

# The world of Owen Gromme



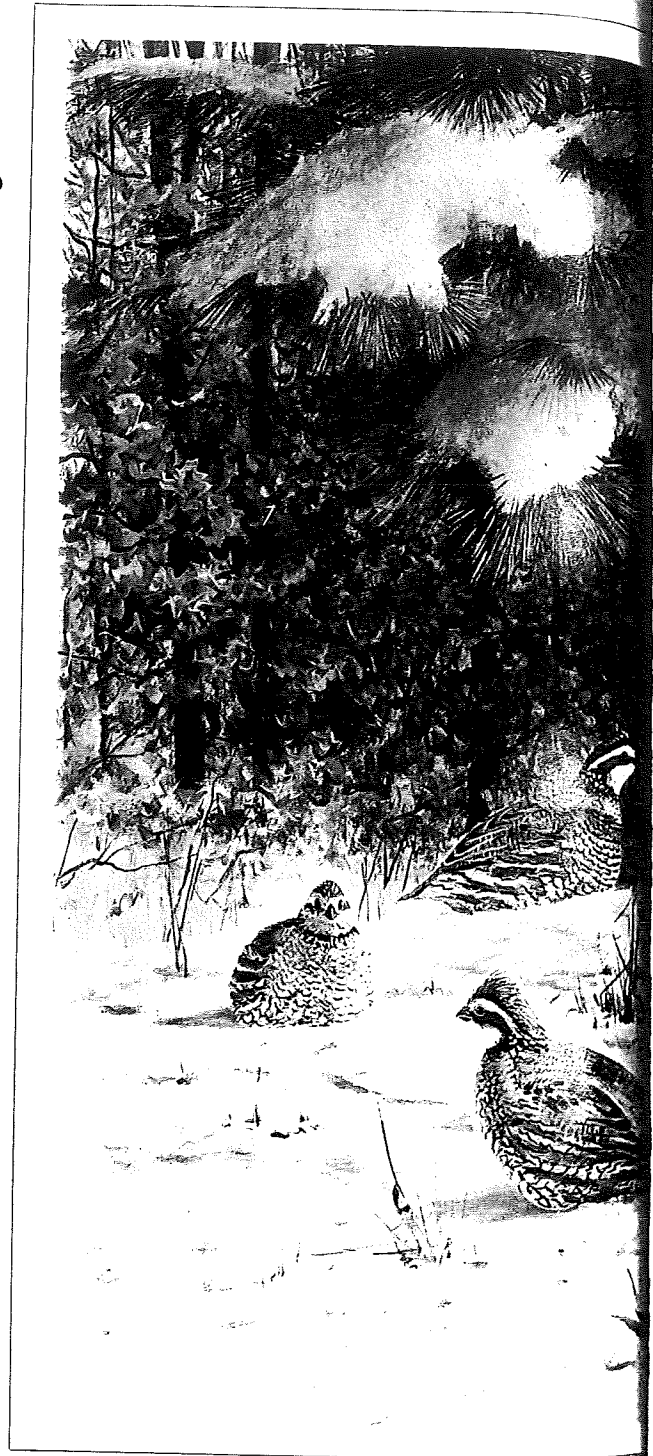
A biography of octogenarian Owen Gromme, Wisconsin's most famous wildlife artist will be published in October by Stanton and Lee of Madison. Called *The World of Owen Gromme*, the book not only recounts Gromme's development as an artist and his emotional involvement in resource issues, it also contains 100 full color reproductions of his finest works. Each reproduction contains a commentary by Gromme on the piece of art — on technique, natural history, circumstances of creation or perhaps philosophy. Several are reproduced here along with excerpts from an introduction to the biography by Roger Tory Peterson and from the book itself which was written by Michael Mentzer. In format the book measures 13 by 10 1/2 inches and contains 300 pages. It sells for \$60.00 and will be available from bookstores and from the publisher.

**O**wen Gromme was born in Fond du Lac in 1896. The acknowledged "dean" of wildlife artists, he has filled his life with over eight decades of achievement in careers as a taxidermist, naturalist and wildlife artist.

Following the mold of John James Audubon and Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Gromme shares the belief that birds and other animals should be painted by those who know their subjects and feel deeply about them. His artistic skills were developed in tandem with his skills as a museum taxidermist, a position he held with the Milwaukee Public Museum for 43 years.

Gromme was and still is a conservation activist. He was one of the prime movers in the successful campaign to reflood Horicon Marsh after it had been drained for agriculture. He was one of those who recognized DDT's threat to birds very early and along with Rachel Carson helped alert the public to its dangers.

