



On Drawing Birds From Life

By George Miksch Sutton

THE EDITOR'S NOTE:

The scientific and artistic talents of the legendary George M. Sutton were lauded throughout his long career, 30 years of which were spent on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. But the quality that set Sutton apart from his fellow ornithologists and bird painters was his mastery of the English language, his ability take his readers along on his pursuit of the wonder and beauty of nature.

"Natural scientists who are able—or even desire—to communicate with the lay public are far too few," said Les Line of Audubon magazine on the occasion of Sutton's death in 1982. "Sutton's many articles . . . and his numerous books are a joy to read, composed with literary skill, charm and wit, while conveying both knowledge and the excitement felt by the author on his far-flung journeys."

So it was with a profound sense of discovery that

Michael Mares, director of the University's Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, received an undated and unpublished manuscript from Audubon senior editor Roger DiSilvestro. Having lain forgotten for years in that publication's files, Sutton's wry observations on a facet of his profession are presented in *Sooner Magazine*, where he appeared so many times during his tenure on the faculty.

Many of Sutton's bird paintings, given to the University of Oklahoma Foundation by the artist and his sister, Dorothy Fuller of Topeka, Kansas, are exhibited in the OMNH—formerly the J. Willis Stovall Museum where Sutton was curator of birds. The long-awaited new museum facility, to be funded in part by a higher education bond issue to be voted upon in the fall, will include a special Sutton Gallery devoted to the works of this adopted Sooner, this genial genius whom *Les Line* dubbed *Rara Avis*. A rare bird indeed.

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ot long ago I saw an enjoyable movie about Mark Catesby, whose drawings of North American birds antedated those of Audubon and Wilson by several decades. One scene showed Catesby climbing a not-at-all-difficult tree with pencil in mouth and sketch pad in hand, finding himself a perch and drawing away at some bird or nest below him with an earnest look of concentration on his face. I squirmed uncomfortably as I watched, partly because I knew how hard it is to draw anything well with fingers stiff from grasping and hanging onto branches, but chiefly because I recalled how often my own drawings had been published as "from life," when I knew full well that most of them had not been made in that way.

The phrase "from life" has, in other words, become an all-too-convenient publisher's cliché insofar as bird drawings are concerned. Of course every bird artist wants his birds to look alive. Of course he has living birds in mind as he draws. Of course he has watched living birds, paying close attention to what they do. Some of what he has seen he has remembered. Too, he has studied the work of other artists, deciding what it is that makes some of their drawings lifelike, others not. If he copies a photograph of a living bird, his drawing is, perforce, "from life" to some extent; but now that I know from long experience what working "from life" truly is, drawings made in other ways—including most drawings of my own—come under the heading of something like paraphrase.

What I dislike most of all is extravagant statements to the effect that a given bird artist has crawled through freezing mud, torn his hands scaling cliffs, braved mosquitoes and ticks, what not, all the while making his "incomparably lifelike" drawings. I have crawled, climbed, swum and slapped along with the best of them—a fact emphasized in some of my writings—but I long ago learned that as a rule drawings do not turn out well unless done in a comfortable room or tent, or, if out-of-doors, in a spot shel-

tered from wind and rain, away from direct sunlight, perhaps along a little-used road or trail.

Haggling? A matter of semantics? Not at all. When I write of drawings made "from life," I have in mind not quick little sketches made in the field, in zoos, on game farms or from household pets, but detailed portraits in watercolor made from start to finish with living birds literally within touching distance serving as models.

I have done many drawings of young birds in just this way. The appealing little creatures stay put nicely if well fed, but run, hop and flutter about wildly if not. Adult birds raised as pets make admirable models, but drawings of them are apt to *look* tame. Only infrequently have I been able to make a finished drawing of a captive adult wild bird direct from life.

One such model was a least bittern brought to my office in Harrisburg when I was state ornithologist of Pennsylvania. That time the bird in my drawing was authentic enough, but not the habitat, for I made the whole picture in my office with the bittern on a table near a window.

When I examined the scrawny, lightweight little heron, I ascertained that none of its bones were broken. Indeed, I soon found that it could walk and fly. But when given a drink and a minnow or two, it settled down to such remarkable motionlessness that I could not keep from finding some watercolor paper and getting to work. Not for hours, literally hours, did that least bittern move. I'm not sure that it even blinked its yellow eyes!

Another wild bird that I drew from life was an elf owl that I found in an old woodpecker hole in a dead agave stalk in the Chisos Mountains. I held the moth-soft bird in my left hand while drawing with my right. Needless to say, the owl popped its bill testily now and then.

