DRAW A BIRD IN SIX STEPS

Start with the big picture. Posture, proportion, and angles create the silhouette of the bird. Dark and light values convey its solidity and lighting conditions. Add a little detail at the end, and stop before you overwork it.

1. As you look at the bird, try to feel the life within it. Try to capture its posture and flow with a single line. Block in the proportions of the body, and then the head. Double-check to make sure the proportions are correct before moving on. Carve in the angles, paying particular attention to where the head and tail join the body. You are not committed to these early marks. They serve as your guides.

2. Lightly draw the form of the bird, showing the major feather groups.

3. Block in the major areas of dark and light values. Lighting, color, and pattern all cause value changes.

4. If you are working with color, maintain the values you observed in step 3. Remember that in some light, a red bird will not appear red. Add the color you see, not what you think it should be.

5. Add details. Accent areas of interest and accentuate the edges. A little goes a long way, so practice restraint.

6. Knowing when to stop drawing is important. As a general rule, stop drawing before the picture is done. It is better for a drawing to be underdeveloped than overworked.
STEP BY STEP: PEREGRINE WATERCOLOR

Unlike those of songbirds, body feathers of hawks are stiff and well defined. You will often be able to pick out individual feathers on the back and chest, especially when a perched bird fluffs its feathers.

- Make a light drawing of the posture, proportions, and angles.
- Block in feather groups. Note double-breasted look.
- Indicate individual feathers to show their overlap and increase in size.
- Fill in patterns on individual feathers. The lower flanks can have distinct patterns.

- Paint areas of shadow, giving volume to different groups of feathers.
- Paint dark patterns. Usually dark comes last but do not risk losing the details of feather markings.
- Once your work is completely dry, paint the breast with a quick coat of warm brown. Paint a dark wash on the back.
- Reinforce shadows and work details around the face. Do not overwork it; stop before you think you are done.
HUMMINGBIRD HELPER

Hummingbirds can be very cooperative subjects to sketch. Prop your sketchbook at the window near the feeder and they will come to you!

Body feathers are proportionately large, making hummingbirds look rather scaly.

Start with posture and proportions. Hummingbirds have large heads.

The feet and legs are very small. They are not scaly but covered with bare skin. Hummingbirds belong to the order Apodiformes, which means “without feet.”

At rest, a hummingbird often hold its wings below and in front of its tail.

Bill length and curvature vary among species. Females have longer bills than males.

Hummingbirds have 10 tail feathers instead of the usual 12 seen in most birds. The size and shape of the tail feathers vary between species and also change as birds age.
WING TIP TIPS

The tips of the wings of a large soaring bird, or those of a smaller bird in a powerful downstroke, are pushed upwards by the air beneath them. When these curving wing tips point toward the viewer, they are foreshortened. The effect is that the longest primary feathers appear stunted.

Cut and fold a stiff piece of cardboard to make a wing platform with tips that curve upward. Spin the cardboard in your hands and notice how the lower wing tip becomes foreshortened, while the upper tip remains clearly in view.

A circling hawk shows the same angles as the cardboard model. The lower wing tip is foreshortened from below and, from the top, shows a line of curled-up feathers along a straight edge. The longest primaries will curl the most.

If both wings are down, the wing tips of both wings may curl up.

If both wings are up, neither wing tip will be foreshortened.
MAKE A FLIGHT MODEL

Use this page to create bird-in-flight models. By rotating the models in your hands, you will develop an intuitive understanding of the perspective and angles of soaring birds.

Photocopy this page onto stiff card stock, and then use an X-acto knife to cut out the models. Fold them along the lines (only lightly bending the wing folds) and place a drop of glue inside the head. After studying these models, create your own.

The gull model will allow you to study wings in which the primaries and secondaries are held at different angles. Each will foreshorten differently. The hawk wings can be set in a flat plane or at a dihedral (V angle) with the wing tips curled up. Rotate the model in your fingers and notice how the perspective changes. Set the model on a stationary stand. Close one eye to eliminate the parallax between your two eyes. Draw the model from different angles. Compare what you see in the model with photographs and birds in the field.
STEP BY STEP: MIXED-MEDIA STELLER’S JAY

Take advantage of the rich colors of watercolor in combination with the precision and texture of colored pencil. By combining media, you get the best of both worlds.

1. Block in the posture, proportions, and angles with a Non-photo Blue pencil.

2. Outline the feather groups and wings with graphite pencil. The harshness of these edges will fade when covered with paint.

3. Add texture with graphite pencil, following the contours of the bird.

4. Lay in shadows with DS Shadow Violet watercolor. Shadows give the bird volume and dimension.

5. Let the shadows dry and glaze layers of color. Look for subtle color shifts.

6. Add colored pencil once the watercolor has dried completely.

How will the cast shadow of the head and wing wrap around the body?

Cyan wings (Phthalo Blue)

Violet in tail

Drybrush the tail and wing markings before adding pencil.

Suggest fluffy breast feathers with longer overlapping strokes.

Exclude detail from highlight areas.

Indicate some feather edges with a white highlight. Do not overdo it.
STEP BY STEP: RUDDY DUCK

Do not think of these step-by-step birds as the only formula to follow, but as one example of how one artist approaches the subject. Absorb what is useful from such demonstrations and discard what does not work with your way of drawing or looking at birds.

1. Draw the form of the duck, noting the proportions and angles. Double-check your proportions. The Ruddy Duck has a surprisingly large head. Use negative spaces to see the form more accurately.

2. Add texture and value with graphite. Pay attention to the way that the markings follow the contours of the body, giving it volume.

3. Paint a light base layer to establish the colors. Keep your palette small to help your colors harmonize with each other.

4. Paint subtle shadows under the head and bill and at the edge of the breast and flank feathers.

As you add detail, show the contours of the body. Think of wrapping the markings around a three-dimensional form.

I love the muted browns and dappled patterns of female birds. Painting the transitions between brown and gray will help you appreciate the subtle changes in color.

5. Final detail added with a splayed brush to achieve textured feathers. White pencil adds pale specks in the feathers.

Keep reflections simple. Remember that they are cast directly below the subject. The subject and the reflection are not mirror images of each other. Note that more of the back of the duck is visible on the actual bird than you see in the reflection.

If you find painting reflections challenging, study the work of other artists. I had a very hard time with this reflection until I spent an hour studying how J. F. Lansdowne handled a similar subject. As an exercise, try copying the work of your favorite artists, line for line. Studying the masters will not turn your style into a clone of someone else’s. You will discover new ways of drawing and seeing.