

ABOUT THE COVER

By Ted Floyd
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“Wow!” That was my one-word reaction to the cover of the November 2010 issue of *Birding*. Mind you, I had seen the cover art before. Many times, in fact. I’d seen earlier sketches by artist Louise Zemaitis. I’d seen mockups by designer Ed Rother. I’d seen the final layout for the publisher. I had a good mind’s-eye view of the final, finished cover.

Still...“Wow!” Seeing the finished product in real life was tangibly different from all those earlier encounters with—and expectations for—the cover art.

Here’s the story of how the November cover came to be.

Back in June of 2010, Louise Zemaitis and I were cleaning up after a bunch of young birders. (See pp. 56–57 of the print issue of the November 2010 *Birding*.) We’d been awake and mainly on the road for close to 18 hours. We were in that “late-night discussion” mode. Every topic of discussion was fair game.

“Louise,” I ventured, “Can you do a cover for *Birding*?”

I had a concept in mind.

First, the cover would have to feature a Savannah Sparrow. I knew we’d be running an article on Savannah Sparrows by sparrow expert James D. (“Jim”) Rising. And not just any old Savannah Sparrow. Jim’s article would deal with the many named subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow. Louise’s sparrow would have to be recognizable to subspecies.

Second, I wanted a robber fly on the cover. (Again, see pp. 56–57 for some context.) The robber fly would have to be a reasonably common, reasonably familiar, and field-identifiable species.

Third, I informed Louise that her cover would be a “gatefold”—that is to say, a foldout cover, wider than tall. Gatefolds present both challenge and opportunity to the artist. The challenge is to make it work: You have to create a “two-for-one” cover. The main part of the cover—the 8.5-by-11 piece that you first see when you receive *Birding* in the mail—

has to stand by itself. Then, when you open up the cover, it converts to “landscape” dimensions, with the right panel serving as “the rest of the story,” if you will. The opportunity is obvious: If you can pull it off, the gatefold option gives you far more to work with.

Next, Louise had a “demand” of her own. The art *had* to be, for want of a better word, “ecological.” It had to be realistic—not just in terms of contour feathers and tarsal bristles, but also in terms of microhabitat and environment. Fine with me.

So off went Louise. A month or two later, she e-mailed me a black-and-white sketch of the cover. It looked great. But which Savannah Sparrow subspecies would it be, and which robber fly species?

Let’s deal first with the robber fly. At this point in the process, I roped in Norman Lavers, artist of the feature article on robber flies (pp. 57–62). Fortuitously, both he and Louise were fine with *Proctacanthus rufus*. Norman sent an excellent photo (see photo on next page), to serve as reference material. Here’s what Norman has to say about *P. rufus*:



Robber flies in the genus *Proctacanthus* are big and powerful. An inch-and-a-half long or longer, they will catch anything that comes by, but they especially like bees and wasps. They grab them out of the air with their long, spiky legs and turn them round and round till they get the stinger facing away from them, then pull them in close for a fatal stab with their beaks. *P. rufus* does its hunting along slow-moving heavily vegetated streams, but the females look for open dunes or beaches of fine powdery sand to lay their eggs. The males get there ahead of them and defend territories about ten feet apart, waiting there to waylay the females. On the open sand, with their red legs and bright red abdomens, you can spot them and identify them from a great distance.



As to the Savannah Sparrow, Louise informed me that she had elected to depict the subspecies *mediogriseus*. It was a perfect choice, although in a rather ironic way. As it turns out, *mediogriseus* is not recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) in its definitive 1957 publication on the subspecies of North American birds. That "complication" serves to illustrate a key point of Jim's feature article on Savannah Sparrows (pp. 44–55), namely, that the continental subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow should all be lumped together. Thus, Louise's bird is pretty much whatever you want

it to be: *mediogriseus*, according to Louise; *savanna*, according to the AOU; or *sandwichensis*, according to Jim.

With all that stuff out of the way, Louise was ready to show me a scan of the art.

"It's beautiful," I declared.

"Not so fast," Louise cautioned.

She was not completely satisfied with the bird's lores. It was back to the drawing board, literally so.

A day or so later, the final, *final*—did I say final?—art was submitted. Here's how Louise sums up the process:

Whenever I am asked to create a piece of artwork, I spend a lot of time thinking before I begin the piece. It is very important to me that the animals in the composition are placed in appropriate habitat and the medium fits the scene. I must admit that this particular pairing was a challenge. I chose the asters first. Their old seed heads remind me of jellyfish moving in different directions. I like the way that the sparrow and the robber fly fit into the pattern of the vegetation. The earth tones of the background, the streaking of the sparrow, and the orange and red of the robber fly feel like autumn. I used color pencil to capture the soft colors, and pen and ink to tighten up the contrasts.

Now the art was in the hands of the ABA's "Pubs guys," designer Ed Rother and Director of Publications Bryan Patrick. Bryan saw to it that the art be properly and professionally scanned for cover-quality reproduction. Enter Ed. Here's Ed's retelling of his role in the production process:

Magazine covers can get a bit tricky when artwork is involved. As a designer, I have an implied duty to be faithful to the artwork and therefore not to alter the composition. (Not too much anyhow...Easy on the Photoshop cloning!) The masthead, the logo, the magazine name, subtitles, descriptions, and so forth—All those things have to be designed around the artwork. The design challenge is compounded when an extended cover with a folded flap is added to the mix. There should be a good compositional balance on the cover in its folded state, yet there should also be

an element of enticement to draw the viewer past the fold. Once the flap is open, the entire layout still needs to make sense compositionally.

Fortunately in this case, the artist planned ahead and gave us a creative solution that easily fit all of our parameters. The sparrow perched on a twig angled toward the center gives us a nice focal point for the folded cover. Yet we sense that there's something in the bird's field of view, somewhere to our right. When opening the fold, we see that there is in fact a secondary focal element that's holding the bird's interest: the robber fly. It's almost as if they are making eye contact. When we add a line of text at the bottom to reinforce this directional focus, we create a neat, harmonious triangle pointing toward the insect (see diagram below). Finally, we reinforce the idea that there's more to the folded cover by adding ellipses in the text before and after the fold. Now all we need is the Jaws theme as background music...

Either that, or I just winged it!

Finally, the completely laid-out cover went back to Bryan for the last step in the production process: getting the magazine printed and mailed. That's a story unto itself, involving phone calls, very large file downloads, eleventh-hour corrections from me, and tight, tight deadlines.

There you have it. From an idea hatched late at night last summer to the finished product you just received in the mail, the November 2010 cover was a decidedly fun ride. Um, do you want to hear the story behind the whole rest of the magazine? Well, you can! Check out The ABA Blog (<http://blog.aba.org>), then click on "Point/Counterpoint" on the right, and then read the three-part series on the November 2010 issue of *Birding*.

