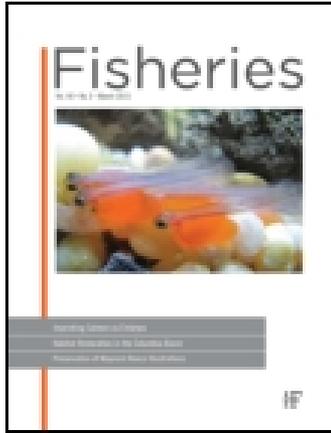


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Brushes with Greatness: Preserving Original Maynard Reece Fish Art

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ESSAY



Brushes with Greatness: Preserving Original Maynard Reece Fish Art

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Recently, the Iowa Chapter of the American Fisheries Society awarded a Fisheries Project Grant for the restoration of the original Maynard Reece fish prints housed at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery. The grant award will be used in conjunction with a \$20,000 grant from the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, Historical Resource Development Program award.

Maynard Reece is one of Iowa's preeminent artists, on a level below only Grant Wood and on par with Ding Darling, Marvin Cone, Andrew Clemens, and Christian Petersen. He began his career as a graphic artist with the Meredith Corporation in Des Moines at the age of 18 in 1938. At that time, he began meeting with and became the protégé of Ding Darling. In 1940, he took a position with the State Historical Museum and by 1942 had painted the color plates for the book *Waterfowl in Iowa*. Following his World War II service, Reece returned to the State Historical Museum in 1946 and undertook the work of illustrating the color plates for *Iowa Fish and Fishing*. His work concluded sometime between the printing of the second edition in 1951 and the third edition in 1956, which included all of the paintings. His efforts resulted in 18 separate paintings, including 63 different fish species. These 18 original paintings are the property of the Fisheries Bureau of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and have been on display at the Rathbun Hatchery since it opened in the 1970s.

The work illustrating these two books for the Iowa Conservation Commission resulted in Reece being invited to submit a

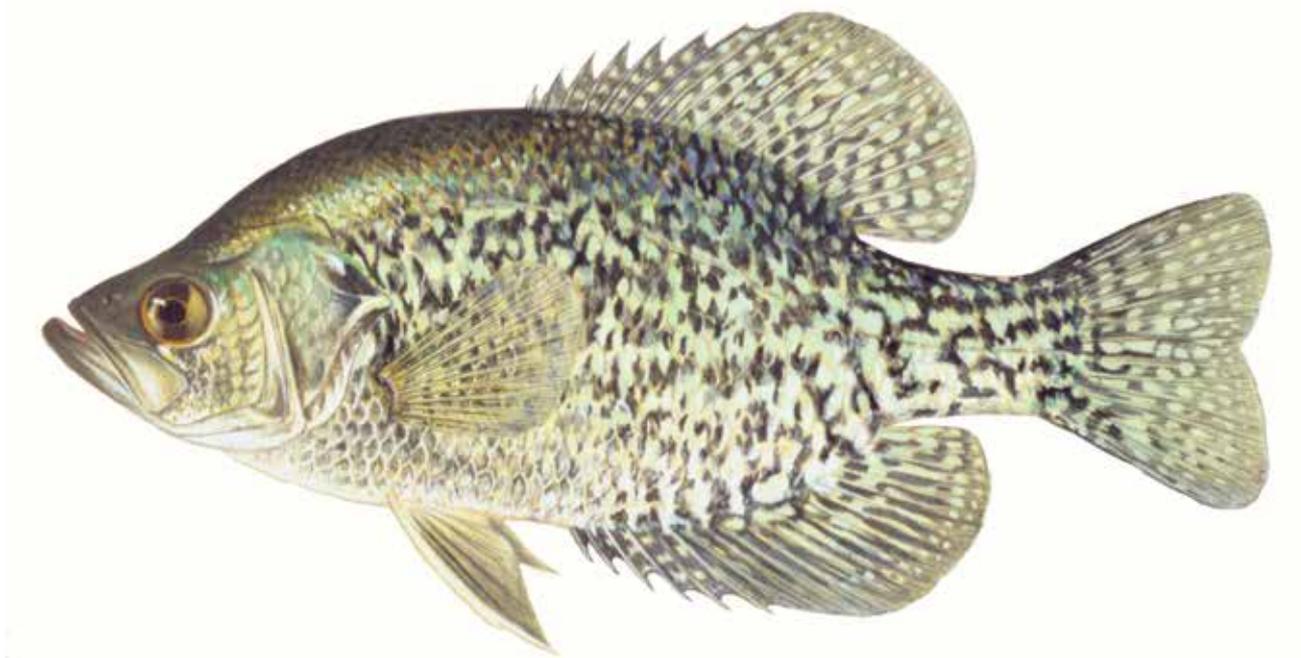
design for the 1948–1949 Federal Duck Stamp competition. This was his first experience in the competition, and he won. He would go on to win a record five Federal Duck Stamp competitions—a mark unrivaled and unlikely to ever be exceeded. His success in these competitions led to him being dubbed “The King” of duck stamps. Reece was commissioned to create the first Iowa State Duck Stamp in 1972 and won the 1977 and 1993 Iowa Duck Stamp competitions. He has also won state stamp competitions in Arkansas, Idaho, Illinois, Missouri, Texas, and Washington.

