



## *Marsh Path, Rainbow Island*

by **Gwen Nagel**

### **Subject and Composition:**

Perhaps because I grew up on the prairie and I now live inland in the Piedmont region of Georgia and in the western mountains in Maine, coastal marshes never fail to engage me. I was painting for a PAP-SE show on St. Simon's Island when my painting buddy, Junko—another lover of marshes—and I happened on to Rainbow Island, a spit of land between St. Simons and Sea Island. I was immediately attracted to the marsh because of the subtle colors of its grasses juxtaposed to a brilliant blue sky.

Marshes, however, can pose some composition problems: they are, after all, flat things, and unless you get a high vantage point they can prove very uninteresting indeed. The path leading into the clump of trees was just the composition I wanted. That there was distant detail in the far shore with a smattering of buildings catching the light, gave the scene that much more interest. The snake line of blue water suggested marsh, and the shadows on the path provided me with an echo of the pattern of darks.

This was an unusually pleasing composition for a marsh scene: I was ready to paint.

### **Materials, the Sketch and Block in:**

I use Kitty Wallis paper almost exclusively and a wide assortment of pastels, both hard and soft: Nu-Pastels, some Rembrandts, Sennelier, Schminke, Unison, Great American, and Terry Ludwig's. I might use my digital camera lens to help compose the scene; I also have a composition gadget that allows me to see what lies within the boundaries of my paper. On location I make a simple sketch with very thin willow charcoal, finding my focal point first (the tree on the right), establishing the horizon line, and then setting up the lead-in with the road. When I'm satisfied with that I begin to think about my darks. (In my studio at this point, I may loosely establish my darks with pastel, then get out some turpentine and rough brushes to lightly go over the dark pattern. On location I might use a Viva towel to loosely blend the deep colors of the underpainting.) I generally use a complement, especially on trees, so I might do a turp wash with a deep reddish brown. This is a blocky stage; I work quickly and I try to get in a lot of deep color. Because Kitty Wallis paper has so much tooth, I generally use the harder Nu Pastels for the block in. I look for more darks, as, for example in the shadows of the road, and find a pattern that is pleasing. I make sure I have color in my shadows: purple and blue and deep red.

I often then will move to the sky to establish its value: I have moved from dark to almost the lightest lights. Because the blue of the water was darker, I may sketch that in to make sure it is a different value than the sky. (I often have to fiddle with the values of the water in a piece, being sure that it reads water and that it is the correct value for the

passage I want darker, I may just spray it or I search for my darkest darks and punch up the passage with them.

## **The Light Values and Details**

The path is light in value, but I want it to have a lot of interest and color, so I block in more darks than I will eventually need. It is only after I've put in my darks in the road (shadows, brown of the earth, some green grasses) that I start stroking in the lights of the path, making sure I have enough color and that the lights don't go "too light" on me and I end up with "chalky" color.

I save the details until last. Again, I may get out my NuPastels or use the sharp end of a Terry Ludwig pastel to establish the branches of the main tree, some other little shrub here and there. I insert the highlights in the trees. I sparingly stroke in a few grasses; just enough to "read grass." A few spots of white here and there suggest some detail of flowers and they echo the distant whites of the buildings. On location I don't usually drag along a mat, but I always have one ready in my studio. When I put one around the painting I can usually tell if it is finished or what might be needed to complete it. I take the piece done on location back to my studio, let it "cool off," and look at it later to see if there are infelicities here and there or sections that need a touch or two of a pastel. At this point I am cautious because from experience I am aware that it is very easy to ruin a plein air piece in the studio with too much detail, with overwork.

## **Post Script**

The painting sold at Anderson Gallery in St. Simons and when I was back on the coast for the 2006 PAP-SE paintout and sale, I tried to return to Rainbow Island. But Sea Island had closed its gates to all but local traffic so I could not enter to paint. Because of this, I feel the piece holds a certain poignancy for me. As I write this I am in my home on a lake in the western mountains of Maine, and I feel it is time to pack my pastels and head for another of my favorite places to paint: the Scarborough marsh near Portland.