

A Birding Interview with Julie Zickefoose

Ever since she was captivated by a Blue-winged Warbler at the age of seven, Julie Zickefoose has known she wanted to paint birds. She has become one of the finest bird artists in North America, with numerous illustrator and author/illustrator credits, including 17 cover paintings for *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Zickefoose began her career as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy, then became a magazine and book illustrator, and now illustrates her own books, including *Letters from Eden*. Besides painting and writing, she publishes a blog, provides commentary for National Public Radio, and resides on an 80-acre sanctuary in Ohio.

In this wide-ranging *Birding* interview, Zickefoose tells why truth is beauty, remembers bird-dogging for conservation, and reveals the impact of vulture vomit.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How do you paint a feather?

Julie Zickefoose: Unless you're talking about the plume sticking out of a California Quail's forehead, I don't usually paint a feather. I try to paint masses of them, in convincing blocks. Early on, I was lucky to have a mentor in the great bird and landscape painter Robert Verity Clem. Because I'm a visual learner, I learned to paint birds by staring at the (sometimes badly reproduced) work of painters I admired. I fixated on Louis Agassiz Fuertes at about age eight, when my parents bought me a book with his work. Other good bird painters were featured in the book, but I had eyes only for Fuertes because I saw a truth there that told me he had been looking right at the bird as he worked. I started trying to paint birds in 1976. By the time I met Bob Clem in the early 1980s, I was primed to see and hear what he was conveying to me. With all due respect to Basil Ede, who gave loving treatment to each individual feather, I see birds as smooth conglomerates of feathers, and I think less is more where painting them is concerned. If you don't think so, look at Lars Jonsson's work.

Birding: Between accuracy and artistry, which comes first?

JZ: Mood comes first for me, mood and light. I first think about the feeling I want to evoke in the painting long before I consider pose or habitat. Accuracy is there because it's so ingrained in me. If I don't know how long a bird's leg is, I'm not ready to paint it, and it won't look right when I'm done. Truth is beauty to me, and it's very hard to make a painting I find beautiful unless the bird is dead-on.

Birding: What do you consider your best bird painting?

JZ: I don't think I've done my best yet, and there isn't one I'd single out at this point. I like the ones that are not self-conscious, that go fast, that don't have many feathers in them, that are done right over a life sketch. I also like the ones that make me feel I'm right there with the bird, in its habitat, that gather something of the experience of seeing the bird.

Birding: What was the toughest criticism you have received for a bird painting?

JZ: Bob Clem was a tough mentor. He wanted me to work from life, paint without thinking about it, and avoid preciousness—tight and tense and perfect paintings—and I understand that now. It was hard to understand then that time spent on a work does not equate to quality.

Birding: How is your work influenced by your personal experiences: living on your 80-acre wildlife sanctuary and collaborating with your husband, *Bird Watcher's Digest* editor William Thompson III?

JZ: How is it not? This sanctuary is a factory for images and ideas and inspiration. I feel completely at one with these woods, and they will never stop giving me moments that grow into creative work.

Bill and I do a dance as far as collaborating goes, the kind of dance where you pull your partner close and then let her swing out. *Bird Watcher's Digest* has been the pivotal venue for my work, ever since I wrote my first piece in 1986. (I didn't know Bill existed until 1990.) He's got great vision,

and it was his idea to take a number of my columns and craft them into a book (*Letters from Eden*). When that came out in 2006, I began to think of myself more as a writer than a painter. My paintings and sketches service the essays they illustrate. I feel very grateful to have had Bill's guidance in making a book. He continues to teach me how to deal with the world outside the studio, lessons of professionalism, dependability, and integrity.

Birding: Which birds (and bird parts) do you enjoy painting, and which are challenging for you?

