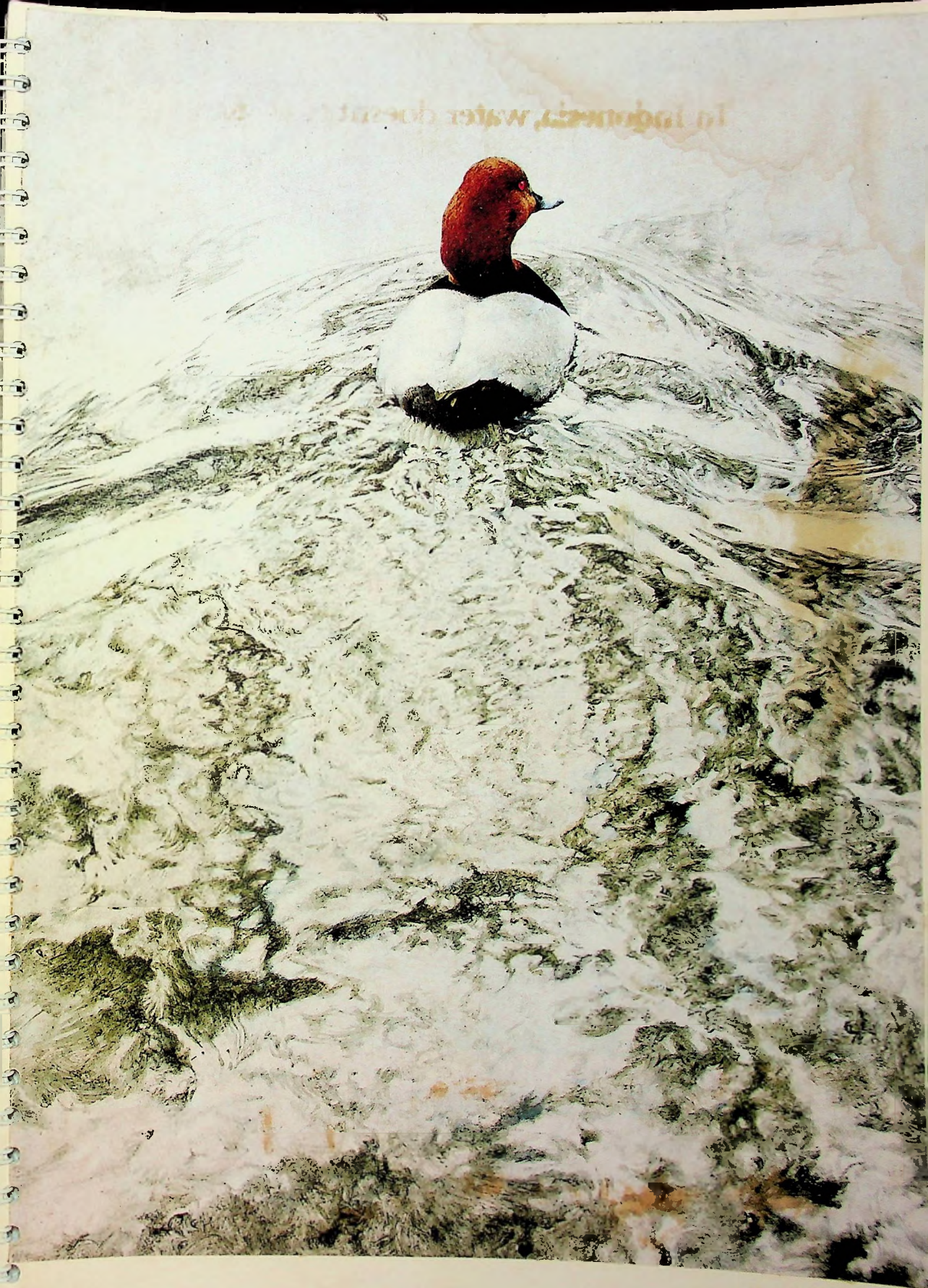


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Contemporary bird illustration

A thesis submitted to the faculty of History of Art and Design
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Design in Visual Communication

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'What is it that fires the imagination of poet and painter,
intrigues the scientist,
and satisfies the common man'

(Mockler, 1982, p.119)

Introduction

Throughout history and over the entire world, from the most primitive to the most advanced of civilizations, man has been inspired and intrigued by birds, featuring them strongly in a variety of creative ways. The abstract patterning of their plumage is used as decorative motifs in an extraordinary number of ways, on stamps, in logos, on pottery and carpets, in poetry, literature, and in countless other manifestations.

'Shakespeare plays were liberally sprinkled with bird images and allusions. In Macbeth alone there are references to crow and Rook, owl and Raven, kite and falcon, sparrow and Wren, eagle and House Martin.' (Mockler. 1982 p.7).

The symbolism associated with birds is every bit as extensive. The Raven features as a portent of evil. Universally, in modern times, the white dove is a symbol of peace or love. Pride and power with birds of prey, fertility with storks, nobility with quarry species such as game birds and so on. Birds have appeared again and again, from ancient Egypt to remote Amazonian tribes, as representatives of spirits, or have been worshiped as gods. Their mystical qualities are summed up best by John Busby, who states that: 'They are seen as both sinister and beautiful, glorious in plumage, but hard of eye and wild of spirit, as quarry to be hunted for food, and as inhabitants of the world of air, beyond human reach.' (Busby. 1986 p.). As a result, the bird offers a whole range of emotional and aesthetic qualities which 'fires the imagination of poet and painter, intrigues the scientist, and satisfies the common man.' (Mockler, 1982 p.119) .

In this dissertation I will explore some of the early history and

development of bird illustration, which to this day, has such an overwhelming influence on many contemporary artist. As we shall see, artists have only recently 'unburdened' themselves from the natural constraints that had been imposed from very early on. I will explore the reasons for the argument that bird art is, of necessity, a specialist genre, with the very best exponents of bird illustration being those who have the best understanding and knowledge of birds and their environment. I will discuss the reasons why many feel that bird illustration is worthy of the attention of a 'fine art audience', and not be solely regarded and treated as a form of technical illustration.



Early history: the 'Museum Era'

The enormous variety of birds, around 9,000 species worldwide, and their variety of shapes, sizes and combinations of colours is reflected in the equally varied treatments of objectives, motives and needs of artists portraying them. There seems no doubt, however, that man 'today, still seems to be enraptured by the notion of capturing the spirit of wild creatures in sculpture or canvas.' (Badger, 1988). This desire prompted one such artist to admit that,

'Art has been a way for me to make a connection with the natural world... Birds, especially, have provided the link. But it is the natural environment in its most pristine state that has always held the greatest fascination for me because it is charged with forces that are within us. It is this unnamed spirit of existence that I mean to instil in my painting' (L.B. Mc Queen. *Painting Birds*. p.138).

Modern day Western representations of birds have been, until recently dominated by the pre-Victorian obsession with classification of animals. As a result, nearly all early drawings and prints were purely scientific studies drawn in meticulous detail, feather by feather, from a corpse. This era of specimen art, popularly known as the 'if it's hit, it's history, if it's missed, it's mystery' era (Hammond, 1986 p.23) exerts the strongest influence on much of the origins of today's illustrators and lives on, in modified form, in the work of several artists. Ironically, perhaps, this type of painting (such as Oudry's) are often far more readily accepted as 'art' than their modern equivalents. 'Wildlife art' is frequently dismissed as 'genre painting', perhaps because of its specialisation, a fact which I will discuss later.

