

## FOREWORD

An air of myth has always surrounded the delta of Guadalquivir. As a young birdwatcher and artist it was my ultimate destination in Europe, a wild and beautiful place with Imperial Eagles, Vultures, Spoonbills, Iberian Lynx and other exotic species, a place one could only hope to see one time. In my teens I also picked up an interest in flamenco guitar and the name El Rocio incarnated the very spirit of this art form. Living some 3500 km to the northeast of Andalusia, in the cold Sweden I visualized a paradise spelled Coto Donana.

A cold and crisp December day in 1974 I entered the head quarter at Paraguay 1 in Seville for a permission to stay for a few nights in the park. It was with great expectation that I entered the long and straight road down to the "Palacio" a few hours later and it was like entering another world, a world of tranquillity, where time stood still and where nature ruled. Donana was then in a winter mood without any tourists or some of its spectacular birds but it made a strong and ever lasting impression on me. I did however see my first Imperial Eagle. I returned a few years later in May. One evening I was watching Red-necked nightjars hunting over the rockroses towards a bright red sky when suddenly a sharp shriek was heard. A few seconds later a Spanish Lynx passed in silhouette over the dirt road with a Rabbit in its jaws – an impression that fulfilled all my dreams of the Donana as I had pictured it.

For many people the "wild" as it unfolds on films and books is overwhelmingly rich and one stunning observation follows after the other. Coto Donana is one of these rare places where the feeling of a pristine natural richness still prevails. For a naturalist and an artist it is however often hours of wait when only the more com-

mon species are in view or just the landscape. The rare and more spectacular species like the Imperial Eagle and Iberian Lynx are certainly crown jewels of the Donana, but they are just as much an indication of the quality of the ecosystem they represent. Areas that can harbour the top predators are usually very important areas throughout the year for all the common species that make up most of the daily encounters of wildlife. The Greylag geese that grace the marshes or the avocets that forage the estuaries of Donana will turn up along the coastline of Gotland where I live. Coto Donana is a true treasure which importance stretches far beyond the Spanish boundary.

Juan Varela is a colleague and friend whom I have had the privilege to get to know, both from painting together in the field in Extramadura as well as over more than one glass of Rioja in the tapas bars of Madrid. We both embrace a philosophy when it comes to painting nature that has brought us together and one that we share with several outstanding nature artists in Europe and around the world. Painting is just as much an act of being present in the moment as an act of creating artworks. It is through the engagement in the natural world and a sincere wish to communicate the wonder we experience while watching the birds, animals, insects and their natural habitat. It is about being there and trying to catch the moment in time and space. Juan combines a deep knowledge of his subjects with a sharp eye and a wonderful watercolour technique. It is often the unexpected or the views outside the spectacular that catches the artist's eye. Through his paintings, drawings and short comments he lets us silently experience the unique ambience of the land between the sea and land. It is a wonderful experience.

Lars Jonsson  
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