island National Park in Canada in the mid-1990s to establish an enclosed prairie where visitors could see the land as it was before white settlers first arrived. The animals are not

hunted, so the park has to find other ways to cull the herd when it gets a little too big. In 2016, Land Between the Lakes agreed to give two dozen elk to West Virginia's reintroduction project.

Just before Knight embarked on her trip, DNR officials made their own visit to Land Between the Lakes—driving the same paved loop to spot and tranquilize the elk that would eventually be released in West Virginia's coalfields. When she arrived at the park, the animals were still in holding pens as biologists waited on test results to ensure they were disease-free and safe to release into the wild.

Knight was not armed with a tranquilizer gun, but she had her trusty Nikon camera by her side. Her first hunt of the day wasn't very successful. She and Jason drove all morning and saw lots of bison, but the only elk they spotted were too far away for good pictures. Frustrated and disappointed, they left the pasture around noon to explore the rest of the park. Elk are most active during early mornings and just before sunset, so Knight had to bide her time until dusk.

Around 3 p.m., the couple paid another \$5 and headed back onto the loop road. This time, they got what they'd come for. "We saw a couple of bulls that were sparring—that was really exciting. And we were fairly close to them. It made my dog nervous. He was in the back seat growling." As the winter sun sank lower in the sky, Knight soon spotted three nice-looking elk bulls and began filling her camera's memory card with dozens of photos. The evening light was perfect, casting a golden glow on the animals.

They finished their safari around 5:30 and, because they had only allotted one night at the park, drove the whole way home, arriving back in West Virginia well after midnight. Knight says the trip was worth the long hours. One bull had proved to be a talented model. "He would just stop and look around and give me a chance to get some really good shots," she says. "I knew I would be painting that particular one."

An Idea and a Problem

A few days before Christmas 2016, DNR released the elk from Land Between the Lakes along the Logan–Mingo County border. Then, in summer 2017, newly appointed DNR director Stephen McDaniel approached Scott Warner, the agency's assistant chief in charge of wildlife diversity, with an idea.

For years, the agency has showcased the state's most iconic animals with a series of special-edition license plates. The tradition started in 1998 with a rose-breasted grosbeak. Since then, the series has featured a white-tailed deer, a black bear and her cub, a brook trout, and a bluebird.

McDaniel wanted to create a new wildlife plate featuring a bull elk to highlight DNR's ongoing elk restoration project. Warner agreed it was a great idea, but there was one problem.

All the artwork for previous wildlife license plates was made by the late DNR biologist Tom Allen, who combined his artistic eye and knowledge of nature to



create beautiful and incredibly accurate wildlife paintings. DNR had all legal rights to Allen's paintings—he signed them over before he died from cancer in August 2010—but, as Warner explained to McDaniel, "Tom didn't have a painting of an elk."

For three decades, the agency has produced the West Virginia Wildlife Calendar. Each month features a full-color painting of a native critter, selected through an intensive jury process. Warner suggested the agency contact artists whose work had been featured in the calendar and see if any would be interested in painting the elk license plate.

In August 2017, DNR asked artists to submit samples of their work for the elk plate project. The paintings didn't have to feature elk—"we didn't want them to spend all this time on something and not get selected," Warner says—but the agency wanted proof of the painters' abilities.

Knight was one of the artists who received the notice from DNR. She has submitted artwork to the wildlife calendar for years, and more than two dozen of her paintings have been featured in its pages. Four of Knight's paintings have graced the calendar's cover—including her painting of a bull elk from Land Between the Lakes, which appeared on the cover of 2018's calendar.

She submitted this painting to the DNR's casting call along with a painting of a white-tailed doe. She also quickly produced another elk painting. "I thought, this is my chance to impress them," she says.

DNR assembled a jury of four people to review the submissions. The panel was made up of three biologists, who were there to ensure the scientific accuracy of the artists' work, as well as a representative of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the nation's leading organization on elk reintroduction programs. Warner, who oversaw the process, asked the members to pick their top three painters. Jurors made their decisions in

A jury selected Mason County artist Rhea Knight to paint the elk that will appear on the new DNR wildlife license plate.





private so they would not influence one another, and the artists' names were not used. "It was completely anonymous. We just said 'Artist 1,' 'Artist 2,' 'Artist 3,'" Warner says.

After carefully reviewing all the work, members of the jury came to a unanimous decision. They wanted Knight to paint the license plate.

Painting the Plate

Although there were some practical considerations involved in painting a license plate—she had to leave room for the letters and numbers, the registration sticker, and the mounting holes—Knight says DNR gave her free rein on the design.

She started by sorting through her collection of reference photos, first looking for a landscape where the elk could live. She came across a photo of a pasture she had shot in October 2017 while driving through Tucker County. "That turned out to be the perfect setting to put the elk in, because it had a nice open foreground and distant mountains."

Next she dug through her photos from Land Between the Lakes. She found a photo of a bull with an impressive rack, striking a good pose. "He looked really representative of a nice bull elk in the prime of his life." The photo was almost perfect, except Knight would have to fix a few of the points on his rack, since a few had broken off.

Knight began sketching the license plate, transposing the elk onto the Tucker County pasture. She usually works large—most of her wildlife paintings are around 18 by 24 inches—but she decided to paint the elk in the exact size it would appear on license plates, 6 by 12 inches. "When you're decreasing or enlarging, sometimes you lose a little bit of something," she says.

Although she usually works on canvas, she decided to use a smooth Masonite board so the texture of the canvas wouldn't show up on the license plate. The change in material proved to be a challenge. "The paint

reacted a little differently than it does on canvas," she says. But Knight adjusted her technique accordingly, and the painting started to take shape.

Once she had the whole picture sketched out, she painted in the sky and clouds and blue mountains. Then came the russet-toned treeline and gamboge-tinged field. Then she added the elk's antlers and head, followed by his neck and body, then his legs.

She chronicled her progress with a series of snapshots. "Every day I would snap a photo of it. I normally don't do that, but Scott asked. He thought it might be interesting for a story later on."

After about a month and a half, she sent Warner a photo of the finished painting. Once again, the verdict was unanimous. "We were like, 'Wow, this is perfect,'" Warner says.

A Traveling Exhibit

The state Division of Motor Vehicles began printing the elk license plates in late October 2018. They will be available for purchase in January 2019. Drivers can purchase them at any DMV office or online at transportation.wv.gov.

As in the past, proceeds from wildlife license plates fund DNR's non-game education programs. "Because of Rhea's artwork, we're going to be able to do a lot more than we're doing now," Warner says.

That's not the only benefit Warner sees in the license plate. He says the elk plate gives West Virginians one more reason to take pride in the state's natural beauty. "You can look at other license plates from other states and it looks like somebody's found clip art and pasted it," Warner says. "We're using artwork. This license plate is a piece of art."

Knight is certainly excited about seeing her paintings riding on bumpers all over the state. But will she get one for herself? "Oh my goodness, yes. Both cars will have them." 🐾

► To see more of Rhea Knight's work, visit www.yessy.com/rheaknight