This early phase of bird art lasted from around the early 1600s to the mid-to-late nineteenth century and largely satisfied the scientific fraternity, but also catered for the demands of the hunting fraternity. Artists as early as the 1700s were providing commissioned paintings of birds and other wildlife, such as 'Still-life' (1712) by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, shown here. Painted in 1712, Oudry and his mentor Desportes, who, along with Dürer and others, were amongst the first artists to actively seek out wildlife as subjects. The main impetus however, still lay with the museums,



'Goldeneye Duck', by J.J. Audubon. Although beautifully ornate, by contemporary standards they are stiff and unrepresentative of the character of the living birds.



Field sketch and finished painting of an Eagle Owl, by L.F. Fuertes.

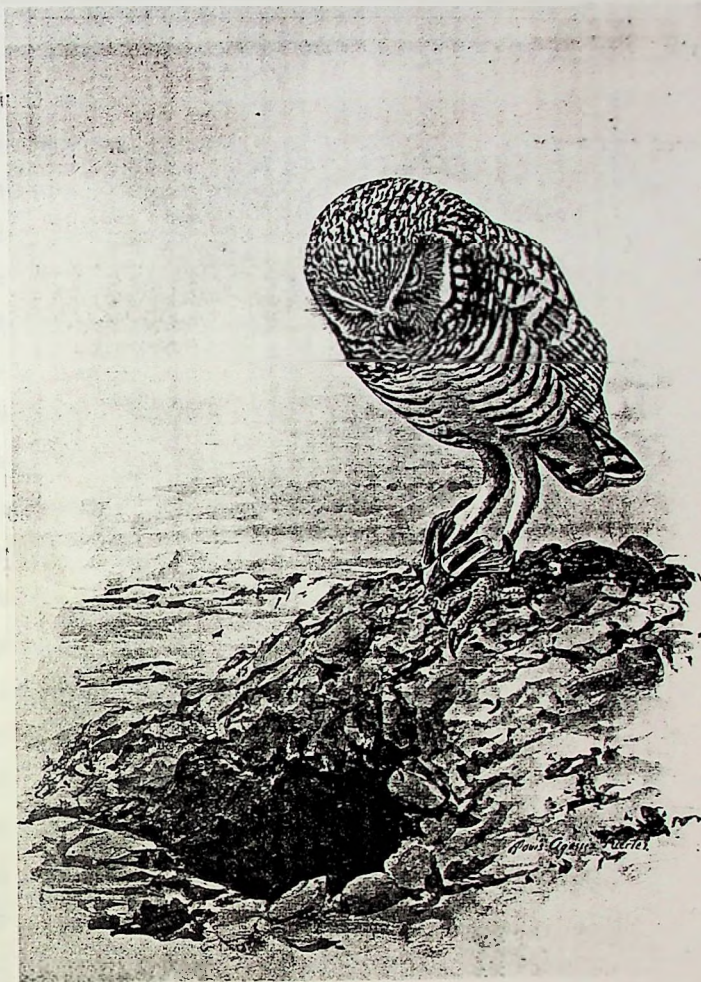
and virtually all acclaimed bird artists, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, were closely affiliated with museums in the United States and England, whose wealth and scientific knowledge enabled all the leading research into ornithology to evolve. All too often, however, the etchings and paintings showed, by any modern definition, appalling lack of knowledge of the bird's habitat. Details such as posture, movement and so on, were largely ignored, such was the artists' reliance on dead specimens, and concentration on plumage features. I can well believe the claims that most of these artists could not identify any of these wild birds in the field.

The museum era, roughly from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century is characterised, and frequently embodied by the work of John James Audubon, one of the leading artists and ornithologists of the late nineteenth century, whose influence was one of the most far-reaching in bird art. His work was detailed to the point of showing every feather, meticulously transcribed onto the body of the bird, but with freshness and accuracy. Audubon's informed portrayals of background, indicate of at least an understanding, if not a good knowledge, of the habitat of the bird. His series of actual-size etchings and engravings in full colour of the birds of the United States was the foundation of contemporary bird art. It represents the beginnings of a departure away from museum-based bird art, to far broader ranging styles which encompassed the bird in the wild, its relation to its environment and, arguably most importantly, the portrayal of character. There can be no doubt that while Audubon's work, in its own right is very beautiful, it is severely limited in the portrayal of the true, living likeness of a bird. Whilst beautifully ornate, and superficially accurate, his illustrations convey little of the living bird.

The limitations of Audubon's style were only being realised at the turn of the century when some artists of note began to emerge, to whom skillful painting or drawing from wild creatures in the wild, was lending their work an air of authenticity and life. Even then, one such artist, George Lodge, would take his sketches back into the studio and produce comparatively lifeless, somewhat stilted finished paintings. Noel Cusa commented:

'In drawing birds it ought, I suppose, to be sufficient to draw exactly what you see... but you are far more likely to draw accurately what you see if you know what you ought to see - what is there to be seen if you look carefully enough.' (Cusa, 1984 p.7).

Lodge himself summed up this awareness of the inadequacies of this style, stating that 'One tends to aim at producing nothing but a feather map of a bird's



'Burrowing Owl' by L.F. Fuertes.

'To one who knows birds, there is far more latent life in a Fuertes bird, composed and at rest, than there is in an Audubon bird, wildly animated.'

plumage... I feel that my own pictures have suffered by this.' (Hammond, 1986 p.23-24).

Another notable artist emerging at this time was Louis Agassiz Fuertes, an American illustrator of birds affiliated to various American natural history museums, who was renowned for the lively and accurate depictions of the character of living birds. His work was of such high quality in depicting the living bird that one recent commentator said,

'Of those who have gone before we can be sure of only two who will be remembered far into the future. Audubon, who took birds out of the glass case for all time, and Fuertes who really brought them to life... To the lay artist, unschooled in a field knowledge of birds, he will insist he sees more life in an Audubon bird, but this is because Audubon strongly reflected Audubon, whereas Fuertes reflected more the character of the bird, less of himself.' (McCracken Peck, 1983, p.ix & 11).

A thoroughly accurate comparison of Audubon and Fuertes was made by Roger Tory Peterson, who said 'To one who knows birds, there is far more latent life in a Fuertes bird, composed and at rest, than there is in an Audubon bird wildly animated.' (McCracken Peck, 1983, p. ix).

Even at this early stage of development, it is apparent that all the most competent artists knew their subject intimately. As artist Brenda Carter states; 'Wildlife artists have to know comparative behaviour, they have to know geology, botany, they have to know habitat, and on top of that, they *should* be good artists.' (Birders World. October 1990. p.58). Fuertes, for example, drew birds from the wild, but he was also an accomplished taxidermist and hunter. One of the great European artists to emerge in the early twentieth century was a Swedish hunter and artist, Bruno Liljefors, whose work, more than any other artist at this time, was endowed with artistic foresight which has rarely been equaled, due largely to his intimacy with his subject matter. (An example of his work is shown opposite). It is often difficult to believe that his work was produced so early in the century, when most bird artists in the western world were still struggling to find their feet in the depiction of wild birds. Perhaps his very isolation from the mainstream of wildlife art enabled him to produce work which was so untainted by the demands and influences of the museum based work, still so prevalent in the work of so many others.

