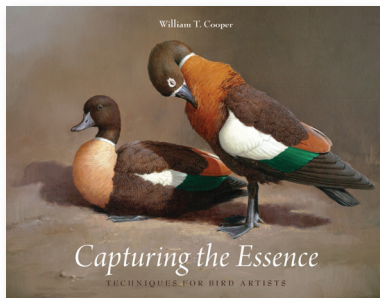


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## Book Reviews



### Capturing the Essence: Techniques for Bird Artists

William T. Cooper. 2011. CSIRO Publishing. Hardback, 128 pages, 139 colour illustrations. ISBN: 9780643101562. RRP \$59.95.

William T. Cooper is unquestionably one of the world's great bird artists, whose work will be very familiar to all with an interest particularly in Australian birds. He has had numerous collaborations with the ornithologist Joseph Forshaw, including his outstanding illustrations for *Australian Parrots* (Lansdowne Editions 1969). His ability to combine the necessary anatomical and diagnostic accuracy of his avian subjects with an environmental context of aesthetic beauty is the hallmark of his work. Each painting a true work of art! Wildlife artists, and bird enthusiasts, are fortunate indeed that Cooper has decided to provide us with an insight into how he goes about creating his art, and in doing so I believe he gives us a deeper appreciation of his formidable talent.

*Capturing The Essence* is primarily in two parts. The first, whilst providing useful information on artist materials and the fundamentals of drawing, is primarily all to do with the underlying philosophy of Cooper's art, which is that studiously observing the subject in the field is paramount to gaining the

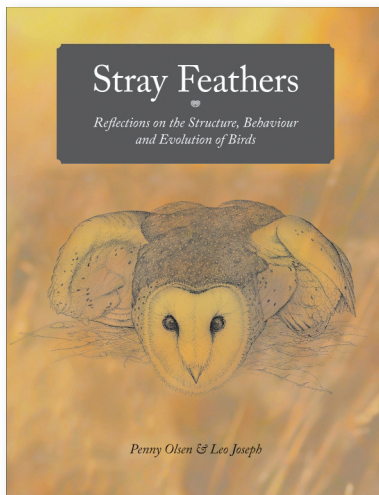
intimate knowledge to consequently produce a painting of both ornithological accuracy, and integrity. There is no substitute for such an approach, and he continually stresses the importance of developing life-drawing skills, and avoiding the trap of over-reliance on photographic reference that the vast majority of wildlife artists fall into in varying degrees. It is only when he refers to the drawing of birds in flight, and the necessity for postural accuracy, that he concedes that photographs of the subject matter are relatively indispensable. Of course, it must be acknowledged that to draw birds, in the field, often with only fleeting glimpses, is actually incredibly difficult and frustrating. It takes enormous perseverance, and talent, and it is little wonder that many artists simply rely on the camera for their fieldwork observations. It is a testament to Cooper's prodigious artistic talent that he can so beautifully *capture the essence* of his subjects with such an economy of line, and then translate such sketches ultimately into his masterful paintings.

Which brings me to the second part of the book: a step-by-step guide illustrating how he develops a bird painting in the mediums of watercolour, acrylic, and oil. It is always fascinating to see how an artist evolves his artwork, and there is much to be learnt from the three examples here. Each are extremely informative, and in the case of the acrylic and oil paintings of Squatter Pigeons and Raggiana Birds of Paradise respectively, I found it refreshing to see how Cooper is more than willing to make compositional changes at virtually any point in the process, constantly critiquing, always seeking to improve on the original concept. Conversely, when it comes to the watercolour example depicting a pair of Red-capped Robins, such mid-process changes are simply not possible; such is the subtlety, but permanence, of the medium. The final, finished image of the robins is gloriously delicate, so in keeping with the birds themselves, and of course featuring the signature vignettted background that has become so familiar to all who have appreciated Cooper's work for decades.

