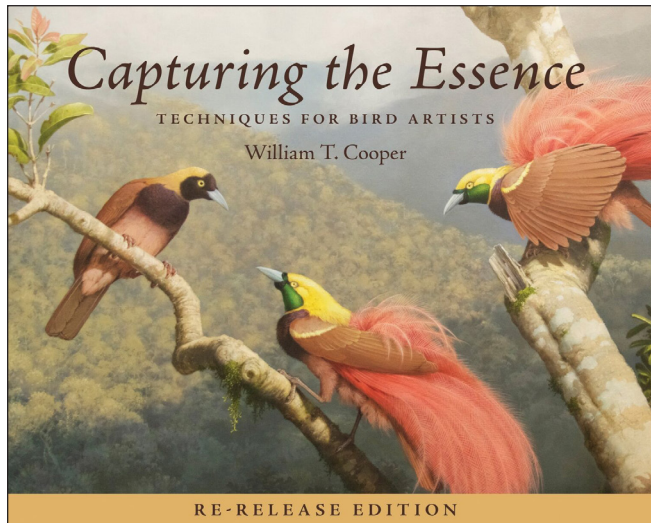


## Book Review

### Capturing the Essence: Techniques for Bird Artists — re-release edition

by William T. Cooper

CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, 2024. Hardback 265 x 207 x 15 mm, 124 pp., numerous colour and black-and-white illustrations throughout. RRP \$59.99. ISBN 9781486318612.



This slim colourful book, of good-quality paper and binding, was first released in 2011 by CSIRO Publishing as a hardback (in the United States of America by Yale University Press as a softback) and is now re-released with a new cover. Other than a half-page text of tribute to William Cooper, by Australian bird artist Peter Marsack, the interior of this re-release is identical to the original (the back cover being slightly different, with a photograph of Cooper and the statement that the book is available as an eBook). Several previous books on how to draw and paint birds are mostly by Europeans or Americans. Australian William T. Cooper (1934–2015) mostly painted in watercolour in the style of John Gould (1804–1881) and associated artists, whose work he greatly admired from an early age. Gould had to frequently paint birds never seen in life, from museum specimens. Although Cooper also often did so (with the aid of photographic reference material of live birds) he preferred to work from life and depict them in appropriate, scientifically accurate, habitat and floral detail, to become one of the greatest bird painters ever. He was remarkably productive, and illustrated many ornithological volumes by Australian author Joseph Forshaw.

As a boy I painted birds, and as a late teenager did so for a year professionally, for magazines, stamps, and private commissions, and in 1975 a Thai artist and I held a successful exhibition of bird paintings on Phuket Island. I got to know Bill Cooper well over a couple of decades, as close friend, neighbour, and colleague, and he was as generous in offering me advice and practical guidance as he was to many others. In illustrating an academic book that I wrote on birds of paradise we collaborated closely,

as I witnessed his work ethic and artistic skills. He had to illustrate some extremely rare hybrids for which specimens were unavailable and so had to work from my photographs of dried bird skins held in overseas museums. His understanding of birds in general, and of some birds of paradise, enabled him to illustrate all species and hybrids wonderfully well (Frith & Beehler 2008).

*Capturing the Essence* is divided into two — Part A dealing with “Materials, Aids, Some principles of painting, Anatomy of birds (for the artist), Sketching from life, Measured drawings, Black and whites, and Ideas” and Part B with “A painting in watercolours, A painting in acrylics, A painting in oils, Conclusion, Glossary, Recommended reading”. Numerous bird illustrations, including small sketches of 14 species on endpapers (unfortunately not identified), are predominantly of working pencil and colour sketches of birds, plants, and scenic detail with but five full-page finished paintings and 6 full-page lovely “measured drawings” in colour (four of entire dead birds and two of just open wings – the availability of freshly dead birds permitting the artist to base these paintings on carefully taken measurements of body parts/proportions).

Given that the book was released in 2011, it is surprising that the immense value of photography is covered in only 15 text lines – particularly as mobile phone cameras are now constantly used. The text, however, deals only with cameras as aids to painting birds, and not their great value in acquiring scenic, habitat, and plant reference material. Ironically, the habitat of Cooper’s painting of Stork-billed Kingfishers *Pelargopsis capensis*, of a *Rhizophora*-lined mangrove creek (p. 24), is based closely upon a photograph I took on Phuket Island, for a study by Dawn Frith (Frith *et al.* 1976); as is a seaward mangrove edge and male fiddler crab in his painting of Brown-winged Kingfishers *P. amauroptera* (both in Forshaw 1985).