Yet another hunter gained a significant reputation in the 1930s, an Englishman by the name of Peter Scott, later Sir Peter Scott, founder of the World



Krákr (Crows). Bruno Liljefors, c. 1905.



A typical Peter Scott painting, 'Canada Geese flying to roost'. c. 1956.

Wildlife Fund, whose paintings of wildfowl were being much admired for their observational accuracy. He, with Dr. Eric Ennion, another English artist whose work was loose and free, interpreting character with grace and ease, were amongst the first to convincingly depict birds in flight with any authenticity (though, Liljefors had been successful in such depictions, in artistic isolation, at least twenty years before). Previous attempts to 'capture' flying birds resulted in many stiff, lifeless renderings. For instance, many of Audubon's attempts in this direction are so stiff and over-formalised that they belie their source - that of a corpse. With Lodge, Fuertes, Ennion and Scott now depending on 'live' sketching to form the basis of their work, bird painting and illustration began to take on a life and momentum of its own. With the influence of Liljefors gradually percolating through the wildlife art world, the improvements were dramatic.



Field sketch and finished painting of Eastern
Meadowlarks, by Lars Jonsson

Painting birds

Despite the huge range of styles within contemporary bird illustration, there are comparatively few artists who are able to excel at both painting and illustrating birds. Peter Scott is one; his obsession for painting wildfowl producing some very competent atmospheric painting of flights of geese at sunset, groups of duck feeding and so on, but in 1950 he published 'A Coloured Key to the Wildfowl of the World' (Wildfowl Trust, 1957) which was an illustrated guide to the worlds geese, swans and ducks. In layout and style, in its function as a comparative guide, and as the forerunner of the modern specialist field guide, it has yet to be bettered, and has admirably withstood the test of time. Despite his being labeled a 'painter' of wildfowl, his illustrations are really first class, as testified, amongst other things, by his contribution of the coloured plates of Ducks and Geese to the multi-volume 'Birds of the Western Palearctic'. Scott's contributions outshone the many so called 'pure illustrators' such as Noel Cusa, who contributed to that same volume.

Lars Jonsson, a young Swedish artist, is another of the few able to make the crossover into wildlife painting, though his primary interest lies in illustration. His skill at capturing posture and movement relies on his skill with watercolour, and practically all his work is in this medium, apart from some larger pieces in acrylic and oils. His preliminary sketches for many of these paintings are derived from his field sketches, with occasional reference to museum specimens and photographs. The example opposite is of a field sketch and a finished painting of Eastern Meadowlarks. To my mind, Jonsson is leading the way in bird illustration, by dispensing with, as much as is possible, all references other than the sketches done whilst actually observing the bird or animal.

There is much debate as to what constitutes 'illustration'. Many critics of the wildlife art genre argue that many of the best paintings of birds rely so heavily on a vast knowledge of the subject that they are, in fact, a form of 'technical illustration' and are far less acceptable as 'art' by definition of the specialisation of the artists. This specialisation implies that any such paintings can be judged and found wanting by both the specialist and the naturalist even before the art critic moves in. In the book 'The Art of Robert Bateman', the author discusses this problem stating that, 'Bateman... is well aware of the *'cordon sanitaire'* which surrounds the field of painting.



A.K. CABPACOB (1830-1897). An example of a 'non-specialist' treatment of the subject.

Wildlife Art... a term he is reluctant to use, has been segregated by critics and galleries from the main body of Fine Art". (Derry, 1981). In fact, Canadian-born Robert Bateman is one of the most successful artists in Canada, with buyers of his work being selected by means of a draw, such is the demand for his paintings! Such success is hardly unwarranted, as his work, to my mind, combines all the qualities of Lars Jonsson and R.H. Ching; superb detail and accurate observation of character, combined with an extraordinary feel for the birds natural place in its environment. Like Ching, Bateman's earliest influence were from the abstract expressionists of the 'fifties and he attributes much of the success of his contemporary work to his earlier experiences with abstraction. In fact once he made the changeover to more naturalistic work he took many of his older, abstract works, and used them as compositional devices for his wildlife art. The strongest influence in his early days was Franz Kline, which is all the more extraordinary when one considers the direction his work was finally to take.

Although this segregation of wildlife artist is primarily a problem for painters of wildlife it reflects a similar problem in illustration, which I feel is stifling fresher approaches to bird illustration. Other artist's, using birds in their composition in a non-subjective way, like the example opposite, by the Russian artist A.K. CABPACOB (1830-1897), shows a snow covered landscape, where one's eye is drawn to the rookery in the trees. This painting demonstrates how the 'non-specialist' artist seems to have no problems in relating the scale of the bird with the surrounding landscape, a common enough problem for many contemporary artists. The argument, therefore, that 'the danger of specialist knowledge is that it tends to dominate colour and composition to too great a degree' (Hammond, 1986 p.78) is a very valid one. Hammond, applies this argument to Louis Aggisez Fuyes, one of the foremost American bird illustrators of this century, active from the turn of the century. He said of him that,

'His landscapes, seldom more than a suggestion in the background, were weak. His over-specialisation in natural history subjects has helped the Art Establishment in America to form the view that painting of natural history belongs in the Natural History Museum and not in art galleries.'

This, however, seems to be an apparently insoluble problem because, in my opinion, the very best painters and illustrators of birds are those very same people who have vast knowledge of birds and are able to apply that knowledge to their work.

'There has always been a dividing line between illustration and what some critics call "fine art". The fact that (Roger Tory Peterson's) field guide illustrations are useful does not in any way detract from their aesthetic qualities' (Devlin & Naismith, 1978, p.217).

Ironically, a presumed lack of awareness of this problem in the United States has dictated that some of the most readily acceptable styles of painting and illustration (or at least those which still sell well) are those that have been based on the museum era of etching, typical of Audubon's style. Contemporary artists such as Basil Ede, David Johnston and Maynard Reese have, in my opinion, contributed little or nothing to the development of the illustrative style, though the demands of the art buying public for such paintings is seemingly as strong as ever. Their compositions are based exactly on the Audubon approach: incredibly detailed bird, centred, with ornate foliage and unnatural postures which imitate the Audubon style, but which in turn belie the lack of feel for, or attention to the character of the species. Their imitation is complete with the carefully centred and hand rendered engraving-style titles of the paintings and the signatures of the artists, which follow exactly the approach of Audubon. These painters illicit little interest from modern birdwatchers, and I strongly suspect that their buying public are not birdwatchers, or those with any birding knowledge of consequence. It seems to me that those with little grounding in contemporary modern bird art have only Audubon's style in mind. His influence is still felt to the extent that some *still* use him as a guideline to what is good in bird art. Basil Ede defends his work by saying that,

'If it's decorative, if it's artistic, if it's sincere, it should communicate to me and I'll like it, because when I look at a painting I'm not looking at technical accuracy, I'm looking at the impact it has on me'. (*Birders World*, August 1989, p.57).

John P. O'Neill, an American scientist and accomplished illustrator, primarily of South American birds, counters this by stating that,

'It's amazing how many - even big name (bird) artists - don't really look at birds. It's inconceivable to me that someone could make a living through birds and know so little about them.' (*Birders World*, June 1990, p.48).

