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JACKSON HOLE, Wyo. -- Every journey has a milepost, where you can capture the essence of place. It might be a peek through a tavern window to watch locals dance the shag in Myrtle Beach, S.C., or a taste of the chocolate nut pie at the Boone Tavern Hotel in Berea, Ky.

In Wyoming, it's the National Museum of Wildlife Art. And it's not an easy milepost to see from Highway 89 outside of Jackson Hole. The museum cascades into a hillside overlooking the National Elk Refuge and the Gros Ventre Mountains.

But I knew I was knee deep in Wyoming when I found the museum's Carl Rungius Gallery. I spent so much time standing around the gallery, observing his work -- the museum staff was ready to call a taxidermist.

Rungius (1869-1959) painted with deep integrity, vivid colors and an impeccable balance between wildlife and landscape. He made it a point to learn about each animal's habitat demands. His bears, elk, moose, caribou and white mountain goats appear in majestic forms unadorned by any human imprints. The free spirit of Wyoming lives in his work.

The museum has the premier wildlife art collection in the world and the second largest collection of Rungius (pronounced run-geeus) work in the world. There are 648 cataloged Rungius items, including 201 paintings and assorted photographs and letters. (The largest collection is the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta.)

He was intense about getting things correct and to scale. At the gift shop, I picked up a reprint of a 1918 magazine, *Cowboys on the Green River*, that featured black-and-white photographs made by Rungius. He spent summers working at the Box R Ranch in Cora, Wyo., and he had the first and only camera in the county. Throughout his life, Rungius would head into the wild with a sketch pad, brush, paint box, rifle and his camera. He had an eagle eye.

A native of Germany, he spent free time at the Berlin Zoo sketching animals. He even wandered around the local glue factory to draw horse carcasses. In 1894, at age 25, Rungius came to America for the first time to visit an uncle. They went on a moose hunting trip in Maine but never saw a moose. The next summer Rungius went to Wyoming with a guide and enjoyed a fruitful hunting trip. That's when he decided to move to America. He set up a studio in New York City and traveled to Wyoming every summer. He died of a stroke while working at his easel in New York.

In his 65-year career, Rungius evolved from a narrow, academic technique -- in which he depicted animals with accuracy -- to a more expressive style

incorporating atmosphere, landscape and bolder colors. For example, in "At the Head of the Green River" he began deploying lots of warm blues and pinks to depict a late-summer trip to Wyoming. The museum's collection also includes "American Black Bear," commissioned in the late 1920s by the New York Zoological Society as part of an overall mission to protect America's endangered species. This painting of a husky black bear set against autumnal gold and yellow brush was purchased by Walter Rockefeller on behalf of the Jackson Lake Lodge, where it hung in the main hall for many years.

"He loved animals more than he did people," said Adam Duncan Harris, curator of art at the museum. "At the beginning of his career, he spent six days hunting and one day sketching. By the end of his career, he was spending six days sketching and one day hunting."

Since the museum opened in downtown Jackson Hole in 1987, and moved to its current location in the fall of 1994, its collection has grown from 250 pieces to more than 3,000. The museum consists of 12 exhibition galleries, a conference room, two full-sized classrooms, a 200-seat auditorium and library. An interactive children's gallery encourages visitors to touch anything they want. Children can climb a tree, sketch an animal skull or put on a costume and pretend they are a bird.

The museum began as a culmination of the collection of wildlife art by Jackson Hole's Bill and Joffa Kerr. Bill Kerr is director emeritus of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. But the museum expansion mirrors the transition from traditional wildlife art to photography and sculpture. In the art world, wildlife art is a new expression when compared to fine art.

Wildlife art developed in tandem with fishing and hunting and as a result two separate yet related genres developed: "sporting art," with emphasis on hunting and fishing, and "still life," which often presented big game as objects for further studies. The museum has ample examples of each form. "Animal art has been around since people drew images on the side of caves," explained Harris, 35. "In the late- to mid-1800s, it blossomed as an art form because more people moved to cities and lost connection with nature. They wanted representations of that in their homes. But it doesn't have to be related to the hunting side of things. For example, Edward Kemeys was a Chicago sculptor who did the lions in front of the Chicago Art Institute. We have tons of his work, and he wasn't doing hunting-related things."

Before catching my plane out of Jackson Hole Airport (the only airport in a national park), I had lunch at the museum's Rising Sage Cafe. During the day the 44-seat cafe serves upscale soup and sandwiches. There are eight outdoor picnic tables that overlook the 25,000-acre elk refuge across the highway. For private evening affairs, such as fund-raisers and wedding receptions, Executive Chef Tom Henninger specializes in wild game cooking with elk, buffalo and trout dishes. Not to worry -- the elk does not come from the refuge. The restaurant's red deer is

imported from New Zealand. Most American ranchers have yet to grow domestic elk in a commercial situation. It is cost prohibitive.

Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton have visited the museum and eaten at the Rising Sage Cafe. Clinton is a fan of the museum. Harris said, "Bill Clinton's favorite piece is a painting of a wolf by Ken Carlson. It's an intense closeup of a wolf with an abstract background. The wolf is loping along and coming right out of the picture frame." Vice President Dick Cheney has a home in Jackson Hole and is a frequent cafe visitor.

"This is my third administration," said Henninger, 37, who previously worked at Mistral in Redwood Shores south of San Francisco. "Clinton was the most cautious. He had a taster in the kitchen. Maybe because Cheney has been here so often he's become more trusting. He is definitely a meat-and-potatoes guy."

When the museum opened in its current location on the west side of the butte, founder Bill Kerr told the gathered cowboys, artists and ranchers, "May it long serve those who come to this place in search of the wild, the natural, the forgotten and serene." It is rare for museum walls to become this liberating.