With a main text of less than 12,000 words, excluding brief to extensive picture captions, some might not see it as definitive on painting birds. That said, it provides a finely illustrated, innovative, guide to painting birds and, after all, ‘a picture tells a thousand words’. Cooper emphasises the need to observe and sketch living birds if they are to be depicted life-like and accurate. It was amazing to watch him sketch in the field, with his determination, skills, and artistic ability to depict the proportions, ‘jizz’, plumage, and environment of birds.

I note that Cooper’s painting of the ear aperture of the Southern Cassowary *Casuaris casuaris* (p. 18) is too

symmetrically circular and simple in its surrounding skull structure and lacks the typically encircling short, fine, black feathers. A colour sketch of the wing of an adult Australian Logrunner *Orthonyx temminckii* has decidedly dark bluish-grey broadly tipped lesser, median, secondary wing-coverts with seemingly atypical flight-feather colours. Perhaps the wing is more variable than field guides indicate, most showing whitish to pale-greyish covert tipping and extensive and contrasting jet-black and rich-chestnut or buff areas on coverts, primaries and secondaries (see Slater *et al.* 1989; Pizzey & Knight 2003; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017; Davies *et al.* 2022). Morcombe (2000), Higgins & Peter (2002) and Boles (2007) do, however, show this species with mid to dark bluish-grey coverts but also with extensive black between the coverts and rich chestnut, brown, or buff in the flight-feathers. Given Cooper's accuracy, which I do not doubt, variation in the Australian Logrunner's wing might warrant study (unless the four field guides grossly exaggerate wing coloration).

In a book for aspiring artists, not ornithologists, passerine and non-passerine might have been included in the Glossary, notwithstanding limited explanation of the former. Most illustrations have a printed caption, but heads of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Cacatua galerita* (p. 6), two colour sketches of Swamp Harriers' *Circus approximans* heads (p. 22), pencil sketches of Rainbow Lorikeets *Trichoglossus moluccanus* (p. 22), Greater Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii* and Australian Pied Oystercatchers *Haematopus longirostris* (p. 66), Plumed Whistling-Ducks *Dendrocygna eytoni* (p. 74), Superb Fairy-wrens *Malurus cyaneus* (p. 121), and Shining Flycatchers *Myiagra alecta* (p. 123) lack one. The caption for a sketch of fluffed breast-feathers fails to identify the Spotted Dove *Spilopelia chinensis* (p. 32) and that of a dead bird does not identify it as being a Yellow-faced Honeyeater *Caligavis chrysops* (p. 73). The caption for a sketch showing feather tracts (p. 34) states that the birds shown are fledglings when they are actually young nestlings. Painting sizes are inconsistently provided. These omissions might have been added in this re-release.

Part B of the book provides invaluable insights into Cooper's techniques, skills, and search for compositional perfection. For a painting in watercolour, he provides field sketches, compositional layouts and paint-application details in nine progressive illustrations culminating in a delightful finished vignettted painting of Red-capped Robins *Petroica goodenovii*. For acrylics, eight full-page illustrations demonstrate the build-up of paint from initially broad to detailed — the wonderful finished image being of a pair of Squatter Pigeons *Geophaps scripta*. The similar treatment for an oil painting is illustrated by two pencil-and-colour-wash life sketches followed by 11 full-page images

of a canvas of Raggiana Birds of Paradise *Paradisaea raggiana*, the finished one spectacularly depicting two adult males displaying to a female on tree limbs with a distant background of rain-forested ridges. Through the progression of these latter images, Cooper can be seen to add or subtract components of his evolving composition and colour palette to achieve his goal — wonderfully instructive, leaving one in awe of his abilities.

Anyone interested in fine bird painting and how to go about it should seek this book, the majority of birds therein being Australian or New Guinean. Cooper dedicated his life to perfecting his depiction of birds and it is impossible to become nearly as good without intimately learning how birds are physically constituted, function, and behave, together with constant hard work. Recognition of his contributions is reflected in Cooper being awarded the Gold Medal of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Drexel University, Pennsylvania (1992), Order of Australia (AO, 1994), and Honorary Doctorate from the Australian National University, Canberra (2015).

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