To further this argument it can be seen that Lars Jonsson, Lawrence B. Mac Queen and Killian Mullarney (an Irish bird illustrator of international renown),



'Townsend's Warblers by L.B. MacQueen. A great portrayal of character with minimum 'fuss'.

three of the very best contemporary illustrators in the world, are each extraordinarily adept at and have incredible knowledge of the identification of birds, combined with a uniquely gifted artistic style. Each has contributed to the ever evolving discoveries with regard to identifying difficult groups of birds, and are acknowledged experts on identification criteria. Witness, for instance, Jonsson's 'Identification of Stints' (British Birds, Vol.77, pp. 293-315), Mullaney's paper on 'Desert, Bar-tailed Desert and Dunn's Larks' (Birding World, Vol. 3. No.2, pp.15-21), and Mac Queen's guide to the birds of Peru. (Although not yet published, a plate of Mac Queen's guide to the birds of Peru is published in '20th Century Wildlife Artists' by N. Hammond, and other examples of his seldom-published work are to be found in Painting Birds' by Susan Rayfield. Other examples can be found in *Birder's World* magazine, in various advertisements).

John Busby delivers a very succinct insight into these problems with his own very strong beliefs on the approach that the younger bird illustrators should take. He says that,

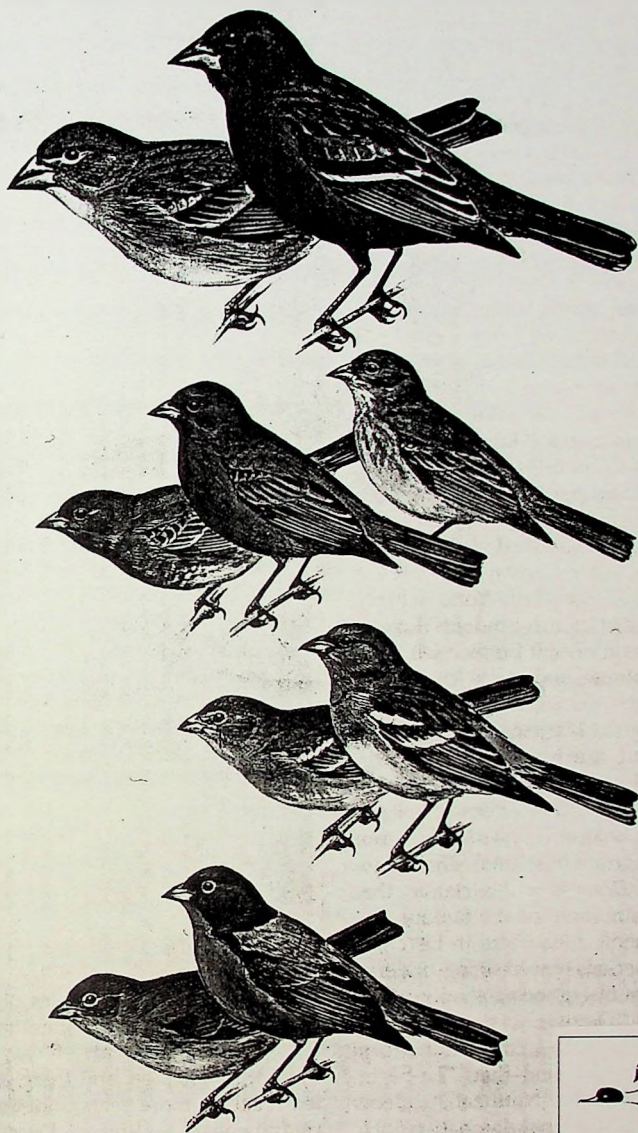
Too many wildlife illustrators shut their eyes to the values of the wider world of Art, and then complain that their own work, which may ignore the emotional and aesthetic energies that are the lifeblood of art, is not admitted to the same league... Knowledge of subject matter alone is not enough. Art is a synthesis, a unity of ideas and the means used to express them... To copy nature without resolving ones own thoughts and feelings is a barren experience (Hammond, 1986, p. 49).

That, to me, is the key to realising what constitutes good bird illustration. Many artists have the ability to draw or paint incredibly lifelike, sometimes almost photographic representations of birds. But it is that little bit extra that is important, that feel for and personal application of knowledge of how birds move and relate to their environment, that intangible ability to personally convey the energy or lassitude of a particular species in a given, personally witnessed context. Whether it is in the loose wash drawings of Ennion or Busby, the strongly composed designs of Warren, or the 'tight' field guide type illustrations of Mac Queen or Jonsson, the secret is to convey character as much as to accurately depict the plumage and environment of any bird, and that can only be fully and accurately achieved with an intimate knowledge of the subject.

Even to most people not directly involved with, or having an interest

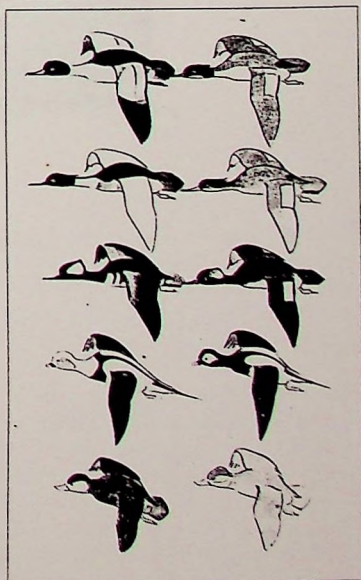
in birds, who take time to compare common representations of birds with the real thing, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a plethora of appallingly bad renderings of birds applied to household items, Christmas cards and emblazoned on crockery. One item often seen advertised in the Sunday colour supplements are porcelain falcons and popular garden birds in ceramics which are invariably stiff, lifeless and characterless. Despite the claims that these 'lifelike' depictions represent a new watershed in contemporary wildlife art, they are invariably uncompromising and very badly observed. It has been claimed that these items argue for the destruction of the 'Wildlife Art' label, or at least the transfer of the wildlife 'tag' from art to illustration

Wildlife sculpture has only gained legitimacy in the past few years, with the annual Ward Show in the United States (See *Birders World*, July/August 1988, p.48-52) displaying the work of some of the worlds best bird sculptors. In Britain, it has only recently gained credibility with the recent publication of work by Robert Aberdein (see *Birding world* Vol.3 no.1 p.22-24). Once again, the best such entries to these shows are accomplished technicians in their field and are invariably experts on birds. 'Bird Carving' originally stemmed from the use of carved floating wooden duck decoys for wildfowlers. The very first, rather crude versions, used as much as two hundred years ago, had only a passing resemblance to real ducks, but when floated out onto quiet pools in the forests and marshes, were lifelike enough to attract other ducks into the vicinity. No doubt, they would then meet with some enthusiastic hunters. The carving of decoys slowly evolved into an art form in itself and is now a huge 'cottage industry' in the States, where they are used for decorative, rather than functional purposes. Magazines are now devoted to bird carving, and the subjects include far more than just wildfowl. Unique to each of the bird carvers of any standing is an intimate knowledge of subject matter, resulting in better and more accurate depictions of the living birds.



A plate of buntings for a subsequent edition to the Field guide to the birds of the East, by R. T. Peterson.

The original layout for the first field guide by R.T. Peterson.



The field guide.

