

Drawing birds and wildfowl from life can be a frustrating business. In common with most animals they generally refuse to pose and understandably most people resort to using photographs. Drawing and painting from life does however offer advantages that photographs don't. It is always useful to view how a bird moves; walking, swimming and flying, as this gives us vital information about the characteristics of the various species. When working from life it is best to concentrate on the main attributes that make a particular bird recognisable. It may be the unique shape of their body parts or perhaps their distinctive colour. If you can capture the essence of a bird then generally speaking it will satisfy most people (though perhaps not Bill Oddie!). So try to keep your sketches simple. If a bird moves, start a second sketch - several drawings on one sheet can provide a lot of information and you will learn so much. Unlike many other animals, a knowledge



of bird anatomy is not necessarily that useful as the feathers can dramatically change the expected shape but it is fairly clear that birds in general can be constructed using a number of curved shapes. As with any other drawing, carefully measure the relative sizes of body

parts and ensure that they are correctly positioned in relation to each other. As with mammals, the heads of young birds are often bigger in relation to body size than the adult heads.

It can be useful to mentally continue the body curves in order to help this relative positioning. If the bird is standing or walking, pay careful attention to the angles of the leg bones. If the legs are drawn incorrectly the bird will look as though it is falling over.

When painting, go for the general tone and colour rather than attempting to paint individual feathers. Observe the boundaries between coloured areas on birds. Some will be

abrupt whereas others will gradually merge so make sure that you account for this in your painting. I feel that birds lend themselves to pen and wash treatment, allowing the pen to show the construction of the bird and using a loose wash to avoid any tendency towards excessive detail.

Unless you wish to paint a study of a particular bird, remember to include other objects that can help turn a rather academic result into a picture that stands up in its own right. Waterside plants, fences and twigs all help here. Choose your drawing position carefully. A high viewpoint reduces the importance of the bird and restricts your background possibilities. Try for a lower viewpoint - ideally at the bird's level if your back can stand it.



Birds can also add interest to a picture even if they are not the main subject. Apart from the flying seagulls that decorate many pictures, wading birds can make mudflats much more interesting. With distant birds, either standing or flying, don't add detail that is inappropriate for the distance. Carefully observe and ask yourself what you *really* see. I am fairly sure it will simply be the characteristic shape of the bird - often a simple triangle. I doubt that you will be aware of eyes, individual feathers, legs etc. Remember, paint what you see, not what you *think* you see.

When painting still water surrounded by trees, I suggest a first wash for tree reflections, painted vertically and when this is dry a bluish wash to suggest a sky reflection, painted in the direction of flow, perhaps leaving spaces to suggest flow lines in the water. Disturbed water varies depending on the weather conditions, but lightly disturbed water with ripples is characterised by longer than normal reflections, with the ripples tending to show alternate tree/sky reflections. At a certain stage of roughness, water will not show any defined reflection. The reflection of buildings in water will have the same vanishing points as the buildings themselves and in still water the reflection will appear to be as far below the water as the building is above it.

