

A Birding Interview with David A. Sibley

Like legendary bird illustrator Roger Tory Peterson, David Allen Sibley has set the standard for birding field guides in our time. The comprehensive *Sibley Guide to Birds* has become a must-have reference for birders, packed with Sibley's detailed watercolor illustrations. The son of Yale University ornithologist Fred Sibley, David Sibley began watching and drawing birds at age seven, and has traveled widely in search of birds on his own and as a professional tour leader. His publications also include *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* and *Sibley's Birding Basics*. Sibley lives in Concord, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons.

In this revealing *Birding* interview, David Sibley describes the evolution of his field guide and possible revisions of the work, talks frankly about painting bird feet, shares his hopes for conservation, and weighs in on low-tech vs. high-tech birding.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: Can you describe the progression of your work?

DAS: I have wanted to do a field guide since I was very young, and I actually started working on one when I was in my teens, but it didn't really become a full-time focus until the late 1980s. I had always wanted a field guide that would include all the field marks that can be used to distinguish one species from another, that would illustrate every plumage of every species and subspecies, and would show every species in flight, describe all the calls, and basically cover every aspect of identification. But putting all of that into one book would make it too cluttered and confusing—and too big—to be useful. So I struggled with the design for years, trying to figure out the best compromise on how much information was included, and trying to organize it in a logical way so that it would be understandable even to a beginner.

Birding: What is your process for creating a bird painting?

DAS: I generally start with a field sketch that I like or just an idea in my head, and then work on fleshing that out with rough sketches. I try to find all possible reference material from my files and books and the internet so that I can have all the information I need to do the painting. Then, when I'm happy with the shapes, even when the sketches are still pretty rough, I transfer the outline onto the paper for the final painting. I fill in all of the details with paint, using all of my reference material and my memories of the bird to check that I'm getting it right.

Birding: What medium and size are the original paintings?

DAS: I work in gouache—opaque watercolor—which works very well for the fine detail and subtle color of birds. The originals are quite large, generally about three times as big as the reproductions in *The Sibley Guide*. I prefer working at a large size, since I can be more loose and relaxed when I paint, and use a larger brush. I'm not very patient as a painter so I like to be able to work quickly and not have to hunch over the painting trying to control a tiny brush.

Birding: Do you ever have to start over?

DAS: It's pretty rare that I have to start over a painting from scratch, and when I do it's almost always because the original outline of the bird was off in some way—neck too long, head too big, etc. Details can be fixed with paint, but there's no way to adjust the body proportions after a bird has been painted. Also, sometimes birds with very crisp and subtle color patterns need a delicate touch; if the painting gets overworked or muddy, there is no chance of recovery. I repainted the Le Conte's Sparrow in my guide just before printing because I was disappointed with the first draft and it's such a beautiful bird.

Birding: What is the hardest part of a bird to paint?

DAS: For me it's the feet. I guess I've always focused on the faces of the birds, and worked hard on getting the bill and eye correct, but the feet are very different, reptilian, and I've never been satisfied with my efforts.

Birding: How can you tell if a painting is successful?

DAS: Since my paintings are primarily illustrations, the success depends on being accurate, but of course accuracy in a bird illustration is sort of subjective and can only represent my personal interpretation of the species. I try to capture what the birds look like to me at a distance through binoculars, which often means distorting some of the details that would be visible at very close range. I've been very lucky to be able to spend most of my life birding, so when I sit back to judge the accuracy or success of a painting, I can just ask myself if it looks "right". Often the best way to do that is to put it away for a day or two and then look at it with fresh eyes.

Birding: Do you intend to do a revision of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*?

DAS: I've been looking forward to doing a revision since before the guide was printed. I'm always learning new things and thinking of new and better ways to present the information. There aren't any definite plans for a revision right now, but I'm building up a big file of additions and corrections. I also have lots of ideas for other book projects, about bird identification and other topics, and I look forward to working on some of those.

Birding: Does an encyclopedic knowledge of birds affect your enjoyment of birding?

DAS: I think birding gets more interesting the more you get into it. It does for me. More expertise just leads to more interesting questions. I approach birding in an academic or scientific way, asking questions and testing hypotheses. I often go into the field with a specific goal, for example to study the tail movements of all the small passerines I see, or to take notes on the bill color of fall warblers, etc. To avoid falling into a rut of expectations, I challenge myself to really identify some of the birds I see. I'll find a gnat-

catcher in New Jersey and try to rule out Black-capped, or study a meadowlark to try to identify it by plumage. These kinds of exercises lead to a lot of discoveries just by forcing me to look at birds in different ways. You can also try challenges like naming birds before you lift your binoculars, or determining the age and sex of birds. All of this just makes you pause and look more carefully at one bird. Sketching is also a very important part of this, and the best way to get to know the birds.

Birding: Do you think your books have increased interest in bird and habitat conservation?

DAS: I think my books, like all field guides, provide a starting point for people to begin to get to know the birds. That acquaintance will, in turn, deepen to a real understanding—which is inevitable as you learn about food habits, migration, habitat preferences, etc., and see how birds and their environment are interconnected. Anything that increases peoples' understanding of and connection to nature will increase their interest in conservation.

Birding: What do you think are the most serious threats to birds today, and what can birders do?

DAS: There are a lot of threats to birds, and all are related to bigger environmental and societal issues, especially the fact that humans are

taking up more space and using more of the Earth's resources. The sad story of the last few Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in the Singer Tract in Louisiana reminds us that economic and political needs overrule even the most pressing and dire environmental crisis. It's short-sighted, but it could easily be repeated today for oil, water, lumber, etc. As long as the demand for these resources stays high, there will be pressure to exploit them. The long-term solution to environmental problems is to control our own consumption and reduce the demand; otherwise, there simply won't be anything left for the birds.

Birding: What do you think about the profusion of technological aids for birding?

DAS: Nothing substitutes for simple experience, just the



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basics of getting into the field and seeing the birds under all kinds of conditions. Photos and videos are incredibly valuable resources, leading to many of the advances in field identification. I still just carry binoculars, telescope, and a sketchbook. I do have a digital camera and will sometimes hold it up to the scope to take a few pictures, but I've always found that taking photos makes me lazy. Instead of really studying the birds, I wind up just taking a picture and planning to study it later. I learn so much more from watching and sketching than I ever could from a few photos.

Technology will always be a useful tool for birders, but there is no substitute for actual experience, and no replacement for the human brain when it comes to the fuzzy logic of bird identification. I think technology will continue to influence birding in fundamental ways, but in the background. There won't be a device that actually identifies birds, at least for the foreseeable future. The human brain, eyes, and ears are unbeatable for sensing and identifying the birds, but huge technological advances are responsible for many changes: amateur bird photography, which was pretty rare just 30 years ago; video; sound recordings; and the availability of all of these things. I think most of the big advances in field identification in the past 30 years and the increased emphasis on details like shape and proportions, molt, and feather details have as much to do with advances in optics (which allow us to see details) and photography (which allows us to confirm the differences and point them out to others). Color reproduction in books has gotten much better and cheaper in recent years. My guide could not have been printed cost-effectively without computers, and specialized guides illustrated with photos

are a tremendous resource—these tools simply were not available 20 years ago. Of course, the internet is a great resource that gives everyone instant access to huge amounts of information, and the birding community has been true to form and shares information freely.

But I still like the idea that some 10-year-old kid in Mississippi can borrow a pair of binoculars, check a field guide out of the library, and go birding in a backyard, and can easily become as competent at identification of the local birds as the internet-connected cutting-edge birder. It's all about basics and time in the field; technology is just a helpful aid. There is still no substitute for a book.

