

# Driftwood Menagerie

Larry Ringgold's sculptures put heart into the driftwood he collects along the Bay shore.



For Chesapeake Beach artist Larry Ringgold, a typical shoreline stroll can unveil the foundation of several creative ventures: the beak of an eagle; the legs of a stallion; the mane of a lion. He spends hours mining beaches for inspiration squeezed, of all places, through the porous, salty membranes of sea-soaked driftwood.

Ringgold, a retired carpentry teacher, crafts elaborate figures (nearly life-size) using pieces of driftwood he's collected from local Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River shorelines. Possessing an inherent talent for discovering profound character where one would expect little to exist, Ringgold initially explored the untapped personality of driftwood when he found several thousand pieces of it beached by recent hurricanes. The wood had an eerie talent for evoking, say, a bird or a horse, when viewed at a particular angle. "Wood has so much character . . . I'm seeing

something there, and I want to develop that," Ringgold says.

Ringgold drew from his carpentry skills to develop a self-styled creative process that demands weeks of rigorous work. He begins by searching isolated beaches for a piece of wood that hints at a particular shape. "The first piece of wood sets the whole movement of the figure. It's the most difficult one to find," Ringgold says.

After collecting more driftwood that complements the original piece, Ringgold begins the process of constructing a full-size figure, first calculating which pieces of wood will naturally fit together to form the anatomy he intends to create. He then fastens the appropriate pieces of the puzzle together using ceramic-coated finishing screws (he locks the smaller pieces together with glue and brads). That done, he trims excess wood from the figure and sands out the rough edges. Using a combination of power washing and bleach, he cleans the figure,

removing sand, dirt and algae before applying five or six coats of paraffin-based exterior finish to enhance the wood's natural appearance.

The resulting figure is stunning, to say the least. Ringgold's "Dinnertime" sculpture portrays an eagle swooping to pluck a fish from the sea; the artist's dedication to detail shows in its intricately chiseled wing curvature and



Chelle Fulk, photos

determined predatory posture. Another standout, “Sea Lion On the Prowl,” replicates a lion in mid-stride. “Willow” depicts a stallion sporting a beautiful midnight coat and a distinctly confident carriage—incredibly life-like at seven feet tall!

Today, Ringgold’s driftwood craft is a full-time job, and the multi-layered artistic process demands a seven-day work week (retirement, what?). But his efforts have paid off in spades. Single sculptures now sell for up to several thousand dollars, and each new piece feels more lifelike than the last. “I’ve come a long way,” Ringgold chuckles. “With the first horse I made, I didn’t even realize the legs went the other way.”

For more information about Ringgold’s driftwood sculptures and his upcoming art shows, visit his website at [turtlepointdriftwood.com](http://turtlepointdriftwood.com).

—Kyle Jenkins



**ABOVE: One of Larry Ringgold’s lions emerges from the foliage.**

**LEFT: The sculptor mounted on one of his driftwood horses.**

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Larry Ringgold works in his studio; a mermaid ponders life on land; and a driftwood horse rears by the Bay.**

Larry Ringgold