A key point in the development of bird illustration and central to the understanding of many of the motives and objectives of contemporary bird art occurred in the 'thirties, with the advent of the field-guide. It was only in the 'twenties and 'thirties that bird-watching, as opposed to hunting, was becoming a recognised pastime, especially in the United States. Many hunters and birdwatchers were impressed by a young artist by the name of Roger Tory Peterson, who had an extensive knowledge of the birds around his native New York. Peterson was uniquely able to transform his ability to identify birds in the wild with a pair of binoculars, to an ability to draw convincing illustrations of what they actually looked like, and the key points to their identification. He combined this with a system of 'pointers' on each of the plates, indicating the main identification features of each species (see example). He said, many years later, that, 'I wished for a simplification, a boiling down, so that any bird could be quickly named with certainty in the field. No such book existed' (Birders World, April 1989, p.55) With some prompting he produced the worlds first field guide to the birds of the United States and, unknowingly, probably contributed more to bird and wildlife conservation than any other single act. The public avidly took to identifying birds in the wild. Anyone armed with binoculars venturing into the countryside could, with the help of the field guide, identify any of the hundreds of different birds to be found all around them. Birdwatching became 'demythologised' and was no longer the realm of the esoteric scientist. Interest in all aspects of wildlife exploded and with it, a seemingly insatiable appetite for more and more bird books, more and more comprehensive field guides and books, and a surge in the variety and number of wildlife artists.

More functional illustration is readily apparent in the use of accurate, informative drawings in field guides. Roger Tory Peterson said that,

'Field Guides demand a great deal of discipline, but are a very different art form (from that of painting large canvasses of birds). It is perhaps better described as schematic illustration.' (Birders World, April 1989, p.54).

The field guide format has only been in use for about fifty years and, as with bird sculpture, has only achieved top quality in the last ten years or so. The first such field guide to appear was to set the standard for many years and has only, in my opinion, been bettered within the past decade. It was first introduced by American artist Roger Tory Peterson in 1934, largely as a result of the ever-increasing band of enthusiastic birdwatchers who needed a quick and easy to use reference for identifying the birds they were watching. The format was of small size, so as to be portable, generally the guides contained full colour illustrations of good quality which, most importantly, displayed the key field characters of each species that enabled the birdwatcher to tell one species from another. In the case of the Peterson guide, the illustrations were bunched in groups throughout the text, but more recently, illustrations facing the text have become the norm. Peterson's book was of a very high standard for its time, but the introduction of the field guide format to Europe, shortly after the appearance of Peterson's book, was somewhat less successful. The first European field guide was by an English illustrator, Arthur Singer, and at the time it was quite highly regarded, but by modern standards is lacking in several important respects. Firstly, though Singer drew birds from life, his plates in the field guide were often too brightly coloured. He tended towards making his birds too 'pot-bellied' and misshapen, though his treatment of feather textures and surfaces were adequate. There were actually erroneous renderings in some of his illustrations, which belied the slight lack of knowledge and the lack of refinement of identification criteria of that time. The facing page format, with text facing the relevant illustration, was an improvement on the Peterson guide that permitted quicker reference, whilst for the first time distribution maps were included for each species. However, Singer's book, though based loosely on the Peterson format, suffered simply from bad drawing. Several years later, Peterson launched his own field guide to the birds of Europe, including the adaptations that had been made in Singer's book.

Since the Peterson and Singer field guides, the tendency in field guide illustration has been to provide more and more detailed drawings with many people equating detail with quality. Some of the best recent field guides, aimed primarily toward the beginner birdwatcher, have been those that actually simplify, rather than elaborate. The Mitchell Beazley guide, with paintings by Peter Hayman is a good example of this. Another successful example is the guide to British birds called 'Birds by Character and Jizz', which includes very loose, atmospheric vignettes of birds in characteristic attitudes, the aim largely to depict the movement and actions of the birds as a useful tool in identification, a move away from the tendency of modern-

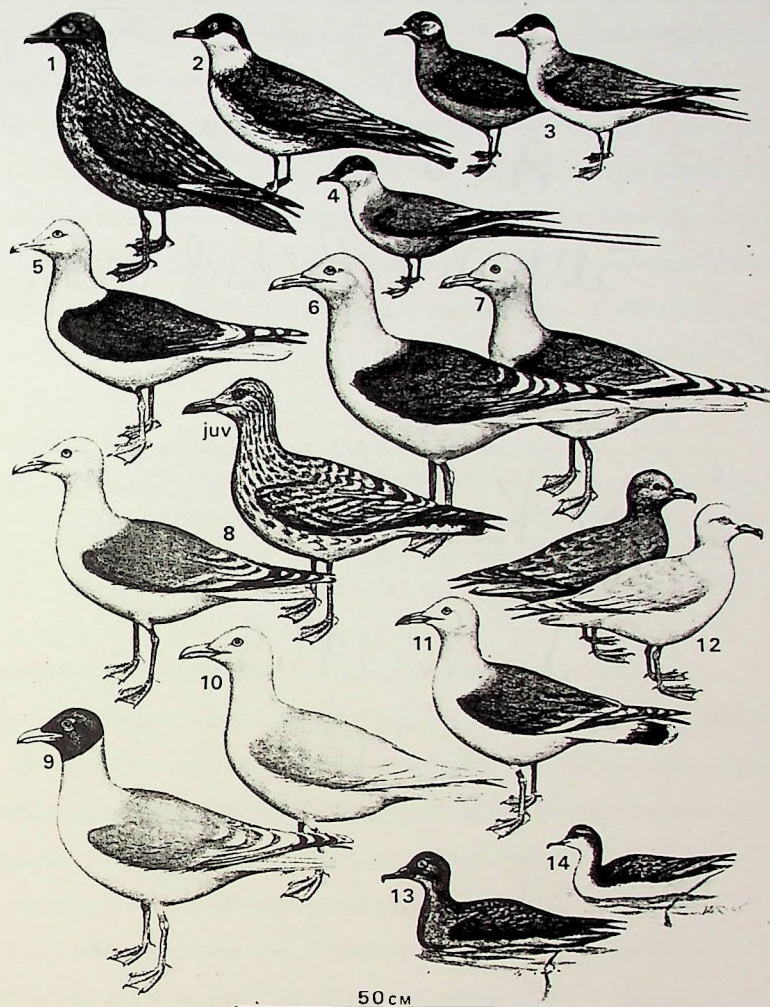
day guides to include more and more plumage detail. Each field guide has to adjust to the specific needs of the readership, and these type of field guides are the exception rather than the rule.

Competent field guide illustrations are quickly recognisable as such by anyone with a reasonable knowledge of birds. There are many superb field guides, notably ones by Lars Jonsson, whose work is renowned the world over for its freshness, observational accuracy and attention to detail. His series of four books on the birds of Europe, and a follow-up guide to the birds of the Mediterranean region were universally acclaimed. One critic said in reviewing a later book of his, 'Bird Island, Pictures from a Shoal of sand', that,

'It is sadly rare that such sensitivity, perceptiveness of form and dazzling ability to draw are combined in one person. There is no doubt in my mind that Lars Jonsson is already one of the greats of bird art... I believe he has set new standards in bird illustration.' (Burn, *British Birds*, Vol. 73, no.3). To this could be added his immense knowledge of birds.