JZ: I like to paint songbirds a lot, warblers in particular. Painting a Chestnut-sided Warbler is my idea of a party. Having said that, I really enjoy sketching big birds like waterfowl, turkeys, and raptors because their architecture is so much better defined. I like painting white birds and grayish-brown birds because you can play so much with color within white, and because gray and brown pigments blend so smoothly in a wet-on-wet treatment. Recently, I have been putting so much more effort into making convincing habitats that painting the birds is like a little sweet dessert after the big meal. I may spend a couple of days creating a habitat, and only 40 minutes painting the bird.

Birding: Tell us about how you reach out beyond the studio, with a blog, speaking engagements, and commentary on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*—and performing with your husband in a band, The Swinging Orangutans?

JZ: That's Orangutans, with a g, because we're so tangy. Bill and I started playing together in 1991. It is such fun. And it has nothing whatsoever to do with birds, though we did play at the New River Birding Festival in May of 2009. Creating a raucous rock-club atmosphere at a birding festival was transcendently, hilariously fun, and we hope to do it again.

I began blogging in December 2005, and I have kept it up ever since. The project has taken on a life of its own, and my blog <<http://tiny.cc/iXFbl>> has made me into a stronger photographer and writer. I can take readers along with me to see a Giant Anteater in Guyana, share the birds of Honduras and Guatemala, or take them into a bluebird box or up the side of a volcano. For me, the blog is all about sharing what I find wonderful in the world.

The NPR work is a lot like blogging, with better outreach. I try to give back, to create fresh material that demonstrates the richness of being connected to these woods and hills. My commentaries for *All Things Considered* <<http://tiny.cc/zEHFQ>> demand that I reach

the kernel of a story in 500 words or fewer—less than three minutes of airtime—and brevity is a great cleanser of prose. I also never realized how powerful a good reading can be before I started recording for radio. It's given me a whole new appreciation for the human vocal apparatus, for vocal acting, and for my amazing NPR editor, Ellen Silva.

Birding: What work did you do as a biologist for The Nature Conservancy? Do you think your scientific background influenced the realism in your painting?

JZ: I was essentially a bird dog for the Connecticut Chapter of TNC, looking for the “best of the last,” whether they were rare plants, birds, animals, or habitats. I drove my own little car and went all over the state, immersing myself in habitats from open fens to pitch pine sand plains to barrier beaches. It was hard work for little pay, but it forced me to learn my plants and trees, and appreciate how plant communities are the backbone for absolutely everything else I'm interested in.

In 1983, I realized that unless I did something fast, Least Terns and Piping Plovers were going to be wiped out in Connecticut, so I started a program to post and protect their nesting colonies on the beaches and islets statewide. Organizing volunteers, patrolling, and playing beach cop was one of the most challenging but rewarding things I've done. After three seasons of it, I was ready to paint and write for a living, which I've done since 1986. Even though the income is

Julie Zickefoose.

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sparse and intermittent, it feels like the right choice to do something I love.

Birding: You're very active and popular on the lecture circuit. How often do you make speaking appearances, and why is this such a big part of your life?

JZ: I average one to three speaking engagements a month, sometimes in far-flung places. Both Bill and I have ridden the bird festival wave, which I suspect has crested, and we've seen some amazing things and traveled to great places we'd never otherwise have experienced. After a full day of birding, which is kind of like hitting yourself over the head with a hammer, people like to be entertained, whether you play music for them or read them bedtime stories. You just hope they don't doze off, so you try to keep it surprising and funny. You can always bring them around by saying "vulture vomit."

Birding: What are you working on now?

JZ: I've just finished a manuscript for my next book, a memoir about a life spent among birds. Theodore Roosevelt said that to really know a man, you needed to share a tent with him, and I think that's true of birds. I'd go further and say that to really know a bird, it helps to be its mama. So these are in large part stories about wild birds I've raised from orphaned chicks, birds that were broken or starved, birds that needed help in some way. Each of the 25 chapters treats a different species, a wide array from Ruby-throated Hummingbird to Osprey. It will be illustrated with my paintings and drawings, and, like *Letters from Eden*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. I'm delighted to say that Lisa White, who has also been interviewed here, is my editor. Speaking of that, I'd better get back to the drawing board!