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- MEMBERSHIP SERVICES

- CONTINUING EDUCATION

- PUBLICATIONS

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- CLASSIFIEDS

- FOUNDATION

- ACADEMY

- AUXILIARY

- RVTs AND CVAs

- PET OWNERS

- PRESS ROOM

- RESOURCES

TVMA SPOTLIGHT

Where the Wild Things Are

That is where you will find Dr. Scott Echols, TVMA 2007 Non-Traditional Species Practitioner of the Year

by **Lindsey Oechsle**

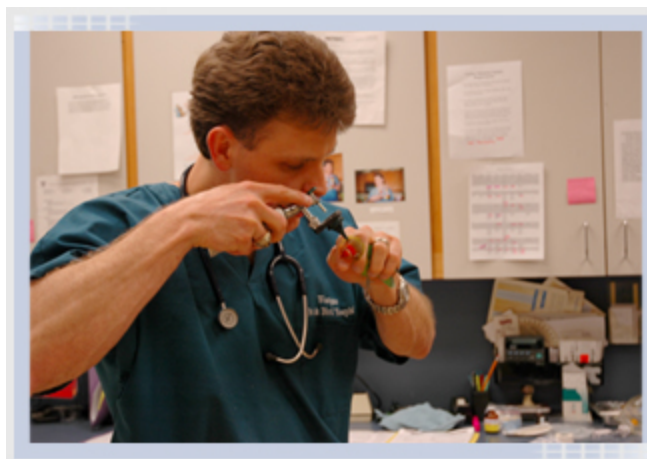
“What award are you getting now, dr. Echols?” asks a staff member as I follow him into the examination area – a fair question, considering his lengthy list of accomplishments.

Dr. Scott Echols laughs in his characteristic humility. “I was

awarded International Avian Veterinarian of the Year two years ago,” he quietly explains to me, making light of his widespread acclaim. He could have mentioned any one of his various professional honors, but appears modestly anxious to move on.

The award that Dr. Scott Echols is most recently being recognized for is the 2007 TVMA Non-

Traditional Species Practitioner of the Year. Dr. Echols' award-winning accomplishments are not



limited to his numerous developments in and contributions to veterinary science. Perhaps more notably, it is in his revolutionary approach to methods of education and sharing information with students, clients and colleagues that Dr. Scott Echols truly gains worldwide acclaim.

It is a Tuesday afternoon in early spring, and Westgate Pet and Bird Hospital is bustling with activity. The South Austin Hospital has a staff of nearly 30 people, comprised of three doctors, a sizeable nursing staff, front office staff and kennel staff. The age-old saying 'birds of a feather' is no better exemplified than by the camaraderie and skill of these Westgate professionals. From the reception area to the examining rooms, a feeling of family and understanding resonates in this well-oiled institution.

Dr. Echols is one of three doctors at Westgate – the most recent addition, having arrived seven years ago. He is also the third in his practice to receive the TVMA Non-Traditional Species Practitioner of the Year Award. Dr. Harry Miller, Westgate's founder, and Dr. Rick Lusk who practices with Dr. Echols, are past recipients. It may not be a prerequisite, but it certainly implies the caliber of their skill.

A wide array of animals, both exotic and domestic, come to see Dr. Echols, though he spends his time predominately with birds. The day of my visit is no different. At the time most professionals delve into rush-hour traffic, Dr. Echols' remaining patient list includes an African lovebird with an ear infection, a guinea pig with a leg injury, a wild duck with a swollen toe, a struggling baby chinchilla and a vocally uncomfortable Bengal cat with a swollen bladder.

Though Dr. Echols is a Board Certified specialist in avian medicine and surgery, he expresses his frustration in the limitations of specialized practice. "I love cats and dogs too. I love horses, but

you can't do it all. There's no board certification for small mammals, fish, reptiles or anything like that at this time. As a bird specialist, I'm limited to about 9,000 species, so I'm more of a bird generalist, but that's my specialty."

From his initial experiences with birds, Dr. Echols admits an unexplainable understanding and connection with his feathered friends. "They just made sense," he confesses. "You know, some people have certain connections with certain animals. For whatever reason, it seems to click very well with me with the birds."

His passion for acquiring, understanding and furthering education is immediately recognizable – a trait almost as unique as the animals he loves and studies. It is these two great loves – exotic animals and revolutionary, applicable education – that inspired the work that Dr. Echols may be best known for. His educational presentation technique of choice is film.