Another quality publication is the 'Macmillan Guide to bird identification,' with illustrations by Alan Harris. This book represents something of a breakthrough with regard to format. Within the standard facing page format there are intrinsically imposed limitations to the treatment of one species over another. For instance, there is generally great difficulty in exploring detailed identification problems of specific species within the standard field guide, simply because each species requires such a different breakdown of criteria, and some will need direct comparisons with others. Those guides catering for beginners need not be overly concerned with such problems, but for the more advanced birder, the problem of format becomes far more complicated. The Macmillan Guide, however, deals with this problem by only treating 'problem' species. In effect, it is a series of mini-papers on the problems associated with the identification of each one. This innovation and some of the best and most accurate drawings, combined with the talents of the author in incorporating all the latest knowledge into the text, makes for a refreshingly delightful book, which fulfills its function well.

At the other end of the scale there are still an inordinate number of field guides that are simply sub-standard. Some of these artists are harking back to the 'museum era' when birds were largely drawn from stuffed or skinned specimens. An amusing example of this is in 'A Field Guide to the Birds of the Soviet Union' (Princeton University Press, 1984), where the artist, Y. V. Kostin, had all too obviously



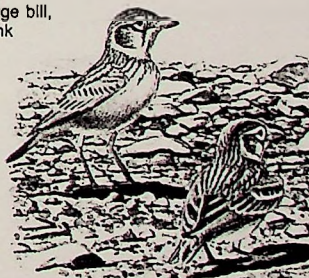
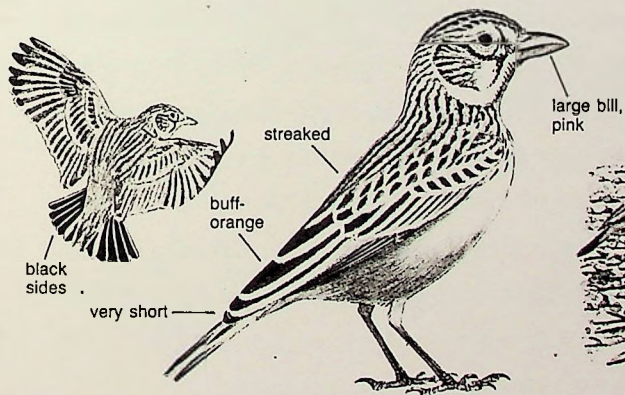
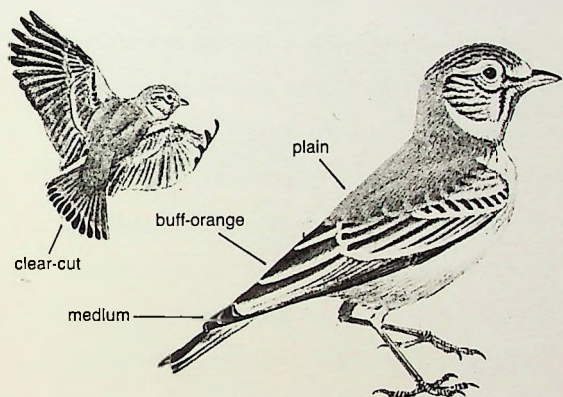
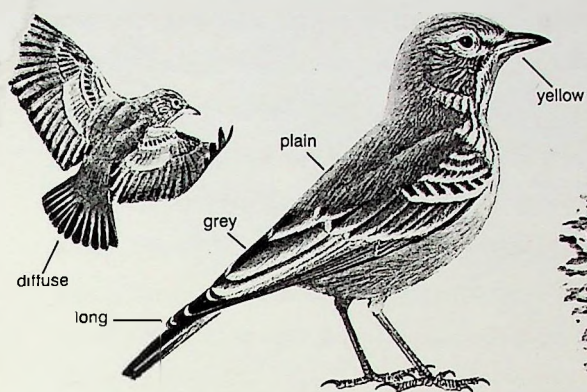
1. Great Skua 286 2. Pomarine Jaeger 285 3. Parasitic Jaeger 283 4. Long-tailed Jaeger 284 5. Lesser Black-backed Gull 295 6. Great Black-backed Gull 292 7. Slaty-backed Gull 293 8. Herring Gull 296 9. Great Black-headed Gull 300 10. Glaucous Gull 298 11. Black-tailed Gull 294 12. Northern Fulmar 10 13. Sooty Shearwater 17 14. Manx Shearwater 19

The 'impossible illustration'. The Fulmar (no. 12) in real life cannot physically stand up!

never set eyes on a living specimen of the bird he was attempting to depict. On plate 21 the depiction of some seabirds demonstrates his lack of proficiency. The birds (shown opposite) are generally dull and antipathetic, the colours drab and lifeless, but the giveaway of his lack of knowledge is in his depiction of the Northern Fulmar, portrayed standing. To anyone who has seen a Fulmar in real life, there is something very obviously wrong with the painting. Then it clicks; Fulmars, in common with many other seabirds, cannot stand up. Being so adapted to a life at sea, their legs, adapted largely for swimming, have become all but useless. When returning to land to nest they can only shuffle awkwardly on their haunches. This 'impossible' illustration by Kostin is repeated again with Storm Petrel and Leach's petrel, and is an embodiment of all that is bad in contemporary field guide illustration.

There is virtually no country in the world that is not now represented by a relevant field guide, if not to the country itself, then to the general geographical region. Within this there are many different standards of illustration, varying from the wildly inaccurate to the informed, sensitive and wholly accurate work of MacQueen, Jonsson, J. P. O'Neill and others. The format for field guides is well understood and readily accepted. Although there are no drastic new ways of depicting birds within that format, one development may prove significant. Killian Mullarney, currently working on a new 'ultimate' field guide to the birds of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, may have struck the perfect balance between the portrayal of character and the need for detail. I have been fortunate to see some of the unpublished plates for the field guide and they are indeed superb. He has utilised the format whereby the illustrations are composed mainly of large scale, detailed drawings of the perched birds. Beside them, Mullarney has included smaller flight and character vignettes of the birds as they would be seen in the wild. The standard of the drawings, combined with the flexibility such a layout permits in dealing with the more difficult to identify groups of birds, is such that I feel that following the publication of this field guide (sometime in 1993) that there can only be refinements to the field guide format, with Mullarney's guide representing the last major innovation in that field.

Field guides facilitate the identification of the birds of a specific geographical region, but since the late 'seventies there has been a wide range of publications dealing with ever more specialised areas of ornithology, and there has also been widespread application of the field guide format to other wildlife. There are now many high quality field guides to mammals, amphibians, and, particularly, butterflies, all modified from bird field guide formats. However the ever increasing variety of published topics associated with birds sees further challenges to the bird



Separation of Desert, Bar-tailed Desert and Dunn's Lark. Painted by Killian Mullarney. Perhaps the last word in the field guide format...

artist. The subjects vary from 'Birds in Ireland', elegantly illustrated by John Busby with loose ink and wash sketches of Irish birdlife throughout the book, to the extreme specialisation in such books as 'Flight Identification of European Raptors' and 'Shorebirds', illustrated by Ian Willis and Peter Hayman respectively. In dealing with comparative illustration of similar looking groups of birds such as raptors and shorebirds, the demands imposed on the artist are considerable. However, despite the wide range of styles and mediums, the one common factor with them all, and a measure of their success to any birdwatcher, is the artist's ability to convey the character of the bird, while including the necessary detail to facilitate identification.



