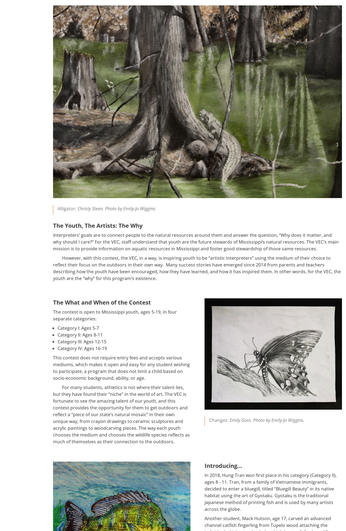
FEATURE

Mississippi's Natural Mosaic:

Interpretation Through Art



Dragonflies: Kate Brooke Hamilton. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Emily Jo Wiggins

About the Author

Each state has a veritable "color palette" of natural resources. The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) provides youth the opportunity to use their creativity and capture native wildlife in the annual Youth Art Contest, hosted by the Bob Tyler Fish Hatchery Visitor Education Center (VEC) and sponsored by the Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries, Parks, Marine Foundation (MWFPMF). The VEC has received over 5,000 submissions from students across the state since its inception in 2014, with an average currently of 800 per year. These students reflect the feet of the Appalachian Mountains down to the Gulf Coast and across to the Mississippi Delta.

Alligator: Christy Steen. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

The Youth, The Artists: The Why

Interpreters' goals are to connect people to the natural resources around them and answer the question, "Why does it matter, and why should I care?" For the VEC, staff understand that youth are the future stewards of Mississippi's natural resources. The VEC's main mission is to provide information on aquatic resources in Mississippi and foster good stewardship of those same resources.

However, with this context, the VEC, in a way, is inspiring youth to be "artistic interpreters" using the medium of their choice to reflect their focus on the outdoors in their own way. Many success stories have emerged since 2014 from parents and teachers describing how the youth have been encouraged, how they have learned, and how it has inspired them. In other words, for the VEC, the youth are the "why" for this program's existence.

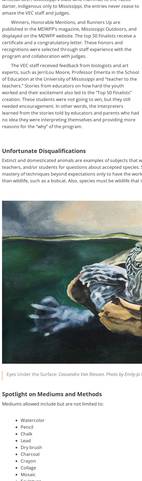
The What and When of the Contest

The contest is open to Mississippi youth, ages 5-19, in four separate categories:

- Category I: Ages 5-7
- Category II: Ages 8-11
- Category III: Ages 12-15
- Category IV: Ages 16-19

This contest does not require entry fees and accepts various mediums, which makes it open and easy for any student wishing to participate, a program that does not limit a child based on socio-economic background, ability, or age.

For many students, athletics is not where their talent lies, but they have found their "niche" in the world of art. The VEC is fortunate to see the amazing talent of our youth, and this contest provides the opportunity for them to get outdoors and reflect a "piece of our state's natural mosaic" in their own unique way, from crayon drawings to ceramic sculptures and acrylic paintings to woodcarvings and canvas. The way each youth chooses the medium and chooses the wildlife species reflects as much of themselves as their connection to the outdoors.



Bluegill Beauty: Hung Tran. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.



Changes: Emily Goss. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Introducing...

In 2018, Hung Tran won first place in his category (Category II, ages 8 - 11. Tran, from a family of Vietnamese immigrants, decided to enter a bluegill, titled "Bluegill Beauty" in its native habitat using the art of Gyotaku. Gyotaku is the traditional Japanese method of printing fish and is used by many artists across the globe.

Another student, Mack Hutson, age 17, carved an advanced channel catfish fingerling from Tupelo wood attaching the individual whiskers or barbels, which he carefully shaved from toothpicks. The carving technique reflected accurate muscle movements as though the fish was swimming in the water. This accuracy, combined with accurate color patterns, the attention to habitat, and inclusion of "fellow inhabitants" around an aquatic environment won him first place in Category IV (ages 16-19) in 2025.

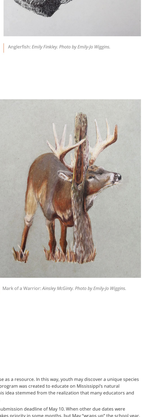
These are just two of the thousands of students that exhibit exceptional work and have showcased their talents in a way that was not offered before in Mississippi. Many that took second or third place, or missed a placement altogether, honed their skills and entered in subsequent years to win and place multiple times. Some students decided to try a different medium entirely and found their skills were adequate, they were just in need of a different "tool" or "material."

Diving into Details

Entries must include a completed entry form and art piece. Wildlife must currently live or migrate through Mississippi. From whitetail deer, Mississippi's state land mammal, to the Yazoo darter, indigenous only to Mississippi, the entries never cease to amaze the VEC staff and judges.

Winners, Honorable Mentions, and Runners Up are published in the MDWFP's magazine, Mississippi Outdoors, and displayed on the MDWFP website. The top 50 finalists receive a certificate and a congratulatory letter. These honors and recognitions were selected through staff experience with the program and collaboration with judges.