Gromme first gained national recognition by winning the 1945 Federal Duck Stamp design contest. However, his canvases remained relatively unknown until the publication of *Birds of*



*Wisconsin* in 1963, a collection of 600 bird portraits depicting 328 species. In 1965, Gromme was commissioned by the Marshall and Isley Bank of Milwaukee to paint whatever he pleased for three years. By 1968, he had produced 43 originals which were then placed on permanent display at the bank's headquarters.

These brought him international recognition. Today he continues to paint daily with skill and speed as his list of commissions grows longer and longer.

Gromme and Anne, his wife of 56 years, live on a 160 acre tract of land in Briggsville, Wisconsin. There, he remains an active outdoorsman, a prodigious artist, and a committed conservationist. ■



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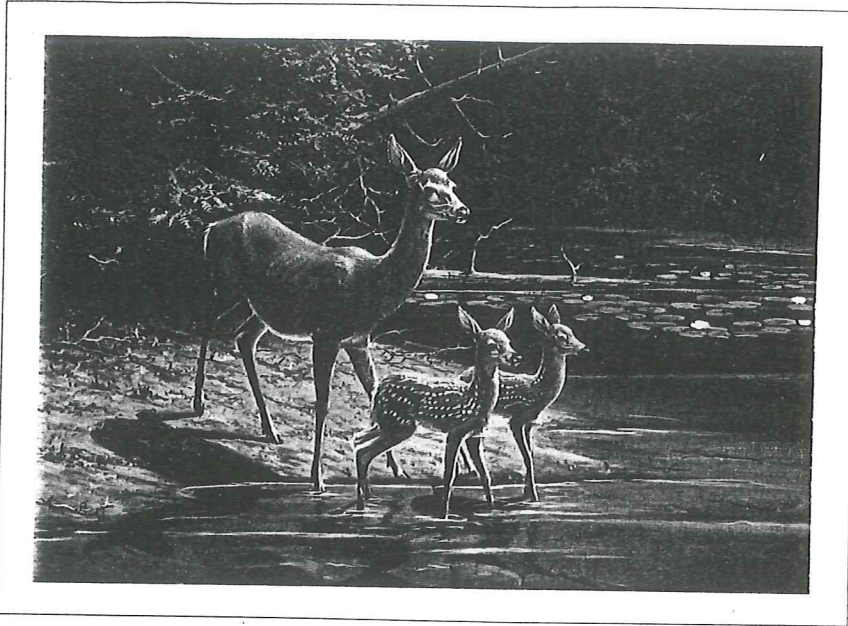
#### **Bobwhites**

*"My old friend Herb Stoddard, in his authoritative book on the species entitled **The Bobwhite Quail: Its Habits, Preservation and Increase**, stated that the old fashioned rail fence did more to conserve quail than almost any other factor. The reason lies in the fact that each angle between the sections of fence prevents the mowing machine from getting in. Consequently, there is almost always a lot of brush growing along rail fences, providing great protection for the quail. With the disappearance of the rail fence in many parts of the United States, much of this ideal habitat for northern bobwhite quail was lost."*

*"I love the outdoors and everything about it and the whole universe in which we live. My one aim in life is to record it for my own satisfaction and the satisfaction of the people who come after me. That's all there is to my art."*

