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## **Ballona Wetlands: Scientific researcher brings images of wetland plants, insects and birds to life through unique artistry**

BY GARY WALKER

The adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" can take on a special meaning when nature is involved. Capturing images of wildlife and plant life can often give a historical as well as visual record of the ecology of a given area, and that is where a scientific illustrator's talents come to the fore.

For nearly four decades, Sharon Belkin has chronicled the lush plant foliage of the Amazon, exotic birds in Guatemala and the numerous inhabitants of the vast ecosystem of the Ballona Wetlands through the artistry of illustration. Her foray into the field of scientific illustration came about by chance when she was studying at UCLA in the 1960s.

Belkin initially planned on becoming a laboratory technician when she learned that the university offered a bachelor of science program in illustration between the art and biology departments.

"It sounded interesting, so I went for it," Belkin said in a recent interview.

The widow of UCLA biologist John Belkin, an internationally renowned entomologist and mosquito taxonomist for whom the John N. Belkin Award is named, she has hoped to continue a legacy of offering the public a window into the complex world of nature.

"I illustrated an entomology textbook for him," Belkin, who also traveled with her husband when he was conducting his experiments with mosquitoes, recalled. "I really learned a lot from him."

The award is given by the American Mosquito Control Association (AMCA) since 1981 for meritorious contributions to mosquito systematic, which is the processes involved in describing a species and/or biology.

Upon graduation, Belkin, 68, said she was able to illustrate everything from "a pollen grain to a fossil," and that led to various travels to the Amazon forest and other exotic locations around the globe to photograph and create wildlife and tropical plant renderings.

Belkin worked for nearly 20 years at UCLA before she started her own freelance company, Morphographics, in 1995.

She typically uses pen and ink, watercolors, carbon dust and computer graphics in her illustrations.

"Computers have really made a big difference in my work," she said.

The illustrator has worked frequently with the Friends of the Ballona Wetlands and has designed a series of postcards for the environmental and restoration group.

"Her drawings beautifully capture the animals and life in the wetlands," Friends of the Ballona Wetlands Executive Director Lisa Fimiani said.

When Discovery Park, a planned 1.7-acre community park in Playa Vista dedicated to wetlands education and the legacy of the Gabrielino/Tongva Native Americans, opens later this year, the environmental organization will have an office there and plans to display Belkin's work.

"We certainly plan to use as much of her work as we can," Fimiani added.

One of the artist's most recent illustrations is of the Orcutt's Yellow Pincushion (*Chaenactis glab orcuttiana*), an imperiled native

sand dune flower that was discovered this spring in Ballona Lagoon. Belkin was told about the discovery, which was first chronicled in The Argonaut on March 11, and was intrigued.

"(Its discovery) was so timely," she said.

After learning that Robert "Roy" van de Hoek, a conservation biologist and co-director of the Ballona Institute was instrumental in identifying the Orcutt's Yellow, Belkin decided to contact him to see if she could obtain a specimen in order to draw the endangered flower.

"I thought, 'maybe he would help me get a specimen,'" Belkin, who had met van de Hoek on a prior occasion, recalled. "In order for me to create a piece of artwork, I would have to have a specimen in hand."

Within a few days the two met at Ballona Lagoon, where Belkin was able to draw some of the pincushions' distinguishing characteristics.

A local nature photographer, Jonathan Coffin, provided photographs that he had taken of the Orcutt's Yellow Pincushion.

"He very generously made available a few of his close-ups so that I could use them for close-ups," she said.

Belkin's rendering of the Orcutt's Yellow could become an important factor in the quest to have the flower placed on the Endangered Species List, according to the Ballona Institute.

"Scientific illustration would be something that the federal government would take into consideration when it decides if a plant should be moved onto the Endangered Species List," van de Hoek, who has worked for the federal government, explained. "An illustration with the exact details and characteristic of a rare flower can make a very important difference."

The rendering took approximately four months to complete.

"I initially thought about doing the painting just for myself," Belkin said. "But then I thought, 'why not let the public see this beautiful flower too?'"

On May 14, Belkin displayed her rendering of the rare flower at the 32nd annual Sylvia Winstein UCLA Emeriti Arts and Crafts Exhibit. Emeriti are retired members of the faculty who retain their former titles. Belkin became a member of the emeriti society through her late husband.

Belkin has worked with archeologists and museums as well. In 2002, she designed a series of posters for the Miami Metro Zoo Rainforest Exhibit.

She has also painted the El Segundo Blue butterfly, which was spotted by conservation experts in July 2007. One of the area's best known endangered species, the El Segundo Blue has had a protected habitat on land owned by Los Angeles International Airport in Playa del Rey since 2007.

In her rendering of the rare butterfly, Belkin also included other sand dune inhabitants, such as insects and other creatures, a tactic that she frequently uses.

"It's important to depict all of the insects, birds and other forms of wildlife when you work on a rendering, so the client and the public can get a complete picture of the ecosystem," said the illustrator.

Van de Hoek views Belkin's long career of capturing nature as a testament to her abilities.

"Sharon Belkin is one of the finest scientific illustrators that I have met and her long career demonstrates her excellence," the biologist said.

Fimiani agrees.

"I love looking at her paintings," she said. "There is a story within them that is so rich with detail and so beautifully depicted, and I think for me, that's the magical part of her work."

Van de Hoek says artists like Belkin are invaluable to wildlife and restoration scientists.

"The history of scientific illustrators is crucial to science because it brings out very important, intricate details of nature," van de Hoek explained. "Very often, a scientist and a scientific illustrator will collaborate to ascertain accuracy about detail to convey to the public and other scientists for historical references.

"Her work has also reached into ecology and restoration, because she does illustrations and art of landscape and often displays an

entire landscape, which might include detailed illustration of sand dunes, reeds and other parts of an ecosystem," the biologist continued. "By painting that picture, it shows how the animals, birds and insects are interrelating, and that's very important in restoration work for scientists to have a full picture of a particular area that might be under restoration."

Belkin, like van de Hoek, believes that one of the keys to a proper restoration is having a professional restoration expert involved in any project.

"The more endangered (the ecosystem), the more one gets wrapped up in it," she said. "I belong to a professional group of scientific illustrators all over the country and we all feel the same way, because if you want to keep something from being plowed under and disappearing, than you have to make people see how beautiful and special it is."

While Belkin's career has taken her to many exotic locales, she retains a special fondness for the Ballona Wetlands.

"It has a very rich history," she said. "There is so much to discover and learn there. It's a real treasure trove for a scientific illustrator."