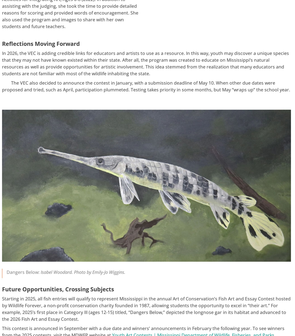
The VEC staff received feedback from biologists and art experts, such as Jericlus Moore, Professor Emerita in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi and "teacher to the teachers." Stories from educators on how hard the youth worked and their excitement also led to the "Top 50 Finalists" theme. Sometimes entries were not going to win, but they still needed encouragement. In other words, the interpreters learned from the stories told by educators and parents who had no idea they were interpreting themselves and providing more reasons for the "why" of the program.



Red Touches Yellow: Sawyer Renick. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Unfortunate Disqualifications

Extinct and domesticated animals are examples of subjects that will not be accepted. The VEC provides contact information for parents, teachers, and/or students for questions about accepted species. Staff have received excellent work that showed quality, accuracy, and mastery of techniques beyond expectations only to have the work disqualified due to the depiction of a domesticated house cat rather than wildlife, such as a bobcat. Also, species must be wildlife that inhabit or migrate through the state.



Eyes Under the Surface: Cassandra Van Riessen. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Spotlight on Mediums and Methods

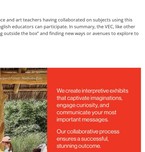
Mediums allowed include but are not limited to:

- Watercolor
- Pencil
- Chalk
- Lead
- Dry brush
- Charcoal
- Crayon
- Collage
- Mosaic
- Sculpture
- Woodcarving
- Woodburning

A mixture of medium is accepted, but photographs are only allowed as guides. Photographs or images created with computer software are disqualified. For this program, no assistance with computer software is allowed.

One unique piece submitted was a life-size replica of a male cardinal made from wire and hundreds of tiny beads woven together. Another youth created a coral snake from used shotgun shells. It was titled "Red Touches Yellow" and accurately depicted the difference between the coral snake and a king snake. Recycled materials are also welcome, like the 2023 entry that won honorable mention. This piece was constructed from soda cans into a sculpture of a hummingbird!

One student created an eagle fish with pen and paper using the stippling method. She used tens of thousands of dots to form, shade, and ultimately create a full image of this fish. Another student cut thousands of tiny pieces of paper of various colors and glued them together to create a complete picture of a red fox. This piece won second place in Category IV in 2022. In this way also, the contest allows students to submit individual pieces to complete a full picture of Mississippi's abundant wildlife, both on land and beneath the water's surface.



Beedy Eyes: Darcy Renick. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.



Anglerfish: Emily Finley. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

The Judging Process

Each piece is graded on wildlife accuracy and artistic elements, using the feedback and knowledge of staff and program supporters from both wildlife and art backgrounds.

Wildlife elements judged by biologists:

- Wildlife Message Content: Accuracy of wildlife message
- Accuracy of Species/Habitat: Correct color, habitat, etc.
- Uniqueness of Species: Endangered species, etc.
- Wildlife Behavior: Accurate interaction between species (predators and prey), interaction of species with their environment, etc.

Artistic elements involved in the judging process include:

- Concept and Originality: Exhibits creativity
- Composition: Effective use of form
- Overall Appearance: Cleanness
- Elements of Art: Color, space, line, and texture
- Craftsmanship: Use of medium and material
- Degree of Difficulty: Appropriate for artist's ability and age

Judges are MDWFP Wildlife and Fisheries biologists, art professors from local universities, members of local arts councils, and/or Mississippi artists.

One judge and Mississippi artist is Allen Winters, a published Choctaw artist and engraver who works with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and has worked with the Smithsonian Institute. Professor Emeritus Jericlus Moore, as previously mentioned, worked at the University of Mississippi and published several books, including co-author of The A is STEAM, Lesson Plans and Activities for Integrating Art, Ages 0-8 (2022). In addition to assisting with the judging, she took the time to provide detailed reasons for scoring and provided words of encouragement. She also used the program and images to share with her own students and future teachers.



Mark of a Warrior: Ainsley McGinty. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Reflections Moving Forward

In 2026, the VEC is adding creative links for educators and artists to use as a resource. In this way, youth may discover a unique species that they may not have known existed within their state. After all, the program was created to educate on Mississippi's natural resources as well as provide opportunities for artistic involvement. This idea stemmed from the realization that many educators and students are not familiar with most of the wildlife inhabiting the state.

The VEC also decided to announce the contest in January, with a submission deadline of May 15. When other due dates were proposed and tried, such as April, participation plummeted. Testing takes priority in some months, but May "wraps up" the school year.



Dangers Below: Isabel Woodard. Photo by Emily Jo Wiggins.

Future Opportunities, Crossing Subjects

Starting in 2026, all fish entries will qualify to represent Mississippi in the annual Art of Conservation's Fish Art and Essay Contest hosted by Wildlife Forever, a non-profit conservation charity founded in 1987, allowing students the opportunity to excel in "their art." For example, 2025's first place in Category II (ages 12-15) titled, "Dangers Below," depicted the longnose gar in its habitat and advanced to the 2026 Fish Art and Essay Contest.

This contest is announced in September with a due date and winners' announcements in February the following year. To see winners from the 2025 contest, visit the MDWFP website at Youth Art Contests | Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks.

Concluding Thoughts

This program originally turned S.T.E.M. into S.T.E.A.M. with some science and art teachers having collaborated on subjects using this contest. However, with the national essay component now offered, English educators can participate. In summary, the VEC, like other interpretive locations, is committed to engaging the public by "thinking outside the box" and finding new ways or avenues to explore to engage, educate, and enlighten our "future conservationists."