

# *The World of* George Miksch Sutton

BY MICHAEL WATERS

When renowned bird artist George Sutton was 10 years old, he drew a red-winged blackbird in pencil on tablet paper. The drawing, remarkably lifelike for the work of a child, contained one errant detail—an incorrect bend in the leg.

According to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History collections manager, Vicki Byre, “it bothered him for the rest of his life.

“That’s how exacting he was,” Byre says. “In later years, he tried to paint birds directly from life, or freshly killed. He was adamant about not painting from a bird skin, because the colors change a bit in the beak, feet, and eyes.”

The same level of conscientiousness can be found in the museum’s gallery exhibit, “The World of George Miksch Sutton.” On display through October, the exhibit gives patrons the opportunity to examine some 60 works drawn and painted by Sutton over a period of five decades—including some works rarely seen by bird lovers, Byre says.

The works were chosen to reflect Sutton’s artistry, scientific precision, and humanity, celebrating his six-decade career as an artist, ornithologist, author, and professor. As developed by curator Laurie Vitt, the museum’s newly named associate director for collections and research, with Byre’s assistance, the gallery is currently divided into three areas, each of which spotlights a different aspect of Sutton’s life and work.

Visitors can survey Sutton’s renderings of the not-so-everyday bird life found in the Arctic and in Mexico, and the precision of his technical studies. Explanatory panels, designed by Vitt, offer further insight into Sutton the man, the artist, and the scholar.

The Arctic section contains watercolors of such exotic native fowl as the long-tailed jaeger, the black-bellied plover, a red-throated loon, and a Sabine’s gull. The paintings testify to Sutton’s professional consistency, Byre says.





“A lot of his Arctic paintings are from Jenny Lind Island, in Arctic Canada, where he stayed for an entire summer in 1966,” she says. “Sometimes he’d work on three or four paintings at once—one in the early morning, another from ten to noon, another from two to four, and another in the late afternoon—so that the sun was always in the same spot when he did each painting.”

The Mexican section shows works created during several of Sutton’s trips to Mexico over a 40-year period. A buff-collared nightjar and yellow-winged cacique, both painted during the artist’s final trip south in 1978, are joined by renderings of a thick-billed kingbird, a greyish saltator, and a rose-throated becard painted by the artist on earlier visits.

A miscellaneous section focusing largely on Sutton’s pen-and-ink technical paintings—such as watercolors of a baby whip-poor-will, and the head and feet of the greater and lesser prairie chickens—evidence his pinpoint powers of observation. “Every one of these paintings shows something he located, observed, and then painted,” Byre points out. “He had to do a lot of field work to create these.”

Fronting the three areas is a semi-octagonal open panel decorated with a mural showing a line portrait of the artist, greenery and open water, and graphic representations of birds, adapted from Sutton’s own paintings, sailing through the open air.

“And if you follow the mural from Sutton on around the wall,” Vitt notes, “you’ll notice that its colors brighten as you move toward the center. Similarly, at the corners of each exhibit panel, ‘you have birds facing in, so that everything ‘points’ towards the center.”

Vitt emphasizes, however, that the Sutton Gallery is more than an exhibition of memorable paintings and thoughtful graphics. “It developed into a natural history exhibit that focuses on George Sutton—his paintings, collections, and research materials.”

He adds that the final product was “a combination art and natural history exhibit, because Sutton was a scientist as well as a first-class bird artist,” and notes that the professor collected and prepared over 12,000 specimens for the museum during his career.

Thus, alongside Sutton’s paintings a visitor finds the kitchen table he used to prepare specimens, his palettes and brushes, shotguns, and a few of his over 70 scientific publications. The display is painstakingly accurate, down to the inclusion of one of the artist’s no. 4 pencils, employed to write and sketch in his journals.

Such well-considered subtleties were the result of teamwork, Vitt says. Assigned to design the gallery himself, “it became apparent to me that only one person in the mu-



Sanford Mauldin

LEFT: OU’s George Miksch Sutton’s 60-year career as a famed ornithologist, bird artist, and writer took him all over the world. His 1947 trip to Mexico, shown here, was one of several, producing dozens of Mexican bird paintings, some of which are featured in the exhibit of his works in the Sutton Gallery at the SNOMNH.

ABOVE: In the new museum’s Sutton Gallery, a display case labeled “Tools of a Scientist” contains the actual field equipment and clothing used by the longtime Stovall Museum curator of birds on his trips into Arctic Canada, Iceland, Mexico and throughout the United States.

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seum—Vicki—knew all the nuances of Sutton’s life and work. So I designed the exhibit and did computer graphics, while Vicki did the research and put together the labels and text.”

The union of paintings with personal artifacts has made an impression on the gallery’s developers as well as visitors. “It’s changed our philosophy about art exhibits,” Vitt adds. “None of us had ever really thought about these sorts of things before. We’ve developed the idea that these art exhibits can be natural history exhibits, and that the combination makes them much more useful for a natural history museum.”

Overall, “The World of George Miksch Sutton” neatly frames the legacy of a man who painted for love of wildlife and love of knowledge. An author of 14 books and illustrator of 14 others, this OU professor spent three decades enriching the University—and the world—with his research.

But finally, perhaps the 18-month-long exhibit—and a bulging guestbook of tributes composed by those who knew him—will also remind visitors above all that Professor Sutton was a man as personable as he was skilled, a man for whom, as Byre says, “the community was his family.”