Reece gained fame for his artwork portraying birds, and his biography as a Legend of the Outdoor Writers Association of America christened him the “artist with the feather touch.” His work exhibits a commitment to detail of the animal, its habitat, and behavior. As an example, every bird has the right number of feathers on the wing, correctly shaped and colored. The results of his meticulous nature and artistic talent include prestigious awards such as being named the Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year in 1973; the Master Wildlife Artist of Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, International Birds in Art show since 1989; and a Distinguished American Artist by *American Artist* magazine.

Reece's attention to detail transcends species. His fish paintings have the correct number of scales on the lateral line and the correct number of spines and rays on the fins. His initial work on *Iowa Fish and Fishing* led *Life* magazine to commission him to paint a portfolio of freshwater fish in 1955



Slimy Sculpin *Cottus cognatus*. Art credit: Maynard Reece.



Black Crappie *Pomoxis nigromaculatus*. Art credit: Maynard Reece.

and a subsequent portfolio of saltwater species in 1957. In 1961, he provided the artwork for Maurice Walsh's story, "A Seven-Pound Trout," in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Utilizing these experiences, Reece wrote, illustrated, and provided photographs for the book *Iowa Fish and Fishing*, which was published by Meredith in 1963. In addition to all his fame as a bird artist, he was the preeminent fish artist of his time.

Reece is a supremely skilled artist who enhanced his skill with the research necessary to capture the essence of the subject matter: hours in a duck blind; miles of walking, shotgun in hand, through marshes and prairies; and hundreds of thousands of casts, photographs, and live and preserved specimens. Experiences and mental pictures earned through a lifetime spent in the field. These are the stripes of honor earned from a commitment to his craft and to conservation. In 1963, Reece was Chair of the Governor's Committee on the Conservation of Outdoor Resources for Iowa. Since then, he has provided numerous works of art to conservation organizations for use in

fundraising. He has always been a supporter of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF); in recent years, he painted an eastern goldfinch (Iowa State Bird) and wild rose (Iowa State Flower) and committed 25% of the print sales to the INHF. His commitment to conservation resulted in the INHF naming a restored wetland area for him, the Maynard Reece Marsh in northern Iowa, which is now managed by the Iowa DNR.

The act of conserving things that are important brings us back to the fish prints. Many years ago, Iowa DNR Fish Culture supervisor Mike Mason mentioned that the fish prints in the interpretive area at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery were the Maynard Reece originals. At the time, I thought that was cool but didn't think much more of it. Last fall while viewing an art show, entitled *In Pursuit of Wildlife Conservation: The Art of Jay N. Darling and Maynard Reece* at Iowa State University's Brunner Museum, the importance of what we had at Rathbun dawned on me. It turns out that it is nearly a miracle that these prints are even around today.



Pumpkinseed Sunfish *Lepomis gibbosus*. Art credit: Maynard Reece.

After starting this project, I sent a note to retired fisheries bureau chief, Marion Conover, telling him about what I was up to and asking what he knew. He related to me the following:

I was a biologist at Clear Lake when the Rathbun Hatchery was being built. I called Ken Formanek who worked in Information & Education back then. Ken remembers doing an inventory back in the late 60's of things at the Iowa State Fairgrounds and found two big boxes filled with Maynard Reece originals! They had sat there for years. They were simply framed with no matting at the time of discovery.

Contact was made with Maynard Reece and he suggested using The Art Store for reframing and matting. A guy at the store had done work for Maynard. ... The originals were matted and framed in what Formanek says is archival condition sometime around 1970–72. They were placed on display in the interpretive area at Rathbun Hatchery and have remained there. Ken believes the folks doing the conservation work will find they are generally in very good condition save for exposure to light over the years.

It's good this preservation work is being done. There is a better place for the originals, and prints will work just fine at the hatchery (personal communication, December 19, 2013).

