

# SALLY OUT OF STEP IN GALAPAGOS LOVE DANCE

Artist showing work inspired by brush with Pacific islands

■ SIMON NEVILLE

**C**AMERA at the ready, Sally Oyler watched in stunned silence as the two birds performed their unique mating ritual in front of her.

The blue-footed boobies stuck their beaks and tails in the air, and let out an extraordinary whistling noise. Slowly they circled, mesmerised by the other's dance – until they noticed Sally's feet.

She laughs: "In the Galapagos Islands you have to keep to certain designated paths and some of these paths are quite narrow. I was walking along one when I saw these boobies doing their dance. Unfortunately, I was in the way, and he just stopped, looked me up and down, and I basically had to get out of his way. They were in the

middle of their mating dance, and weren't going to stop for anything. The birds carried on as if in their own world and I tiptoed round.

"It's just an amazing place – you're not allowed to touch the animals on the islands, but they are allowed to touch you.

"The animals are quite happy to have people around. The baby sealions are great, especially when you're snorkelling, as they will come right up to your mask and you think they're going to shatter it, then they flip over backwards and go off and see their friends again. They love people, they look at you like you look at them."

Such encounters with the wildlife of the islands, which lie some 600 miles from the coast of Ecuador, were the inspiration for the 47-year-old's latest solo exhibition, which starts in Edinburgh this week and features over 70 paintings from her travels. Sally spent two weeks in the place Charles Darwin got the basis for his groundbreaking evolutionary



**BRUSH WITH NATURE:** Sally Oyler tries to respect the colourful animals she paints around the world.

Picture: PAUL PARKE

thesis *The Origins of the Species*, painting and observing the beautiful environment.

"The Galapagos Islands have an incredible, very diverse lifestyle," she says. "The inspiration for this exhibition came from different characters and different wildlife there. There are birds that don't live anywhere else in the world."

Sally has been painting wildlife for around 20 years – since a safari in 1986. "Ever since I was three I have painted, but painting seriously and drawing animals didn't really begin until I went to Africa. I was bowled over by it.

"During that trip I saw a leopard in a tree – it was one of those classic poses and I wanted to capture it in my own way.

"I've had people come up to me after seeing my leopard paintings, saying 'when I was out in Africa that was exactly what I saw and it just captures it for me'. It's quite a quirky way of painting but each

**"I don't like painting flat boring animals, they need to have a look in their eye"**

## SALLY OYLER

animal seems to have its own personality, and that's what I like."

Of course, animals are entirely likely to get up and wander off. "I take a lot of photographs and I have a notebook and write down the particular thing that strikes me about the look in an animal's eye or the colour of its wing or a particular action that attracts me to it," says Sally.

"I do a quick little sketch then take away all the information I have got, and paint it. I don't like painting flat boring animals, they need to have a look in their eye."

She also steers clear of painting scenery, preferring to have the animals as the sole subject of her work. "The scenery on the Galapagos Islands was amazing but it's



**PAINT LIFE GRAND?** A leopard, above, and turtles, below

not very beautiful. It's rocky and black because of its volcanic nature – in fact, some of the islands still have active volcanoes on them now. I didn't incorporate that into my paintings, it was the living things I focused on.

"We stayed on a boat and would arrive at each island early in the morning. You would get off and have a naturalist with you.

"My most amazing experience was swimming with the green sea turtles – which I'm still working out how to paint."

Sally, who grew up in Edinburgh, lives with her husband Patrick Gammell in Haddington, where the couple run a property development business, the Uffizi Partnership, which was behind the renovation of the Leith Assembly Rooms, Leith Exchange and Easter Dalry House in Haymarket.

She studied at Gray's College of Art in Aberdeen before moving on to a postgraduate degree at Manchester College of Art, special-

ising in textiles and graphics, until that fateful African trip.

The new exhibition will be Sally's 13th and other animals on display might be slightly more recognisable in the cold harsh conditions of the Scottish winter.

"I'd always wanted to paint Highland cows, but never had the right technique. But when I was in Borneo and saw the orangutans two years ago, I worked out a technique for their long straggly hair by using a blob of paint which is blown on, and then when I did those I suddenly realised it would work for the Highland cows."

She believes her paintings are "quite uplifting and quite accessible".

She said: "I hope I have given the animals their own spirits and personalities. I just love the different forms of life and patterns and colours and richness of them. I think over the years I have

inspired quite a lot of people to save up some money and get themselves out to some of these wonderful places.

"I feel very lucky to be able to travel – I love travelling as much as I love painting."

She is also working closely with the Galapagos Conservation Trust – she is a member – and is donating 10 per cent of all sales of her Galapagos paintings to the Trust. "I joined them when I travelled there and I wanted to try and help preserve all these amazing things that are under threat."

The Trust, set up in 1995 to raise awareness of the Galapagos Islands' conservation needs, has over 7000 members in Britain.

Leonor Stjepic, executive director of the Trust, says: "Sally wanted to find a way of supporting us. It's nice for us because most of our events are based in London and this means our Edinburgh members can get more involved. We have good active members who do more than pay their membership and we're looking forward to seeing how the exhibition goes."

■ *Blue-Footed Boobies & Friends – paintings from Galapagos and Scotland is at Dundas Street Gallery tomorrow and Wednesday, 10.30am-6.30pm.*

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10/11	FRI	PALMA	4*BB Tryp Palma	-	159	-
11/11	SAT	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Kavalir	-	89	-
13/11	MON	BARCELONA	3*BB Hotel Catalonia Rubens	-	115	164
13/11	MON	PALMA	3*BB Tryp Bosque	-	-	129
14/11	TUE	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Ariston	65	-	99
16/11	THU	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Marketa	65	-	-
17/11	FRI	PALMA	4*BB Tryp Palma	-	149	-
18/11	SAT	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Esprit	-	69	-
20/11	MON	BARCELONA	3*BB Hotel Catalonia Aragon	-	115	144
21/11	TUE	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Marketa	65	-	95
23/11	THU	PRAGUE	4*BB Hotel Olympic	89	-	-
26/11	SUN	BARCELONA	2*BB Hotel Condestable	-	-	129
27/11	MON	BARCELONA	2*BB Hotel Condestable	-	105	129
27/11	MON	PALMA	3*BB Tryp Bosque	-	-	149
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30/11	THU	PRAGUE	3*BB Hotel Esprit	59	-	-
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08/12	FRI	BARCELONA	4*BB Hotel Barcelona Universal	116	159	-
11/12	MON	PALMA	3*BB Tryp Bosque	-	-	129
11/12	MON	BARCELONA	3*BB Hotel AB Viladomat	-	119	149
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