



**A**WARD-WINNING ARTIST John Threlfall has found pastel to be the medium that gives him the most enjoyment and satisfaction. “It’s so tactile,” he enthuses, adding that his focus when producing his wildlife and landscape art is all about “quick mark-making and getting the image down.” Threlfall loves pastel’s immediacy and appreciates that there’s no waiting for work to dry as with paint, making it user-friendly—especially when working in the depths of the unforgiving Scottish Highlands, where the artist lives.

“Pastel has a fabulous facility for mark-making, and there are wonderful bright colors and pigments,” Threlfall says. Although he has worked with both acrylics and oils in the past, these other media just don’t satisfy him in the

way that pastels do. “You can play about with pastel and its various forms,” he says. So, even within the medium, he utilizes pastel in various ways, depending on what he has in his hand. “For me, working in soft pastels and pencils is quickest. With harder pastels, I’ve got to go slower.”

The artist works both outdoors and in his studio. Working outside, he’s more reactive, focusing on getting the scene down quickly in an effort to outpace the changing light and weather. “Meanwhile, in the

OPPOSITE  
Five Puffins (pastel on paper, 00x00)

BELOW  
Costa Head, Orkney (pastel on paper, 00x00)



# BIG COUNTRY

**JOHN THRELFALL** melds aspects of memory, color and mark-making to strengthen the intent behind his compositions and awaken a powerful response in viewers. BY TIM SAUNDERS





LEFT  
**Gray Wagtail**  
 (pastel on  
 paper, 00x00)

BELOW  
**Gray Seals** (pastel  
 on paper, 00x00)

Threlfall enjoys the spontaneity of his work and how it can change quickly, which is just as well when he's tackling the demanding subject of constantly moving wildlife. "I play around with the composition, pushing it and exploring the subject matter," he says. He thrives on exploring how to overcome difficulties in mark-making and mixing colors. "Pastels allow me to quickly express energy, enthusiasm and excitement," he says, "but it doesn't always happen right away, nor with every painting. I'll knock it back and bring it forward, and the process can take some time. I've always worked from the heart, not the head."

Threlfall considers becoming an elected member of the Society of Wildlife Artists his greatest achievement. "I started drawing wildlife quite late in life," he recalls. "There are lots of amazingly talented wildlife artists out there, so to be recognized by my peers was a huge moment for me. They're a great bunch of people."

## A CREATIVE LIFE

A professional artist for longer than he cares to remember, Threlfall's enthusiasm for pastels is passed on through the classes he teaches. "I enjoy showing students how to see the world in a new way," he says, adding that he has taught other media but didn't get the same sense of enjoyment

studio I'm more contemplative," he says. "I take a break and have a coffee—it's relaxing. It's also seasonal. In the spring and autumn, I'm outside all the time. In the summer and winter, I'm in the studio. When I was younger, I painted outside at all times of the year. It's too cold for me outside in the winter now, and I suffer from hay fever during the summer months, so I have to paint in the studio."