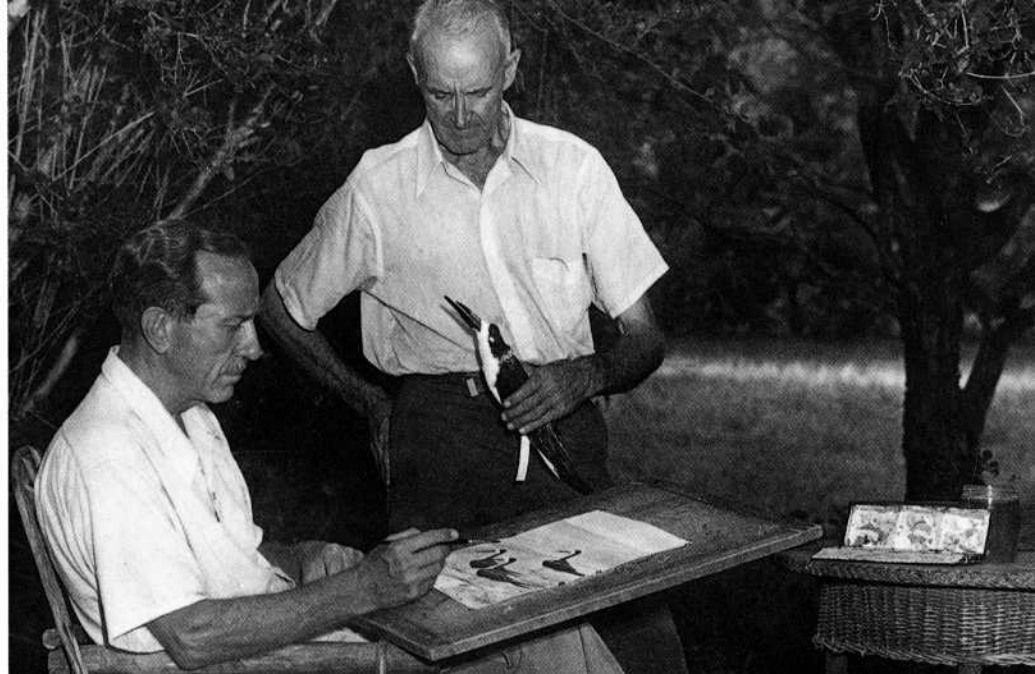
Other owls fresh from the wild I have drawn from time to time, for these lovely birds can be very docile by day while held captive. All four owl species that I did for Todd's *Birds of Western Pennsylvania* were drawn more or less



In the field—in Mexico, Iceland, or Oklahoma—Sutton, left, sometimes required assistance with the "from life" drawings of his reluctant models.



Barred Antshrike (male)
from *Mexican Birds*, 1951
University of Oklahoma Press.



At the Sherwood Plantation near Thomasville, Georgia, in spring 1952, Sutton is observed by Herbert L. Stoddard as he finishes his black skimmer drawing for *Georgia Birds* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1958).

“from life”—i.e., with the living owl in front of me for a time. But no drawing of the four was done wholly from life, and none was done in the owl’s habitat.

A boreal owl, shipped to me alive and penciled in immediately after I received it, died during the night, so I did not add color until the following day. A great horned owl that had been caught by one foot in a steel trap posed beautifully while I drew its head. That time my problem was inducing the bird to repeat a certain position that appealed to me. A snapping of fingers usually made the owl turn its head and look downward toward the sound, thus repeating the pose.

A king eider several weeks old that some Eskimo boys brought to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s trading post on Southampton Island in the fall of 1929 was a wonderful model. The bird had reached adult size and was fully feathered, but for some reason could not fly. Petted and talked to, it quieted down within a short time, permitting me to make an authentic portrait of its head, neck and shoulders.

I was impressed with the narrowness of its eyelids. The short facial plumage so closely surrounded the eye that the lid was virtually invisible, thus giving the drawing a chance to show the striking difference between the dark eye’s moist glassiness and the softness of the feathers. This extreme narrowness of eyelid seems to be widely characteristic of ducks: it was notable

in a drake canvasback, a drake pintail and a hen mallard, all of which I drew from life at Cornell.

Not so, however, with the wood duck. During the courtship season, the handsome drake of that species has an eyelid so bright and so red that at a distance the eye (which is also red) looks bigger than it really is. I never look at my drawing of a drake wood duck’s head without remembering how and where I made it. My studio was the very one in which Louis Agassiz Fuertes had made so many of his wonderful pictures. The bird was to be banded and released, so I was crowded for time. To keep it quiet, I stuck it head-first through the sleeve of an old shirt and pinned it in. It did not tame down at all and continued to struggle, sometimes turning over completely, sleeve and all. When at last it did get free, it wrought proper havoc in the room.

