If you have ever taken a drawing class, you know the difficulty. I remember Life Drawing and my own feeble attempts at rendering the body from a model a few feet in front of me. The realization comes quickly that, in spite of excellent vision, I could not see. My friend, John Dawson, can see. Unlike you or I, John can see far beyond our paltry abilities. Using his uncanny sensory skills, John has been able to assist millions allowing us to join him on his visual journey through the natural world. As an artist, he is one of those rare souls who have mastered technique and can depict nature beyond the real. You are familiar with his work, although you may not know it, because he has illustrated so many magazine articles, ads and US postage stamps that we all have encountered it numerous times. John views the world not as it is but as it needs to appear in order to enhance our understanding of it. That is vision.

One of my first introductions to John’s special skill was a poster he created for Virgin Islands National Park. He was tasked with including all the salient features of the park both above and beneath the sea in one spectacular scene. Not only was his scene successful but it was transporting. You were there, within the park in a way that no visit would ever place you. This was one of the first in a long series of incredible dioramas John has painted over the years. His ability to create these spectacular vistas eventually led to his “Nature of America” series for the U.S. Postal service.

Birds and their feathers are made up of a plethora of details. To depict them in their natural setting photographically is now commonplace but nothing compares with what is possible with a fine illustration. Audubon magazine used John’s paintings for years to depict birds in precisely the manner they wanted and emphasizing those incredible details. He completed a wonderful series of posters called Family Portraits that featured members of the different avian families. These were cherished by their subscribers for years.

Sixteen hour days, often seven days a week, has been the norm for most of John’s career. He has always had a paint brush in his hand from the time he was small. He grew up in San Diego. After high school he attended the Los Angeles Art Center School (now the Art Center College of Design) He worked in Detroit for a bit, did a stint in the Army and returned home to San Diego and started his career as a graphic designer. Before long he started picking up work doing pen and ink illustrations for ads and articles. ‘Psychology Today’ hired him early on to do illustrations for their young magazine in the sixties. He worked on many diverse advertising projects and even depicted Morris the Cat for the can label back then. John taught life drawing for years while working in the illustration business.

In 1978 John and his wife Kathie decided to take a leap toward a higher level in illustration. With his already extensive portfolio they headed for Washington, DC where they met with National Geographic, Audubon and other potential customers for his work. On this trip they met Howard Paine, Senior Art Editor at National Geographic. Their relationship took off and led to years of interesting work with the magazine.

Relocating to Idaho, John started putting those sixteen hours a day towards fine color illustrations. These have included dozens of beautiful renderings of the type that made the magazine pop back then. One of my favorites was a cross section of a peat bog showing the broad range of habitats from the top to the bottom of the bog. This became John’s specialty, depiction of scenes that could not be shown in any other way.

John Dawson’s first article for National Geographic was a major undertaking. It was quite unusual to give a new artist in their employ such an important assignment. NG was putting together a feature article on ants and needed finely detailed illustrations to flesh it out. While working on the piece John had the opportunity to work with the writer, Bert Holdobler, and E.O. Wilson, both world reknown biologists at Harvard. John worked two years to produce the outstanding illustrations that brought these tiny insects and their complex world to life. It was one of the highlights of his career.

In the late eighties, John and Kathie travelled to Hawaii for the magazine and prepared the incredible gatefold that showed our islands in all their glory in one incredible three page fold out. If you have not seen it you should seek it out. They loved Hilo and decided they would escape the frigid Idaho winters and live here permanently. They have resided in Waiakea Uka since 1989.

Recently a ‘First Day of Issue’ celebration took place at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park for the final pane of stamps in the Nature of America series. Made up of twelve different panes of stamps featuring scenes of the many different ecosystems of the United States, these highly acclaimed scenes are among the most popular stamps the US Postal Service has ever produced. John Dawson has spent the last twelve years working on these stamps that were released one per year over the period. The Rainforest of Hawaii is the final pane in this monumental series.

Once I attended a local event with John and, as dignitaries droned, he sketched them and the crowd according to what grabbed him. Ah, if we could only see. His sketchbook is filled with these vignettes from his life. It is difficult to imagine the thrill of being able to visualize a scene and put it on paper at will. John Dawson has his own window on the world and through that window he has shown us the beauty and harmony of the natural world. Seeing through his eyes, I understand how little I see with my own.