

# Trash Birds

Art by \_\_\_\_\_

BARRY KENT MACKAY • STEVE CARBOL • LYDIA C. THOMPSON • RAY NELSON • JULIE ZICKEFOOSE •  
BARRY VAN DUSEN • MICHAEL DIGIORGIO • JONATHAN ALDERFER • JOHN SCHMITT • KENN KAUFMAN

Open your eyes. Without effort or thought you receive a gift—the ever-changing sight of the world, of the reflected light from the atmosphere, of the objects and creatures around you. Vision is the cornerstone of most birding *and* artistic pursuits.

Each of us has a unique, visual vantage point and a set of experiences and memories that color our perception. For visual artists in the realist tradition—which certainly includes most bird artists—there exists an urge to reproduce or somehow visually document those experiences, those artistic visions. Successful realist artworks don't have to be accurate in the ways photographs are; rather, they have to be accurate to the artist's perception. As such, they are communications that allow us the privilege of seeing from a different perspective even though they are rooted in the visual world we all share. Paintings have a curious way of finding their own audiences—what may be a striking image to one viewer may leave another untouched—but the most potent images often linger on in the memory to be recalled later, when a particular set of circumstances conjures up one of them.

In the short gallery presented here, we've narrowed the field quite a bit—to “trash birds”. This catchy, and somewhat pejorative, phrase brings to mind introduced pigeons and starlings (and we have some of those), but you'll also see Mallard, American Robin, and Song Sparrow. In many birding situations these native species also assume the mantle of “visual trash”, to be sorted through and eliminated during the search for something different—something “better”. It's part of the game we play. That's fair for field trips and life lists, but if that sort of selective vision takes over we might be missing something interesting, even memorable. I'm not talking about field marks here, although I'd venture that many birders, myself included, could more accurately describe the field marks of a Clay-colored Sparrow than those of a female House Sparrow. I'm referring to the experience of seeing and enjoying a work of art, even if its subject is a “trash bird”.

As birders, we are perhaps most familiar with the bird art that fills the pages of many popular field guides. That work serves the purpose of helping us to put names to the birds we encounter in the field, and without doubt the painting of those images is an exacting and painstaking process requiring great skill. Field guide illustration can even exert a strong influence over our perception of birds in the field. Those of us who grew up with the illustrations of Roger Tory Peterson and Arthur Singer (*The Golden Guide*) may most easily recognize birds that match *their* illustrations, and all of us can have difficulty identifying birds that don't conveniently present themselves in the classic side-view pose that most field guides portray. A hybrid of book illustration and fine art is the *Birds of Europe* field guide by Swedish artist Lars Jonsson, but that is the rare exception. Most field guide illustra-



As a bird artist and illustrator, Barry Kent MacKay has two contradictory desires: to paint as many of the wondrous species of wild birds as he can, particularly those species, subspecies, and plumages that are seldom, if ever, illustrated; and to take a single species, and explore its different forms under a variety of light conditions and circumstances. For the latter one needs the familiarity our commonest birds provide. This study is of a lovely drake **Mallard**, preening, in dull winter light, on

tion imposes stringent restrictions on the artist that bird art does not. In 1965, the renowned bird painter (and bird illustrator) Don Eckelberry wrote about these distinctions, in his article “Techniques of bird illustration”, published in *The Living Bird*:

*The moment a bird painter depicts a species in accordance with specifications dictated by someone else—when he draws the bird a certain size, shows a particular race or plumage, or demonstrates some activity or action—he is dealing with bird illustration. This differs from bird art which, by its very nature, has to be untrammelled. ... Art, I suspect, is not just a matter of talent but of intent. Illustration, in all but feeling, is usually more demanding.*

As any gallery goer knows, art is best appreciated by viewing the original drawing or painting, allowing the size and surface of the actual object to be experienced. (The Woodson Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, assembles an annual show entitled *Birds in Art* that travels around the country and is well worth seeing.) You’ll have to forego that part of the experience here, but as you look at the art reproduced on the following pages I invite you to engage a slightly different mindset from that which you might employ while birding or browsing a field guide: Be open to the feelings and the insights these artworks might offer up for you, the memories they might stir. Trash bird or rare bird? In this case—who really cares?