In reviewing this book, I found myself revisiting his *Australian Parrots*, and gaining a renewed appreciation for just how exceptional an artist Cooper is. Irrespective of our artistic abilities, all of us can seek to improve our observational skills by sketching birds in the field, and in doing so take more from the experience. There can be no more intimate way to *really* look, observe, learn, understand. Australian ornithology is

fortunate that William T. Cooper took this path himself as an artist, and has encouraged others to do the same. Just try it, put away the camera, pick up the pencil! *Capturing The Essence* shows a master at work, but highlights that the rewards of such an approach to studying birds are tangible to us all.

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### **Stray Feathers: Reflections on the Structure, Behaviour and Evolution of Birds**

Penny Olsen and Leo Joseph. 2011. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback 288 pp, black and white illustrations. ISBN 9780643094932. RRP \$59.95.

This book is based on a large number of high quality illustrations of Australian birds, which had been gathered for a planned earlier publication by the Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS). The authors have accompanied these beautiful illustrations with a rich and varied text that is inspired by and which supplements and extends the life and drama in the images.

*Stray Feathers* has been produced for the student, bird lover, teacher or general reader and it covers a wide scope of fascinating aspects of birds including chapters on anatomy and physiology, bird senses, plumage, finding and handling food, courtship, parental care, nests, living together and many others.

The book contains remarkable facts about a broad selection of birds that will be familiar to readers from the more populated parts of Australia, as well as birds from across the more remote regions including our offshore islands.

Each page provides a vignette, which is a window into selected aspects of the lives of different species. The authors explore how storm-petrels feed their young on oil and how pigeons supply theirs with milk; how a Common Koel chick uses its tiny body to evict the nestlings of its host, and what feeding niches are occupied by co-existing species of grebe. There are excellent descriptions of the synergies between Black Kites and wild fire, between the Azure Kingfisher and platypus, and between albatrosses and prevailing winds.

This book is also a useful reference for the bird hobbyist and there is considerable detail about Budgerigar skeletons, skulls,

breathing systems and feathers, and the importance of tongue shape in seed eating, nectar feeding and 'talking' parrots.

The bird adaptations featured throughout the book are described in terms of evolutionary imperatives, and the bird's behaviour, structure and physiology are often related by the authors to environmental selection pressures. For example the large range of bill lengths and shapes among waders is explained in terms of adaptive radiation to enable feeding. Examples of convergent evolution are also identified, such as in the common habits of crocodiles and mound builders. There are also descriptions of how unique random genetic mutations have led to the Emu's particular method for extracting water from ingested food and this is contrasted with the different strategies employed by desert mammals.

In addition to many specific examples, there are overarching evolutionary themes, which prevail throughout the book. Some of these include the trade off between birds' need for communication and the associated enhanced risk of predation; the relative merits of solitary and group lifestyles; and the advantages or otherwise of pairing for life.

The authors also explore some unexpected evolutionary relationships such as how weak flight in Buff-banded Rail may explain how rails successfully colonised remote islands thus leading to speciation. The authors do not claim, naturally, to have all of the evolutionary or biological answers about all species, and they stimulate enquiry by setting the scene for further work such as into "the uniqueness and function of wagging behaviour in fantails", and the purpose of the Southern Cassowary's "helmet".

Whilst not a key component of this book, there are some descriptions of bird responses to current topical environmental changes, such as tree loss and bell miner-psyllid larvae-Eucalypt dieback interactions.

This book is immensely readable and is entertaining, informative and inspiring. It will stimulate and enlarge the reader's love of birds and most likely promote a closer style of observation and a deeper understanding of evolutionary mechanisms. The illustrations are at times captivating and are always clear and accurate depictions of birds in the business of going about their lives.

The text and illustrations of this book are supplemented by an excellent "Further reading" list which will be very useful for extending the reader's investigations. This book will be a valuable addition to municipal, school and tertiary institution libraries, and will be an especially useful resource for biology teachers working at upper secondary school level. Most of all it will be a useful addition to the shelves for all lovers of birds.

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