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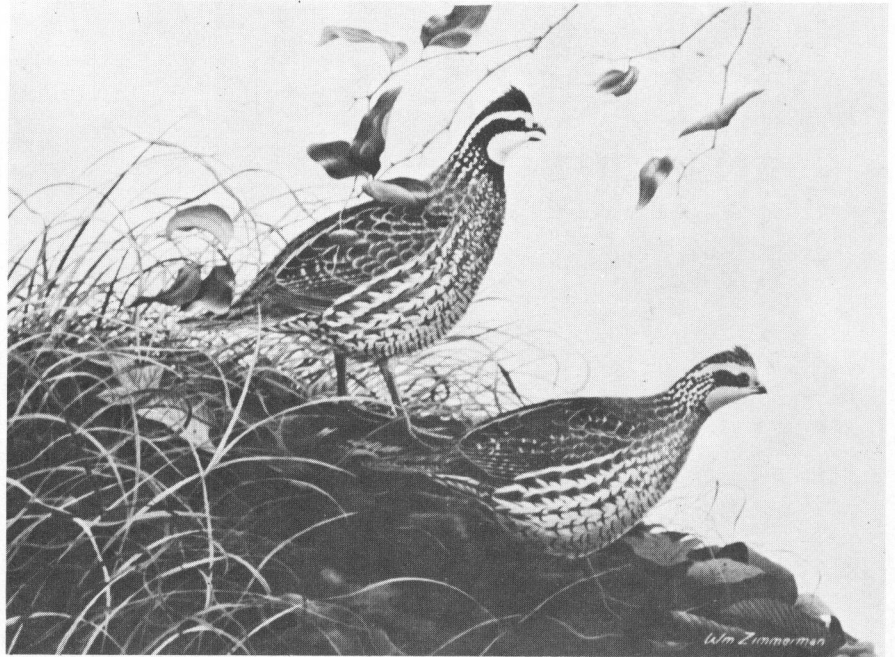


WILLIAM ZIMMERMAN

by Storrs L. Olson

SEVERAL years ago I was intrigued with a delicately detailed painting of a Pintail that adorned the cover of an outdoor outfitter's catalog I had received in the mail. The signature, "Wm. Zimmerman," was unknown to me, and I had expected this to be the work of some bird artist with whom I was familiar. The name stuck with me, however, and I kept my eye open for additional works by "Wm. Zimmerman." After some time, I was rewarded by a charming sketch of a woodcock in the 1965 issue of *The Living Bird* which followed an article by Don Eckelberry on techniques in bird art. I eagerly searched Eckelberry's resume for some mention of "Wm. Zimmerman" but was disappointed when not a word was to be found. Therefore, four years later, I was delighted to learn that Bill Zimmerman would be visiting the Smithsonian Institution's Chesapeake Bay Center for Field Biology in order to do some background research for a forthcoming portfolio of North American waterfowl. I would have the opportunity to sate my curiosity.

Late one winter morning I was



Bobwhite, male and female.



Sparrow Hawk

greeted by a hirsutely adorned young man carrying a very large leather portfolio. This was Bill Zimmerman, and one glance at the contents of the case immediately justified the zealous attention of its guardian. Within were ten of the most exquisite paintings of waterfowl that it has ever been my good fortune to examine. Each was extremely detailed, yet none was photographic. There was a warmth and depth to the color and the texture was such that one literally could almost feel the plumage of each bird. I was to spend many subsequent moments gazing at these enchanting delineations.

Bill Zimmerman is 31, single, and currently resides in Dillsboro, Indiana, a few minutes' drive from Cincinnati. His past history has been intimately involved with nature painting since youth. Inspired early by Audubon, he began sketching with watercolor pencils at about age 10. These he found unsatisfactory, but the fortuitous gift of an old paint set by a friend provided him with a new medium. This set of casein paints contained one tube of white paint that was usable, so Bill mixed his watercolors with the casein to achieve a more desirable product. He then reverted entirely to casein, the softness of which allows him to capture the feeling of texture. Bill uses a glazing technique of a wash over a wash, to obtain an inner depth of color. He feels that his technique

had more or less taken form by age 19, although he says he continues to improve. He attended the Cincinnati Art Academy for awhile, and this period constituted his only formal training. Bill is a member of the Society of Animal Artists, a rather elite group composed entirely of wildlife painters.

His first painting endeavors were sold to neighbors, and he has subsisted largely by commissions since then. For this reason, most of his work, unfortunately, has been unpublished although his paintings have appeared in galleries in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere. Most of these paintings now reside in private collections. On the commercial level, he served a stint with Gibson Greeting Card Company while doing commissions on the side. In a cooperative effort with fellow artist and friend, John Ruthven of Cincinnati, he produced "Top Flight," a color coded speed index to North American waterfowl. He and Ruthven traveled to Africa where Zimmerman was to paint African big game animals. Afterwards, Bill returned to his native Midwest and resumed painting the creatures he knows best. In addition, he has spent considerable time studying wildlife in Wyoming. An ardent outdoorsman, Bill is also a skillful hunter and spends many hours in pursuit of feathered game, the specimens of which double as subjects for his paintings. He is one of the fortunate whose work is also his hobby, and his interests include the painting of fish, wildflowers, and mammals, in addition to birds.