"Instead of showing a slide show, I actually show presentations of videos, so it makes the presentations more lively. It explains the whole process, so I try to do these types of things as a method of teaching. Many people have told me that it has helped, and that's why I've continued doing it."

Not only does Dr. Echols author and narrate the content for his videos, but he also acts as the videographer and film editor. "I'm usually not in any of the videos," he admits with reserved laughter. "They're not really there to see me."

Dr. Echols is an Adjunct Professor of Exotic Animal Medicine at Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine. Though he thoroughly enjoys teaching, he says he doesn't want to give up his freedom of travel to teach full-time. What Dr. Echols may hesitate to acknowledge is that he is a full-time

teacher, no matter where he is. It is simply his nature.

He travels constantly with his responsibilities, as his expertise and effective lecturing is requested in every region of the world. His teaching requirements allow Dr. Echols to dedicate only three to five days each week to practice. In the middle of surgery, one of the receptionists interrupts him with proposed travel plans. Next week he will be traveling overseas to a conference in Zurich. Just last week he was working on exotics at a Los Angeles hospital and speaking to a local bird club.

Last year he taught at six universities both nationally and internationally. He names his hometown of Dallas as a regular destination, where he devotes his knowledge and dexterity at some of the area hospitals.

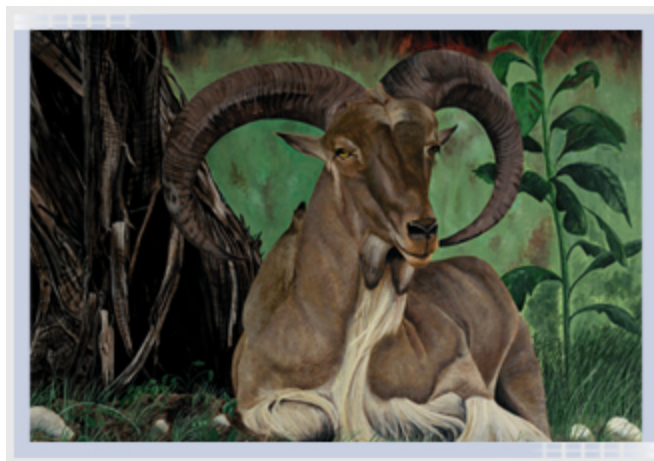
Though he may be a free spirit with a long for going, Dr. Echols is no stranger to the emotional strain stimulated by travel. In his international travels, his staff, practice and clients are not the only ones who miss him. He also departs from his home and family – his wife Layle, who is a relief veterinarian and practices at different hospitals in Austin, an African grey, several Italian greyhounds and two cats.

It is in fact this absence that inspired one of Dr. Echols' greatest film accomplishments. In "Captive Foraging: The Next Best Thing to Being Free," Dr. Echols attempts to counteract behavioral problems brought by bird captivity. In contrast to his lecturing videos, this DVD is intended to show clients how to provide the best care for their birds. The star of the film happens to be 'Missy,' an Umbrella cockatoo that was under Echols' care for several years.

"Missy was given to me as a neurotic bird, and she would do fine when I was in town, but as soon as I would leave, she would pluck her feathers," he explains. With the heavy travel Dr. Echols

endures with his lecturing, Missy developed separation anxiety – a common emotional problem with captive birds. Because of his desire for the well being of this beloved species, he has given the responsibility of caregiver to Jennifer, one of Westgate's knowledgeable and passionate staff members. Dr. Echols' love and concern for Missy is immediately apparent as he speaks of her with Jennifer. Missy continues to achieve widespread notoriety and celebrity status among aspiring students, avian professionals and bird owners across the world.

This adoration for creatures of the wild has lived in Dr. Echols for as long as he can remember. "I was the guy who would play in the creek and catch animals. I've always been attracted to wild animals especially, so I think towards the end of high



school I made a decision that I wanted to try and be a veterinarian – that's really what happened more or less."

Growing up in Dallas, it was Board member Dr. Gary Brantley, who offered a young Echols his first experience through a high school management internship program – an experience that Dr. Echols remembers fondly. After another brief stint at a mixed practice in a little town about an hour north of Dallas called Van Alstyne, Dr. Echols went on to academia.

"I was very young when I got into veterinary school – I was 19, so I was the youngest in the class, and I didn't know if I should even be there," he remembers. "You know, there were all these people who had all these experiences, and here I am – I hadn't had any."