*Owen J. Gromme*

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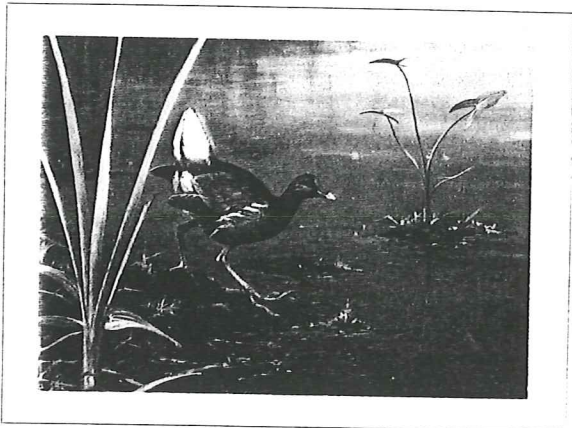
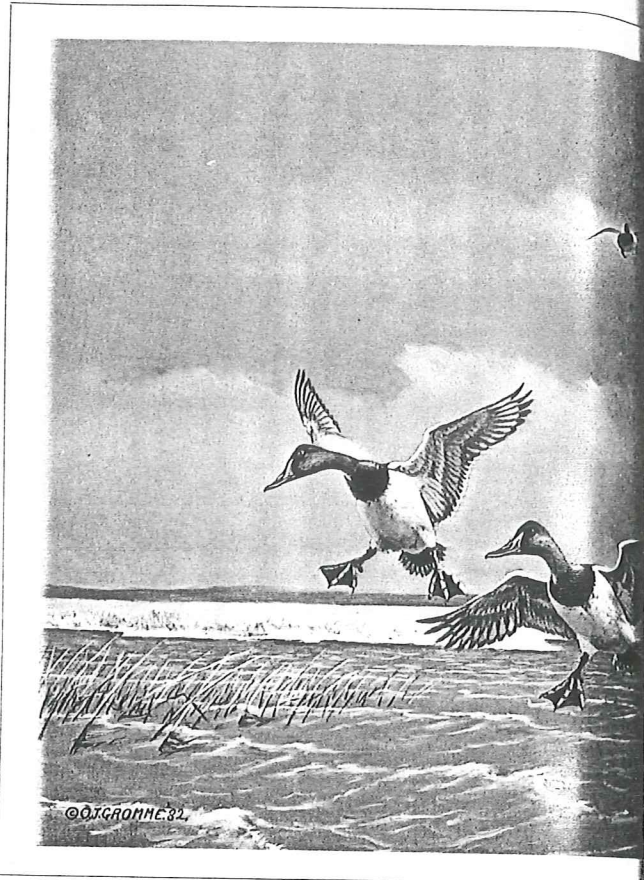
**Virginia Deer with Fawns**

*"There is no large mammal which is quite as well-known or loved as the whitetail deer.*

*One day I very carefully observed this doe and her two fawns as they approached the water for a drink. The sun shone behind the animals, causing the light to filter delicately through their ears, making the ears seem almost translucent.*

*The mother is a scrawny doe with her ribs and loins showing because most does are quite lean at this time of year, since the nursing fawns keep their mother's weight down. And she has a few scars on her skin where she has been tangled in barbed wire fences. But she makes a beautiful picture with her new fawns.*

*Finally, the water, coffee-colored due to the tannic acid of the tamarack swamps it flows through, contrasts nicely with the soft green of the summer foliage."*



**Common Gallinule (Moorhen)**

*"The major elements of a wildlife painting are subject, composition, light, color and detail. These are things which I strive for in each and every painting. I try to make each work that I do better than anything I have ever done before. The completed painting may not be the best that has ever been done, but I want it to be the best that I have ever done.*

*Take this painting of a common moorhen (gallinule) as an example. In it, I placed the moorhen (or Florida gallinule as they are also known) in a setting which is typical for it. Then I made the plants and land formations lead the viewer's eye to the bird. Without fencing the moorhen in it, the plants establish a direction for the eye, always bringing the viewer back to the bird.*

*As far as light and color are concerned, they are interdependent, for the direction and type of light — morning, midday or evening — largely determine what colors predominate. And the bird itself is portrayed with the kind of detail and accuracy that many years of observation bring."*

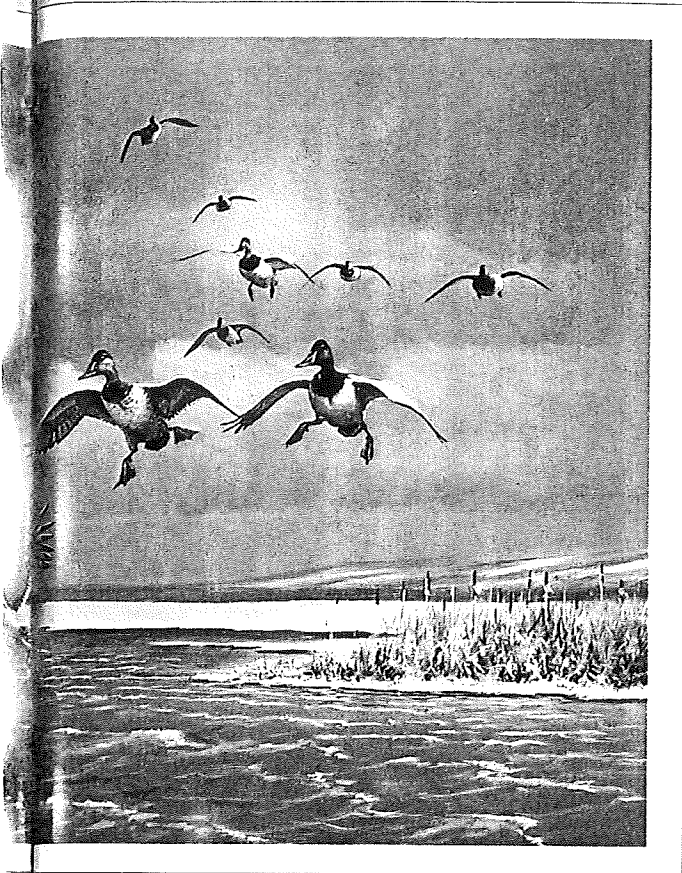
Now, more than at any other time in his life, Gromme is frustrated and angered by the policies of the current federal administration. Gromme believes that the progress wrought by a generation of environmentalists like himself is now on the auction block. He cautions that while "we may in time change the government, there is not much we can do to replenish our natural resources."