Over the next year, the original paintings will be sent to an art conservator to be treated and restored. After completion, we will create digital images, archive the originals, and create a new display for the State of Iowa Historical Museum and produce prints for continued display at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery. The new high-resolution digital images will allow us to create new prints in the future as needed and will allow us to use these images on the website, in publications, and on educational materials for the foreseeable future, all of which greatly enhance their utility to the Iowa DNR. Furthermore, by restoring and



preserving these irreplaceable pieces and archiving them at the State Historical Museum, they will be available to future generations to enjoy.

Thank you to the Iowa Chapter of AFS for assisting in this project.

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In Pursuit of Wildlife Conservation: The Art of Jay N. Darling and Maynard Reece, 2013. A pamphlet created to accompany the art show at Iowa State University's Brunner Museum.

Maynard has artwork in the holdings of the National Museum of Wildlife Art

www.wildlifeart.org/collection/artists/artist-maynard-reece-449

Maynard Reece Gallery

www.maynardreecegallery.com/AboutUs.htm

Wikipedia site

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maynard_Reece

Des Moines Register listing of famous Iowans

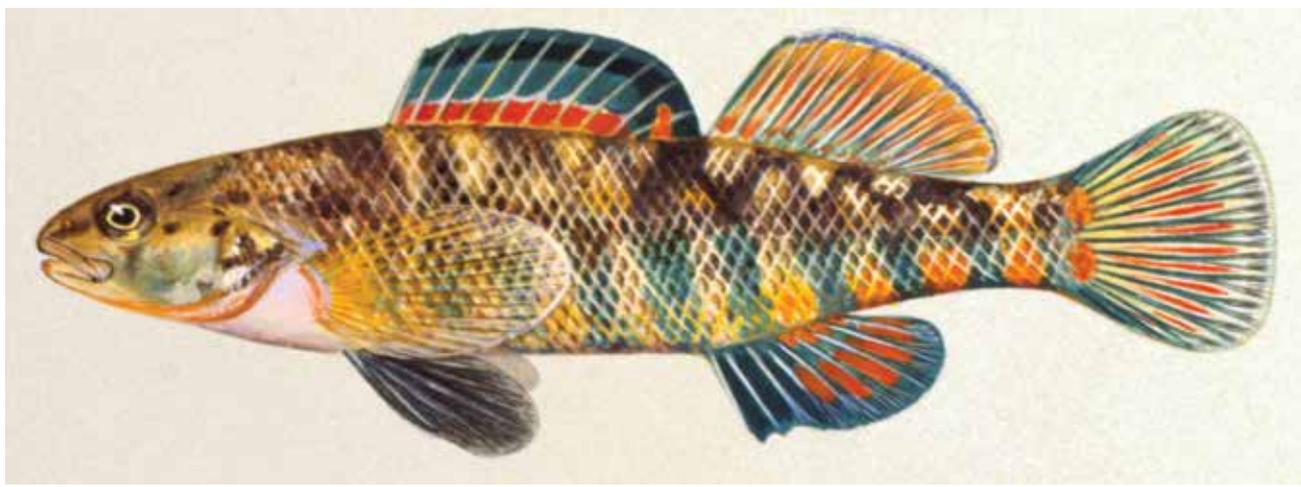
data.desmoinesregister.com/famous-iowans/maynard-reece