Perhaps Dr. Echols felt that he had something to prove, but his thirst for knowledge was irrefutable – he is blessed by the special power of passion. In candid reflection of this time, he later said, “During veterinary school, I aspired to be the best I could to help my patients, clients and colleagues. I felt that I could best help those around me by gaining experience and truly understanding my subject.”

Indeed, Dr. Echols went to great lengths to truly understand his subject, beginning at the Wildlife Center where he started working with hoofstock. As a second-year student, Dr. Echols spent the summer working at the Navajo Nations Indian Reservation – an experience that he describes as ‘fly-by-the-seat-of-our-pants.’ There he was introduced to all facets of animal care with little to no direction. Whether catching cows and pulling calves in the field or performing surgeries with the book open, reading as he went along, he describes it as an interesting learning experience.

True to his exploratory nature, Dr. Echols continued to crave the unfamiliar in his last year of studies. With a desire to experience different aspects of veterinary medicine, he planned to work at a zoo, private practice, and in a field situation – and he did just that. When a recruiter from Guatemala came up to veterinary school, Dr. Echols had only one question: “Alright, what do I do, just show up?”

“I went to Guatemala and lived in a tree house for a month and worked out in the jungle, and it was a real great experience. There were eight of us in this Guatemalan tree house. They were from all over the world.” The nonchalant manner in which he describes this leads me to wonder what, if anything, Dr. Echols would consider to be unusual. Surprisingly, it was not living in a tree house above the jungle floor, sleeping under a mosquito net on a reed mat that Dr. Echols names

as the challenge of that experience. Dr. Echols, who describes himself as rather carnivorous, cites their vegetarian diet as his greatest struggle. "It was hard on me. I tried it, and I just lost weight like crazy, we were hungry the entire time."

In addition to his fieldwork in Guatemala, he went to the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, TX, where he worked specifically with caged exotic animals, and then on to Oakley, California to extern at The Medical Center for Birds with Dr. Brian Speer.

"Brian is still one of the most foremost avian experts in avian medicine and surgery, and he and I just hit it off. It was just an instant connection as far as mentor and friend, and he invited me back for a job."

When Dr. Echols graduated Magna Cum Laude from Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine in 1995, he took his mentor up on his offer and returned to Dr. Speer's hospital for an ABVP avian residency.

In his five years working with Dr. Speer, their accomplishments and developments would alter and evolve avian medicine in areas of flock health management, evaluation of pancreatic diseases and approaches to a variety of avian kidney disorders – to list a few. Today, with a long list of his own personal accomplishments, Dr. Echols credits Dr. Speer with introducing and instilling the deep interest in avian medicine that brought him where he is today.

It was in this residency that Dr. Echols discovered another talent – wildlife art. He describes it as a therapeutic activity that functions to ease his mind from the stressful grind of an endless workload. "When I was doing my residency, I would stay up until the middle of the night, and I just needed something to calm me down, so I started painting," he recalls as if it were the

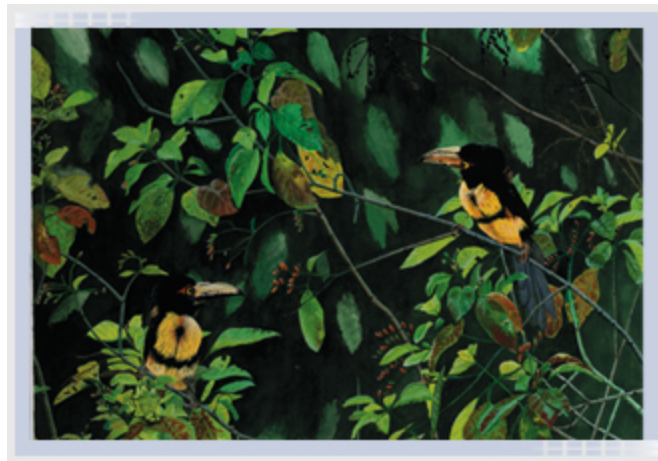
simple and simple solution. I just took it up.

Though watercolor is his medium of choice, this is not the impressionistic blending of shapeless color and ambiguous, dreamlike, representations of your typical watercolor artist. In fact, that it is watercolor is nearly unbelievable at first glance. The intricate detail in the depiction of his work could only be achieved by an ardent student of animals and an avid observationist.

He admits that he has trouble finding time to paint these days with his traveling.

