

# About the Cover Painting

by Julie Zickefoose

Many of us still remember the “spark bird”, the one that set off a lifelong passion for birds. That bird, well seen, opened the door to a joy theretofore unknown. The cover painting for this issue of *Birding* was commissioned by my friends John Kricher and Martha Vaughan as a gift for John’s cousin, whose spark bird was an Eastern Towhee. As a commission, it’s a soft pitch, because all I have to do is put the bird in a pleasing setting, and make it handsome enough to merit spark bird status. To sweeten the deal, as a watercolorist, I love working in browns and blacks. The pigments move nicely in solution, and a dry brush will lift them back up if I change my mind.



① I wanted the towhee to feel comfortable in its setting, so the forest floor was an obvious choice of venue. I know better now than to attempt a bramble tangle. That is a watercolorist’s nightmare. During one of my winter walks around my house in Ohio, I had found a striking ironwood trunk that would serve nicely as a backdrop for a strong vertical compositional element, one with lots of movement of its own. The concept sketch came out in a minute or two.

the bird, rather than evoking any specific time of year. I worked from a nice road-killed specimen—I’m licensed to handle them—and got this detailed drawing.



② I like towhees any old way, but puffed out is a favorite pose. This is a winter scene, but it is intended to be timeless, and really just focused on the roots and

③ One of the things I’ve always loved and tried to emulate about the late Don Eckelberry’s work is the strong structural drawing he did, feeling the planes so clearly. I transfer the drawing onto watercolor paper using an overhead projector, and set up to paint.



The ironwood trunk and roots were handled in wet on wet watercolor, and went so quickly I didn’t pause to shoot progress pictures until they were all blocked in. Here’s maybe the first 20 minutes of the painting.

④ Here’s the second installment. You can see that I’ve worked more on the roots and trunk as they dried, and begun to suggest the forest receding off in the distance. The bird is for dessert, once I’ve clobbered the habitat.



⑤ This painting was pretty much finished in a single day. I spent the first afternoon coming up with the concept and drawing, the entire second day painting, and most of the next morning refining. As always for

me, painting the bird is the very least of it. Putting it in a believable setting is a much bigger challenge and time sink.

I was determined in this one not to get bogged down in the leaf litter or other unessential elements. To my eye, too many wildlife paintings give equal focus to the minutiae of vegetation or gravel or whatever the background might be, with the result that the viewer's eye doesn't know where to settle. It roams all over looking at detail and then gets tired, without finding satisfaction. I want the bird to be the focus, with



some other nice restful elements to set it off. I want to suggest complexity without getting too literal and picky about it. Also, I am lazy.



⑥ To get myself in the right frame of mind to paint, I often go to Lars Jonsson's work. I sit on the floor flipping through books written entirely in Swedish, just staring at the paintings. Lars manages to suggest entire habitats without delineating so much as a leaf. I don't come anywhere close to doing that, but I look anyway, and hope that some of his genius rubs off on me. All I can do as an artist is expose myself to the best stuff and then do it in my own primitive way.

As soon as I have a passable habitat, it's on to the bird. At this point it's about 3 in the afternoon. I block out the towhee's colors and set about sharpening and modeling it with deeper blacks. I'm sticking with ivory black right out of the tube; it's a nice warm black and it moves beautifully in solution, lifting back up without staining. I love ivory black. I think it's made from burnt cow bones. It used to be made from burnt elephant tusks—hence the name.

I model the bird and take another look at the background. It looks all right to me, but husband Bill steps in and comments that the distant background looks too flat and seems to come forward. Hmm. He has a point. Bill suggests darkening and defining the distant trunks. So I do, and it immediately looks better.

⑦ It's good to have a keen-eyed editor like Bill around. Now the ironwood trunk is definitely in the foreground. I knock off for the day and decide to do the final tweaking in the morning.

I elect to fiddle a bit with the moss behind the towhee's head. The color isn't working, so I green it up a bit. A light wash of Chinese white over the top of his head and back helps him to pop out of the green...which has about the same value as his head—oops. There's a constant tuning of darks and lights so that darks play against lights, with the result that some edges are "lost" and some are sharply defined. Hard edges make things pop off the paper, so you have to watch those. But some hard edges are nice, like those along the white tail panels.



I think the painting is done now. It's always good to stop a little before I think the painting is finished so that I don't noodle it into fussy obscurity. I want it to look like a painting, not a photograph. The whole time I've been painting, a pair of towhees has been scuffling around under the feeders just a dozen feet away. How nice to be able to refer right to the living bird. It should always be that way.