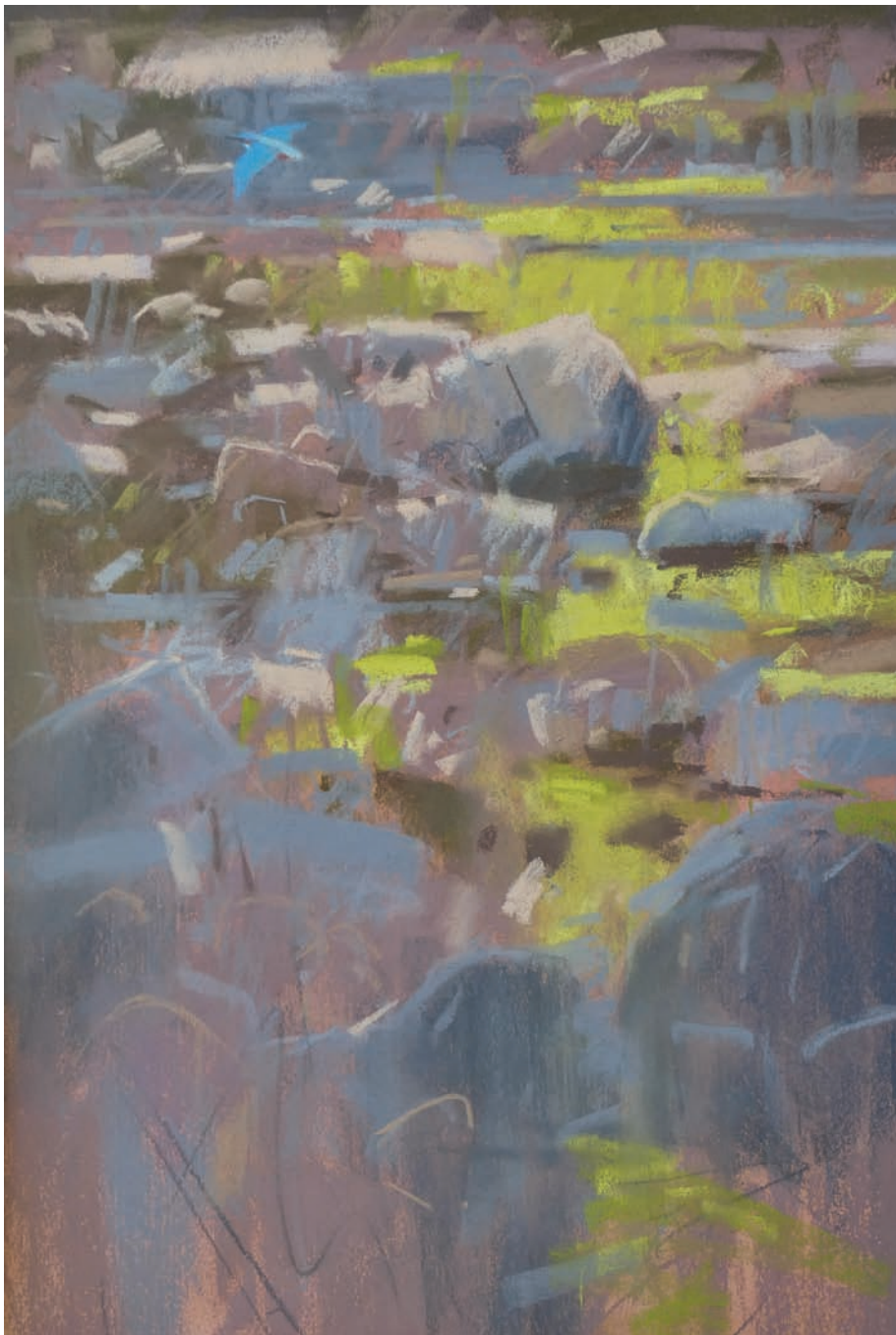
## THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Threlfall's fundamental love of the outdoors is a main driver in his art practice. The seasonal changes, beautiful landscape and diverse wildlife are all factors that continue to stimulate his senses. Born in Lancashire, England, the 64-year-old artist has resided in Scotland for the latter half of his life. "I now live in the Highlands, in northeast Scotland, where there's a decent winter," he says. "It's cold, with snow in the mountains and white mountain hares dotting the landscape. In the autumn, there's a great change of color."

This is a contrast to Dumfries and Galloway, in southwest Scotland, where he lived when he first came to the country. "When we moved north four years ago for my wife's job, I was intrigued to see how my work would change with the landscape," Threlfall says. "It's drier and colder here, and the colors are so different. It's arable, with lots of Scotch pines, and the Cairngorm Mountains have an Arctic aspect. The southwest has more deciduous spruces and rye fields full of cattle."







## ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

Threlfall names Unison as his favorite brand of pastel, but also uses a lot of Daler-Rowney pastels. For his support, the artist prefers working on Canson Mi-Teintes or Fabriano hot-pressed watercolor paper. “The latter I cover with gouache,” he says, noting that he works in a manner similar to artist John Blockley (English, 1921–2002). “For me, it’s all about exploring the surfaces I work on,” he says.

According to Threlfall, Blockley was open to covering his paper in gouache, acrylic or watercolor. Threlfall uses only gouache because he prefers a matte finish over a shiny one, which, he says, can be off-putting. “This approach allows you to decide the color of your background,” he adds.

LEFT  
Flyby (pastel on paper, 00x00)

OPPOSITE  
Fulmar (pastel on paper, 00x00)

as he does with pastels. In addition to running his regular pastel course, Threlfall will be offering a workshop series this fall and winter that focuses on drawing and meditation. He also plans to continue working as an Art Safari tutor on Orkney, the islands off the coast of Scotland, famous for well-preserved Neolithic sites as well as an abundance of marine and avian life.

Threlfall comes from a creative family. “On my mother’s side, I have a cousin, Brian Pilkington, who’s a very good artist,” says Threlfall. “I looked up to him a lot. My mother was also very creative.” At school, in Lancashire, Threlfall notes that he always loved art but wasn’t inspired by the coursework, so he pursued a career in the sciences instead. “I got a degree in geological chemistry and got work taking

samples for the British Geological Survey in the summers, which exposed me to a vast array of wildlife and sweeping vistas in the English countryside and Scottish Highlands. During the winter months, I worked as a ski instructor. Any spare time I had, mainly in autumn, was spent drawing and painting.”

The artist has been an avid skier since the age of 14. “I love the exhilaration of it, careering down the slope at great speeds,” he says. “As an instructor, there was a lot of psychology involved in the teaching—a lot of focus on how to overcome fear—it was fascinating. This was in the early 1980s, when we were starting to think about the left brain and right brain. It’s interesting how that correlates with the artistic process as well. I explore this concept in my classes.

## “I’ve always worked from the heart, not the head.”

— JOHN THRELFALL



## APPROACHING A PAINTING

Threlfall has been inspired by a number of artists, including Bob Kuhn (American, 1920–2007), known for his wildlife work. “His drawings and paintings are lively and colorful,” says the artist. The paintings and drawings of Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) also appeal to Threlfall, largely because Degas experimented with techniques that included contrasting dry and wet pastel.

Threlfall doesn’t have any particular routine or process when it comes to his work. “I don’t have a typical day,” he says. “I may aspire to walk the dog, come back, do some yoga and meditation, have a coffee, do some administrative tasks, sit at the easel for a couple of hours, have lunch and then return to the easel for a few hours. In practice, however, this rarely happens. For instance, earlier today I was walking the dog down by the river and saw some wonderful geese. So after I’ve had lunch I plan to return to that spot.”

When asked whether he has ever been tempted—in this technology driven world—to ditch traditional media for digital, Threlfall smiles. “No, I haven’t been,” he quickly replies. “I’m quite happy for others like Hockney to do that. I truly love working with pastel on paper. It’s so tactile—you don’t get that with digital.” **PJ**

**Tim Saunders** (tasaunders.weebly.com) contributes to publications in Great Britain and the United States. He’s publisher and editor of *Contemporary Artist* and hosts the *In Conversation* podcast.



**John Threlfall** (johnthrelfall.co.uk) is a member of both the Society of Wildlife Artists and the Artists’ for Nature Foundation. In 2007, he was named the Swarovski/Birdwatch Magazine Bird Artist of the Year, and his paintings have won multiple awards in various exhibitions. He’s the author of two books: *Between the Tides* and *Drawn to the Edge*. Both were written and illustrated to showcase the extraordinary diversity of habitat and wildlife around the U.K. coastline. The artist’s work has appeared in numerous other publications, including *Artists Magazine*; *Bird Art and Photography*. Threlfall has been teaching drawing and painting workshops for more than 15 years. He makes his home in the Scottish Highlands.