"I would like to do more painting if I had more time, so I do a little bit of painting, though I'm not very prolific," he humbly resigns with a sigh. "I would like to do some more artwork of various sorts, but there are only so many hours in the day, so there's only so much I can do."

"Not that I'm lazy," he retreats – as if anyone would accuse him of that, "but I just haven't had time."



His finished pieces, averaging about a year each from start to completion, are stunning. Not surprisingly, birds seem to be his subject of choice. His most recent, and not yet completed work promises to feature a blue heron. A

yellow-billed ox-pecker is the star of his most popular work, and a piece featuring Aracaris has brought him notoriety. His adoration for these tropical birds is evident as he describes the subjects of his work.

“When I was in Guatemala, I photographed some of these little guys. They’re mini-toucans – toucanettes, I guess you could call them.” In 2001, this beautifully complex piece entitled *Two Collared Aracaris* graced the cover of the Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery (JAMS), of which he has been a member of the Editorial Review Board since 2000.

In addition to editing Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) proceedings and JAMS articles, Dr. Echols serves on the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP) application committee, writing and reviewing test questions for the Board exam. He also mentors some veterinarians applying for the test, assisting them with the application process. He will be teaching at the ABVP conference in California in about a month, providing what he refers to as “painstakingly intense lectures and stuff like that.”

Currently President-Elect of the AAV, Dr. Echols will begin his term as president in August. This international group deals with all aspects of bird medicine and surgery except for production poultry. As a delegate of this association, he will be attending the European AAV meeting in Zurich in April and will be the keynote speaker at the Australiasian AAV meeting in Australia in October. “So the Australiasian group and the European group are subsets of the International group, which is what I’m going to be president of,” he explains to me plainly, noticing that I’m having trouble keeping up.

A traveler of the world, Dr. Echols speaks spotty German and Spanish. “But not very well,” he reminds, careful not to appear too accomplished. Though English is his primary language, he claims a greater aptitude in ‘Tex Mex.’ His staff is quick to add Pig Latin to his list of lingual astuteness, to which he agrees with resignation and a chuckle. At the mention of video translation, Dr. Echols breaks into comedic performance, causing hilarity among his staff. “No not

yet," he finalizes, at the conclusion of his translation attempt en Español.

True to his non-traditional interests, he also enjoys playing the guitar. He grew up with heavy metal and head banging hard rock, and that is his genre of choice. He plays electric, 12-string, 6-string and dulcimer.

Dr. Echols' artistic abilities are not limited to watercolor and film, as he also displays an innate talent for photography. He has a wealth of photos on his computer of appealingly exotic animals that have received his care. Similar to his artwork, his photographs expose his intrinsic ability to truly capture the personalities of these otherwise unfamiliar creatures – bringing them to life in a single frame. As he shares the images with me, I realize that this talent for art and photography is a creative lovechild of both his visionary talents and his attraction to exotic animals and their behaviors. These images act as an educational tool for himself in his personal reference and for students in outward instruction.

Much to my excitement and interest, a lesson is spawned by his inescapable desire to exchange knowledge. As if sharing a family photo album of a travel expedition or unique tropical vacation, he recounts his experiences with these creatures. It is impossible not to find it fascinating. "That's a kinkajou from Central America, a fly-river turtle, also called 'pig-nosed turtles,' and they're a fruit-eating water turtle, not very common..."

As he continues, I begin to understand that this travel expedition of faraway places and things is not a Caribbean vacation; rather it is his life and his passion.

"I'm always looking for better ways to teach and to improve upon teaching," he shares. "I am always trying to find a better way to get a message across, and that's something that I think I

continually work at. That's kind of like an ongoing goal – to figure out a better method.”

Dr. Echols mentions that he is fortunate for two things: the opportunity to build upon and share his ideas with others, and to work with a variety animals. He credits his mentors, office staff and many others with giving him positive encouragement and guidance.

“These animals have taught me a lot, and not just medicine and surgery. I have really come to respect wild birds and am always fascinated by their behaviors and interaction with people and other animals.”

Dr. Echols takes pride in his active roles in both self-education and teaching others. He takes sharing information very seriously, with the consequence and hope that it may someday affect a pet, or family member. He cites this as his greatest responsibility.

I must add, that it is his greatest success.

If you would like to see more of Dr. Scott Echols' artwork, visit his websites [www.](http://www.archaeopteryxstudios.com)

[archaeopteryxstudios.com](http://www.archaeopteryxstudios.com) and www.echolsfineart.com.

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