Outdoor Writers Association of America—Legends

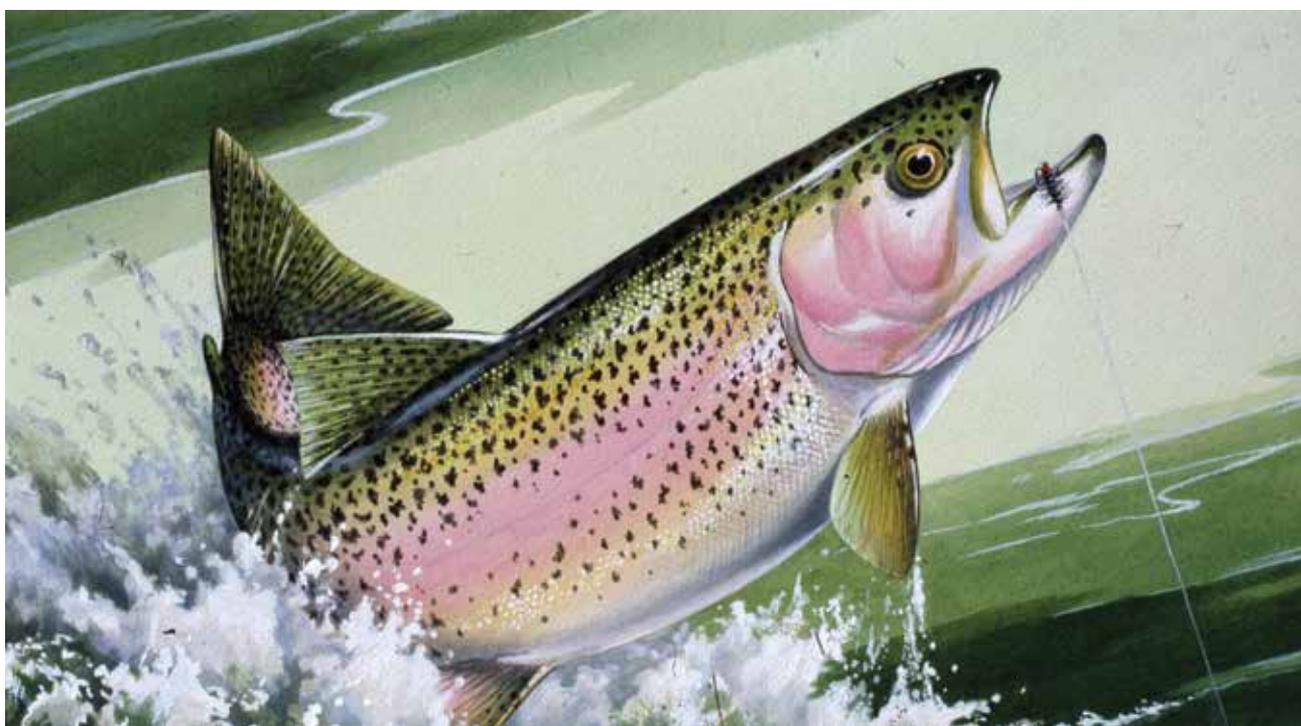
owaa.org/owaa-legends/maynard-reece-artist-with-a-feather-touch

MAYNARD REECE HONORS

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation stamp, 1988
Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year, 1973



Rainbow Darter *Etheostoma caeruleum*. Art credit: Maynard Reece.



1982 Iowa Trout stamp. Art credit: Maynard Reece.

Distinguished American Artist by *American Artist* magazine
 Master Wildlife Artist, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum,
 International Birds in Art show, 1989
 Commissioned to create the first Iowa Duck Stamp, 1972
 Commissioned to create the first Missouri Turkey Stamp, 1983

MAYNARD REECE STAMP PRINTS

Federal Duck Stamp

- 1948-1949 Federal Duck Stamp Print—Bufflehead
- 1951-1952 Federal Duck Stamp Print—Gadwalls
- 1959-1960 Federal Duck Stamp Print—Labrador Retriever
- 1969-1970 Federal Duck Stamp Print—White-winged Scoters
- 1970-1971 Federal Duck Stamp Print—Cinnamon Teal

Stamp Prints

- 1972 Iowa Duck Stamp Print—Mallards
- 1977 Iowa Duck Stamp Print—Lesser Scaups
- 1981 Iowa Habitat Stamp Print—Bobwhites
- 1982 Iowa Trout Stamp—Rainbow Trout
- 1982 Arkansas Duck Stamp—Wood Duck
- 1982 Bass Research Foundation—Largemouth Bass

- 1983 Texas Duck Stamp Print—Wigeon
- 1983 Ruffed Grouse Society—Ruffed Grouse
- 1983 Missouri Turkey Stamp Print
- 1984 Chesapeake Bay—Canada Geese
- 1984 International Quail Foundation—Bobwhite Quail
- 1985 Ducks Unlimited—Mallards
- 1985 Arkansas Turkey Stamp Print
- 1988 National Fish & Wildlife—Mallards
- 1988 Arkansas Duck Stamp Print—Pintails
- 1989 Washington Duck Stamp Print—American Wigeon
- 1989 Iowa Ducks Unlimited Sponsor Print—Canada Geese
- 1992 Quail Unlimited Stamp—Bobwhite Quail
- 1993 Iowa Duck Stamp Print—Mallards
- 1997 Illinois Habitat Stamp Print—Ring-necked Pheasants
- 1998 Illinois Habitat Stamp Print—Doves
- 1998 Idaho Duck Stamp Print—Canada Geese
- 1999 Illinois Habitat Stamp Print—Turkeys
- 2000 Illinois Habitat Stamp Print—Whitetail Deer
- 2000 Quail Unlimited Dove Conservation Stamp Print—Doves
- 2013 Arkansas Duck Stamp—Mallards **AFS**