

PAINTING THE FALLS OF YELLOWSTONE



One of Poulsen's finished paintings, *Citadel of Asgard Falls*. Photo credit Ron Maier Photography.

The Bechler region in the southwest quarter of Yellowstone National Park is one of the most remote and least-traveled regions of the park. It is also home to some of the most stunning, varied, and unique waterfalls in the Rocky Mountains. Cody-based artist M.C. "Mike" Poulsen embarked on a multi-year journey to capture these waterfalls on canvas. His goal was to not only depict the beauty of the falls, but to incorporate the Native American history, natural history, and ecological importance of the region.

"Historically the arts have been paramount in conservation efforts," says Poulsen. "How else would Yellowstone have been protected if there was no knowledge of or understanding of those natural wonders?"

A Wyoming PBS production crew accompanied Poulsen

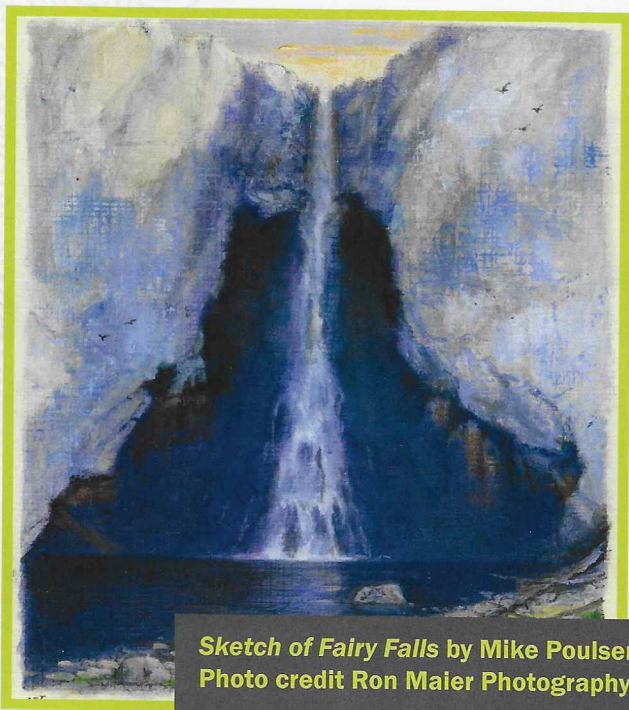
into the Yellowstone backcountry, filming the artist at work *en plein air* from 2015-16. "Painting in the backcountry is wrought with challenges," says the artist, "From logistics to truncated timetables. Much of the backcountry is rugged and at times unforgiving. Not to mention it was imperative that the local wildlife and landscape be as untouched as possible. Preservation means each person does their part to keep a light footprint and respect the sacrifices of those that work so hard to keep it safe and unspoiled."

The finished documentary is titled, *Painting the Falls of Yellowstone*, and it premiered in May of 2017 in Yellowstone's gateway communities of Cody, Dubois, and Jackson. It went on to air on Wyoming PBS in June, and has since enjoyed nationwide distribution.

Finding the Falls

Beginning as early as the late 1970s Yellowstone National Park archivist and historian, Lee H. Whittlesey, was already underway on a project to document the history of all the known waterfalls in Yellowstone. In the 1980s, park employee Mike Stevens began an independent mission to photograph all of these waterfalls. Then in the 1990's when Paul Rubinstein came aboard, the three began a new quest to survey the previously unexplored rivers and creeks in the park's remotest backcountry. They had no idea that their ten years of exploring the Yellowstone wilderness would yield so much new information. Their seven years of research and thousands of miles of off-trail exploration has provided the most new, large feature geographical information to the contiguous United States map in the last half-century.

Poulsen was introduced to the backcountry waterfalls when he attended a presentation by Stevens, Whittlesey



**Sketch of Fairy Falls by Mike Poulsen.
Photo credit Ron Maier Photography.**

and Rubinstein the Buffalo Bill Museum of the West. They had recently published the book, *Yellowstone Waterfalls*, and Poulsen was so taken with their research that he decided then and there to retrace their steps and document some of the over 290 waterfalls that they had discovered. Mike Stevens came on board as a guide, and the journey began.

America's national parks have long been a destination for artistic expeditions. According to Poulsen, "Artists like Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and photographers like William Henry Jackson used their talents as artists to bring to light what was otherwise considered myths and tall tales spun by trappers and mountain men who had seen the wonders of what would become Yellowstone. Their works inspired Congress to preserve those natural wonders and became influential in creating Yellowstone as the first national park in world history. Working on this project has in many ways been like walking in the footsteps of those great artists."

The Yellowstone Waterfall Project

Production on *Painting the Falls of Yellowstone* may have wrapped, but Poulsen's Yellowstone Waterfall Project is a long-term endeavor. "We have gone back into the backcountry of Yellowstone for the past 4-5 years now," says the artist, "Collecting information and doing sketches and studies of the waterfalls. We will

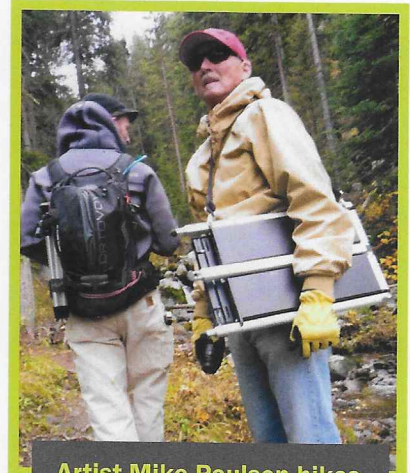
have museum exhibits starting in 2021." The Booth Museum in Cartersville, Georgia has scheduled a show set to feature 40-45 paintings and over 100 sketches, as well as a book and field guide showcasing many of Yellowstone's most breathtaking backcountry falls.

Poulsen continues to paint at the Poulsen Studio Gallery in Cody, and it is there that collectors can see the paintings and sketches as they are completed. Patrons can meet the artist, and even sponsor a waterfall of their choice through the Yellowstone Waterfall Project. A portion of that cost goes to the Yellowstone Forever Foundation for their Children's Education programs.

"People must be moved enough to act," says Poulsen, "Moved enough to care. Art and education is completely capable of doing so. Educating and inspiring the next generation to develop a stake in these natural wonders and the issues surrounding the Park is what makes this so much fun. There is so much to love about Yellowstone and its history but we have to find a way to rise above the noise and bring it to life."

M.C. "Mike" Poulsen

A life-long portrait and landscape artist, Mike Poulsen received the Wyoming Governor's Arts Award in 2011 and was the Honored Artist at the 2008 Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale. Poulsen also shares his love of art with budding artists as part of the Painting with the Masters program at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody. His paintings are part of the permanent collections of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West and the Pentagon Hall of Heroes, and he is a featured artist in many shows, including the Autry Museum Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale, and the Eiteljorg Quest for the West Art Show.



**Artist Mike Poulsen hikes
the trail to Lost Falls.**