In Iceland, at a big lake called Mývatn, in the summer of 1958, I drew the head of a hen black scoter in about the same way; but that bird tolerated me from the first. Held snugly in a towel pinned together at the proper places, she did not try to beat her wings or kick. When I tossed her into the air after an hour or so of “sitting” for me, she shot off with a whirring of wings that sounded downright jubilant. *Jubilant* was certainly the way I felt, for I had put my whole self into that drawing, and I was glad to see that it had turned out well.

A yellow rail that someone at Cornell caught in a dry field not far from Ithaca would not stand still more than a second or two at a time, but I learned that it repeated a certain tail position frequently, so I decided to draw it in that position. I was much impressed with the little crane’s proud manner. It did not sneak about with head down, but took a sort of “banty rooster” attitude toward the world, as if quite sure of itself. True to character, it managed to escape from its captors soon after I had returned it to them and long before I had finished my drawing. Its behavior was strikingly different from that of a sora rail that I drew from life several years later. The sora, conforming to what the books say about rails, skulked about, often with head down.

A pied-billed grebe drawing that I made in West Virginia was authentic enough, though its “habitat” while being drawn was a half-filled bathtub. What a joy it was to watch that grebe cavorting in the water!

A pileated woodpecker whose head I drew from life at Cornell had been reared in captivity by a graduate student, Southgate Hoyt. The bird cooperated well; but its eye, as recorded in my portrait, does not have the fine fierce look that the wild bird has and that Fuertes caught so well in his pictures of the species.

Most drawings that I have made on expeditions to the far north have been of parts of birds—spread wings, bills



George Sutton crawled, climbed, swam and slapped along with the best of them but found that his drawings turned out better when done in a comfortable room or tent, sheltered from wind and rain, direct sunlight and curious bystanders.

Photographs courtesy of the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

open enough to show bright mouth-linings, feet with toes spread to show semipalmation, etc. But on Victoria Island in 1962 and on Jenny Lind Island in 1966, I made several drawings that were essentially landscapes featuring birds. One of the most successful of these shows a horned lark standing on a rock with a lovely legume in full flower close by. The lark I did from a freshly collected specimen, but the plant *Hedysarum Mackenzii*, I did "direct from life." As I sat on the ground with the plant before me, I could hear larks as they passed overhead and singing in the distance.

Near our tent on Jenny Lind Island, a pair of snow geese had their nest close to a big rock. Here was material for a fine direct-from-life study. The geese I could watch to my heart's con-

tent through a binocular, but the "from life" part of the picture was the rock near the nest. To draw it I took my outfit to another big rock a few rods away and got to work. Only he who has done this sort of thing can know of the difficulties that must be dealt with: wind makes the eyes water; the sun suddenly comes out, and the white paper glares; the water jar upsets; mosquitoes do their drilling behind the ears, where there is no wind, and on the knees where the cloth is thin and stretched tight. Enough said.

Very few of the birds in the many big drawings that I have made in Mexico during the past 35 years have been done direct from life, but most of the drawings were made outdoors, with accessory material galore all about me. Most of the plants therefore are accu-

rate, even quite identifiable. An unexpected problem along remote trails has been people. The friendly *paisanos* can hardly be blamed for being curious about this strange man and his paraphernalia along *their* trail. So they gather around, and their friends and relatives gather around, and conversation waxes voluble, and out from pockets come billets of sugar-cane, and the chewing begins.

Only once during my entire career have I made a finished watercolor from start to finish directly from a free-to-come-and-go living wild bird in its habitat. That bird was a female nighthawk at her "nest" on the roof of a three-story university building. There was nothing in the least exciting about that nest and its surroundings. The eggs lay in as exposed a spot as could have been chosen on that roof. The bird was motionless, utterly motionless, so far as I could see, hour after hour. No object of any sort cast a shadow on her from about 9 o'clock in the morning until later afternoon.

Her eyes were almost closed while I, seated on a low stool three or four feet away, went ahead with my work. I was tempted to make a sudden noise or movement to see if this would rouse her into opening her eyes wide, but she and I had a contract: if she would be good enough to mind her business, I would mind mine.

So, day after day, while the sun was high and the air warm, I went to the roof with stool, drawing board and unfinished drawing. Invariably the nighthawk faced south. Invariably her eyes were mere slits. When the sun was fully out, all shadows were strong but short. At first I used only a pencil, drawing in what I could see of the intricate patterns on back and wings, working entirely from what was there beside me rather than from a scientific skin or mounted specimen. When the penciling in was finished, I took brushes, a glass of water and the old Fuertes paint box to the roof and added color.

I often wondered whether the eggs were hatching. When, at long last, the drawing was finished, I left the bird precisely where she'd been. I looked closely at her that day, hoping to see the nubby beak of a chick poking out from the soft underplumage. No nubby beak did I see. But the chicks were there, all two of them; and they were fed that evening. 