Barbara Bloom. An example of the field guide format applied to other areas of natural history.

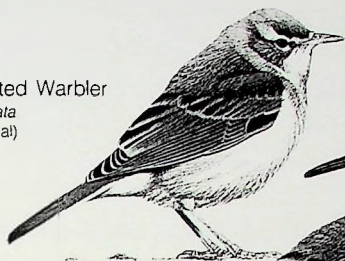
'Editorial Illustration'.

Aside from field guides, and largely separate from those drawings done purely for identification, are a vast range of approaches of various artists whose work is largely to illustrate articles or books of a slightly less specialised nature, or to be used in a purely decorative context. Virtually all of the huge range of birdwatching periodicals have illustrations, some to illustrate certain points in the text, others simply to convey atmosphere possibly evoked by the text. There are a great deal of books on ornithological subjects which feature these vignettes and sketches, and a vast number of regional bird reports which contain bird sketches sent in by the readers. With drawing birds, in even the crudest fashion, being such an integral part of most birdwatchers being able to identify difficult birds in the field, great attention is paid to each submission by the birdwatcher. This participation of the readership is fostered by the editors of such reports. As Noel Cusa states;

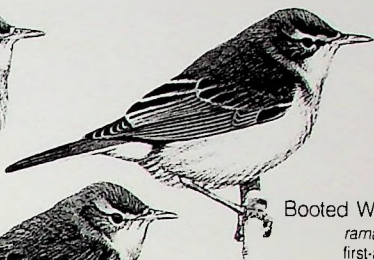
Birds are difficult subject matter for the artist. They will rarely sit still, as human beings can sometimes be persuaded to do. They are indeed not usually approachable enough to be seen effectively without binoculars (though) sketches in the field can and do record shape attitude and posture (Cusa, 1984, p.8).

Admittedly, many drawings submitted to magazines, from both the amateur and the professional artists are lacking, with an inclination to sacrifice mood and atmosphere for anatomical accuracy, and a tendency to treat backgrounds (and even perches) as superfluous. A more recent development, as yet an accusation which can only be leveled at one artist, Ian Lewington, is the risk of caricature. Exaggeration of shape or structure is apparent in many artist's work. Although it occasionally works well when used to portray movement, it lends itself all too easily to misinterpretation if handled badly. Lewington's work recently has taken strict identification drawings almost too far. In recent papers illustrated by him (Harrap & Lewington, 1990, Madge and Lewington, 1990. See bibliography) his treatment of feathers and surface detail was one of the most accomplished to date, but the birds postures, and particularly the head shapes were misinterpreted and looked

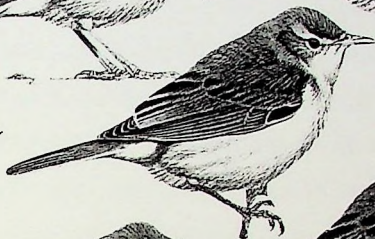
Booted Warbler
caligata
(typical)



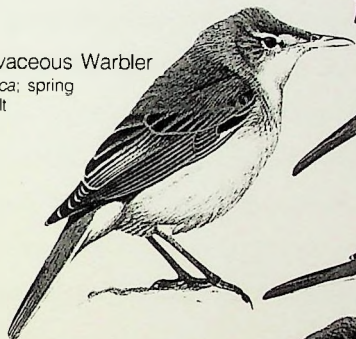
Booted Warbler
rama; fresh
first-autumn



Booted Warbler
caligata
(grey)



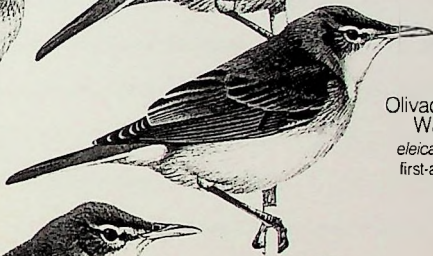
Olivaceous Warbler
opaca; spring
adult



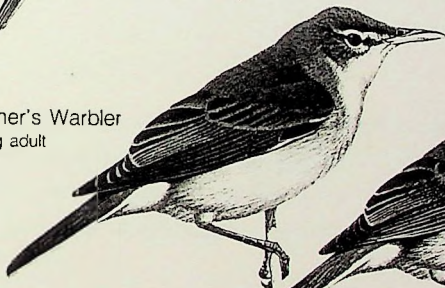
Olivaceous Warbler
eleica; fresh
first-autumn
(grey)



Olivaceous Warbler
eleica; fresh
first-autumn
(fawn)



Upcher's Warbler
spring adult



Upcher's Warbler
worn summer adult



'Hippolais Warblers' by Ian Lewington. Suprbly
executed identification drawings, but the postures
and expressions are verging on caricature.

exaggerated, almost parodied. (See opposite) The risks in allowing this to happen to your work are self evident, but already other artists have seemed to tend toward this direction. It remains to be seen if it is to become more prevalent.

One popular birdwatching magazine, 'British Birds', runs an annual competition for amateur illustrators. By flicking through several years published entries one can see the faults which carry over into the professional arena. In general there is little experimentation, and few of those illustrators demonstrate a really fresh approach to their subjects. Most have a large, highly detailed bird, usually centred, and a background or surrounding foliage which seems to have been painted around the bird or birds, rather than being an integral part of the composition. Many of these illustrations suffer from a lack of correct scale to the birds surroundings. Brenda Carter said that, '(Painting the) Habitat is as important to me as the birds I paint, because the relationship of the bird to the land helps define its unique place in the world' (Birders World. October 1990. p.59) .A correct approach to all forms of bird illustration, from the tightest of line illustration to the loosest wash drawings, must take these factors into consideration in order to be successful.

You don't have to be an artist to appreciate how a bird relates to a branch or bunch of marsh grass, or notice how it blends into the landscape, yet gives that landscape life... it helps to see that birds are not stuck on the top of a scene like a hard edged decal, but are softly enveloped and coloured by atmosphere and light. (Rayfield 1988, p.9)

Some of the most highly regarded artists to have mastered this 'editorial' illustration, such as Ennion, Busby, Brockie and Tunnicliffe, along with, predictably the greats of the field guide artists such as MacQueen, Jonsson, Mullarney and Bum. The latter three have published preparatory and field sketches which, to my mind, are in themselves often incredibly good depictions of birds, and their success can be judged the simple fact that they are showing us how the bird has been seen, as opposed to how people think they should be seen. One of the most accomplished artists in pen and ink line drawing is Laurel Tucker, one of the few illustrators able to convey mood in her line drawings with ease. Unlike the two masters of wash and line, Busby and Ennion, she includes detail by virtue of the medium she works in, but is adept enough and sparing enough in her handling of line to prevent it from detracting from the overall statement of mood.

As I have said, there seems, in the various journals and local bird reports, to be very little experimentation. Although the British Birds' competition

Painting of 'Cream-coloured Coursers', by Killian Mullarney.



1



juv. winter/iridescent
summer

very pale side
of head
paler lower than
individual below.

A page from the field notebook of Killian Mullarney.
Although used for the artists own reference, they are
beautiful paintings in their own right.

bill finely peppered, overall greyish
with double darker eyestripes



2

grey line
very difficult to see.