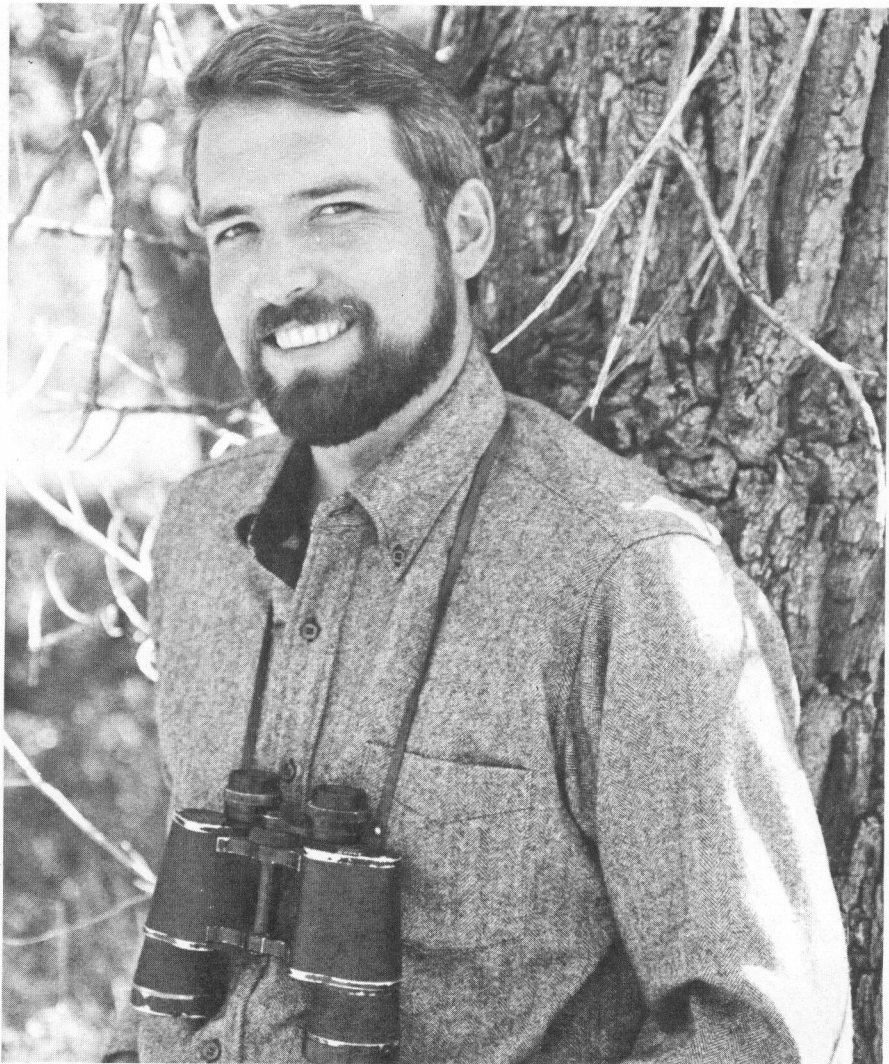
About a year ago Bill commenced work on a series of paintings for a projected elephant folio of North American waterfowl. This magnum opus has occupied most of his time since and is scheduled for completion some time in 1971; hopefully to be published in folio form in limited edition. It was my pleasant duty to assist Bill in gathering subject material for this folio while on his visit to Chesapeake Bay. For two days we helped out local wildfowl biologists, who were engaged in a trapping and banding operation on Maryland's waterfowl-abundant Eastern Shore. On our second day out, our combined efforts resulted in the capture of almost 50 Whistling Swans, which were to be dyed and banded before being sent off to their far northern breeding grounds. From this lot of birds we picked one fine healthy male to serve as a subject for one of Bill's from-life watercolor sketches of the feet, bill, and eyes, the colors of which quickly fade in preserved specimens. Our model posed cooperatively for his portrait while Bill captured on paper the almost dog-like quality of the bird's great brown eyes. In order to determine more about the migration of these magnificent birds, this now immortal swan was subsequently equipped with a small radio trans-

mitter and released to be followed later by airplane on its departure north. Bill insists on making what he calls "rough preliminary sketches" from life whenever possible. He feels that this "homework," which is later incorporated into the final painting, enables him to catch a certain depth of color which is only superficial in photographs. He tries to get to know each bird as well as possible and portray it in a mood of activity representative of the species.

From these sketches for soft part colors, actual museum specimens for detail of feathers, and photographs for natural postures of his subjects, he compiles a finished painting, which, at least for his present undertaking, represents about a month's work. Bill recently spent a summer in Alaska familiarizing himself with the ducks and geese there, and making more sketches for future paintings. After finishing the waterfowl folio, he will have some commissions to catch up on and then he contemplates perhaps another folio depicting another group of birds.

Bill Zimmerman's paintings are

extraordinary in detail, yet this detail is neither photographic nor coldly scientific such as is seen in Audubon's works. His precision is a warm idealization of, almost an improvement upon, reality. So that this detail is not overshadowed, most of his works are largely devoid of background. Viewers upon seeing his lifelike portraits will have no trouble in mentally providing the lake or river, field or marsh, of their own experience as their personal background. The artist's abstraction is then not only forgivable but also a necessary adjunct to his method of presentation. The trees or other vegetation that are provided in his paintings are in themselves aesthetically most pleasing. I will not attempt to flood the reader with superlatives. Being no *arbiter elegantiarum*, I will let the works speak for themselves. Bill Zimmerman has shown more than promise. He ranks with, and should be considered among, the finest in his field. It will be to the continuing enjoyment of us all to see more from this most gifted craftsman.



The artist in the field.