"Once the resources are gone, they're gone," Gromme argues. "We'll never have them back again. Current policies are turning our natural resources into fat bank accounts, and that is what really disturbs me."

Gromme laments what he calls "change in emphasis" at the Department of the Interior in particular. "I want my grandchildren to have fresh air to breathe and clean water to drink. I don't think that's too much for any of us to ask."

Gromme expounded on this environmental ethic in detail during a commencement address at Fond du Lac's Marion College in June of 1978: "We owe a great deal to those who came before us, and it is our duty to pass on to posterity a world morally and physically as good or better than the one we live in... By every legal means, it is our duty to oppose those who, out of greed and avarice, or for selfish or other reasons, would pollute, defile or destroy that which means life itself to every living being."

*From The World of Owen Gromme*



### Canvasbacks

"Canvasbacks, like other diving ducks, can be thought of as cold weather ducks. They stay in the northern climes until freeze-up and are often seen when the snow is blowing. This picture, for example, shows a flock of 'cans' winging in over the ice and frozen shore to a patch of open water. On their way south against a dark, cloudy sky, they have probably spotted this open water and are coming in for a rest before continuing their southerly flight.

Canvasbacks are easy to recognize in flight because of their large, rusty-red heads and muscular necks. Considering the speeds they attain (up to 70 mph), 'cans' have comparatively short wings which they must flap very rapidly to attain such great speed."



### Barn Owl

"We call this bird a common barn owl because of its habit of nesting in old barns, silos, church belfries or other old buildings. Actually, I have only known of one owl which ever nested in a barn, but the name seems quite appropriate nevertheless.

There is something 'ghostly' about the common barn owl. Its light color, heart-shaped face, dark eyes and silent flight all contribute to that sense of "other-worldliness" which the barn owl evokes. And since they are often seen flying at night, just beyond the reach of a car's headlights or else in the dim light of some old, musty building, they give a sense of being unreal.

Embracing this point of view, I painted my barn owl in a setting which would contribute to its ghostly aura. Peering down from the haymow of a musty, rough old barn, the owl is surrounded by cobwebs, dust and relics from a bygone day. This was a commissioned work, with the patron requesting the background of an old barn, and I was quite pleased with the final result."

When the National Audubon Society held its annual convention in Milwaukee in 1970, the Gromme exhibit at the Marshall and Isley Bank was the big attraction. Inasmuch as I had not yet seen any of his original canvases, I was dumbfounded. Here was an artist, 12 years older than I, doing his very best work at a time in life when so many other painters were putting their brushes aside. It was a moving experience; an extraordinary affirmation of life and vitality. An example to follow.

Owen Gromme demonstrates as convincingly as any man I know that creative growth can continue, and need not taper off or atrophy when a person reaches the traditional age of retirement. Quite the contrary. It was then that his art — painting birds — soared to new heights. His output was prodigious and it became almost a status symbol to own a Gromme original, many of which were reproduced as limited edition prints by Wild Wings, Inc. Over 40 years at the museum had given him the training and discipline that made his formidable skills possible.

*From introduction to The World of Owen Gromme* **ROGER TORY PETERSON**

Despite the setbacks, the frightening prospect of acid rain, the continued erosion of some of our nation's most precious topsoil, the threats to pure water and the expanding list of endangered species, Gromme remains hopeful. He is convinced, much as he was in 1935, that education of the nation's young people will insure the preservation of our country's natural resources. "If we are to save this fair land of ours," he contends, "conservation must be taught to the school children."

Pausing for a moment, he adds, "I like to reduce things to a few sentences, something easy to understand. If you think about it for a minute, it's all very simple. The next generation needs pure water and clean air. It's our job to make sure they have it."

*From The World of Owen Gromme*