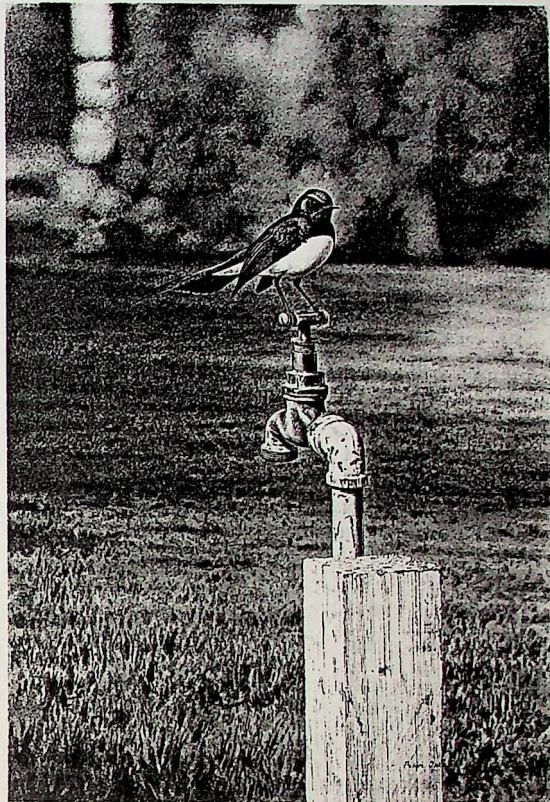
shoulder, fleshy

Common
first summer

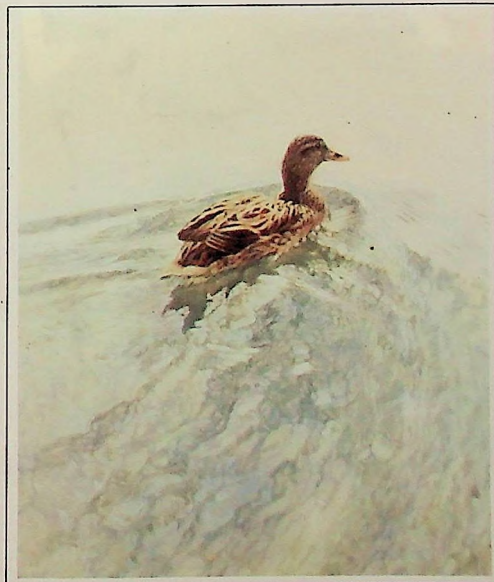
mentioned above specifically requests black and white line drawings, there are virtually no submissions to that and other periodicals, even of professionally commissioned artwork, of etchings, woodcuts or other such mediums. The few such illustrations of anything other than pen and ink line drawings are of particular interest, if for no other reason than they show us the general lack of use of such mediums, whilst hinting at the possibilities. A little known American artist of the 'forties and 'fifties, T.M. Shortt, illustrated F. Bodsworth's book, 'The Last of the Curlews'. He is one of the very few illustrators of wildlife to use woodcuts as his preferred medium. His work is compositionally powerful, and there is a strong design sense in many of the illustrations. He captures mood very ably, and doesn't permit the bird to dominate the composition to excess. His ability to show detail when it is needed betrays the putative 'clumsiness' of woodcuts, as opposed to pen and ink Shortt shares with the Polish born wildlife painter, Manfred Schatz, the tendency to eliminate superfluous detail, particularly when illustrating the common theme of his wildlife painting, action and fast movement, to produce work of supreme eloquence.

A hundred years after the advent of true bird illustration there are, it seems, still a great variety of media into which the bird illustrator could venture. Sculpture as a form of illustration has only recently gained acceptance in the form of wood-carvings. Modern compositions in drawing and painting, combined with recent advances in character, structure portrayal, and a generally accepted application of sound knowledge of bird and habitat, has yet to be fully applied back to etchings, lithography and woodcuts. Other areas remain completely untapped, such as the use of holography and, particularly, animation for identification purposes, which seems almost an absurd oversight when one bears in mind the control which animation would allow over the vagaries of varying light and angle of films. Computer animation is now sufficiently advanced to make this a feasible medium for the bird illustrator.

Photography, it has been suggested, will replace or at least offer competition to illustration, as the need for more and more accurate depictions of birds increases. This argument, however, doesn't stand up. They are frequently used by bird artists as reference material, but photographs are invariably subject to all the capriciousness of varying light conditions, depth of field, and countless other factors. As a result, if used by the artist for reference, photographs should be treated with appropriate caution. The fact is that even the very best of bird photographs, and there are some incredible photographs around, being split second representations of the bird, often freeze the movement of the subject and, as such, can distort, or taint any interpretation of character, factors which can be overcome by the competent



A classic example of a photo-realist painting; 'Willie Wagtail' by Peter Trussler. The background, painted out of focus, even has the circular distortions, or 'doughnut effect' that one gets from using a camera with a shallow depth of field.



Two examples of the work of R.H. Ching showing his almost 'super-realist' style.

illustrator. Nicholas Hammond cautions artists regarding the dangers of a 'photographic' representation, or of adopting a 'photo-realist' style in their work. He states that;

To look at some modern paintings of animals, it is hard to believe that photography was invented a century ago; feather maps are no longer needed, but they are still painted. While Scott, Ennion, Busby, Talbot Kelly and Jonsson were all released from realism by the invention of photography and the more realistic painters such as Eckleberry, Gilmore and Shackleton employed a strong design element in their composition in a way that no camera could achieve, there are many painters still producing and selling work that could quite easily be photography. (Hammond, 1986, p.28).

Two of these, Australian Peter Trussler (shown opposite) and Englishman Simon Coombes are guilty of such techniques, in paintings of birds and African wildlife. Invariably paint the backgrounds out of focus, in the manner of a large aperture lens, with a shallow depth of field. Similarly, Raymond Harris-Ching, one of the most popular and internationally renowned painters and illustrators of wildlife in the world, is guilty on occasion of using a photographic reference to such an extent that the reference actually becomes the painting. I then wonder what the purpose of the painting is. Ching's early interest in the abstract expressionists meant that he, like Bateman, spent many years painting nothing but abstracts, but, as he himself admitted, 'the works were based on an intellectual preference, and painted with a consciously imposed style.' His 'super-realist style', in his contemporary works are self evident in the illustrations opposite. (I still have to ask myself 'How much is photograph?')

The best of the contemporary bird illustrators are only slowly beginning to realise the advantage they have over photography. They are beginning, as with younger artists such as Nik Borrow, Philip Snow and especially Martin Elliot, to exploit this. They are coming to terms with the fact that context and feeling are important to the quality of any bird illustration, be it a detailed field guide illustration, or a simple line and wash drawing. Against photography, the competent bird artist will always feel that he or she will have the upper hand. The ability of an artist to recreate an accurate and informative illustration within the bounds of their own experience is paramount to succesful bird art, a facet ably expressed by Horner, as she watched Raymond Harris-Ching at work in his studio:

As he reflects the original vision on to the page before him, it is subject to the natural distortion of his own intense perception, undergoing

the subtle modifications which stem from the mind of the painter - dramatization in terms of composition and colour, an awareness of grace and style, the accentuation of form. The end result is an image, often some simple thing within our own experience, now endowed with a beauty, half real, half imagined. It is this personal element which turns illustration into art. (Homer, World Magazine, August 1988, p.51-57)

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