— Jonathan Alderfer, Associate Editor, *Birding*



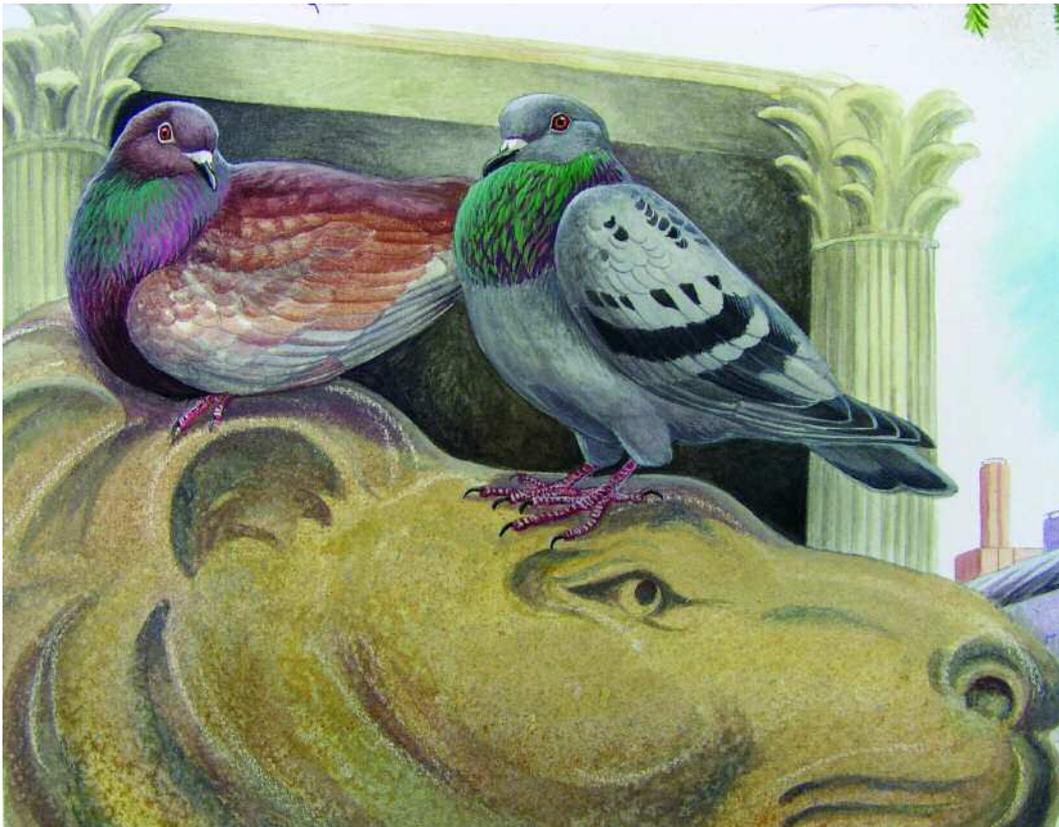
When Steve Carbol was twelve, **Muscovy Duck** wasn't included in the field guide he'd salvaged from his grandmother's attic. He first encountered the huge hulking ducks in a city park where they seemed exotic, unknown, mysterious. Muscovies were ponderous, grotesque, and totally unlike the dapper little Mallards and wigeons that clambered over his shoes in pursuit of bread-crumbs. With their wild crests, bald swollen red masks, and toneless hissing, Muscovies

One of Lydia C. Thompson's favorite birds is the **Northern Mockingbird**, and in particular one individual (shown here on yaupon holly) that had a special fondness for Saturday afternoon opera broadcasts. The bird would move closer to the window, listening and hesitating. Eventually, he would duet with the soprano, all the while adding in songs from his own repertoire: a Northern Cardinal and other neighborhood birds, a





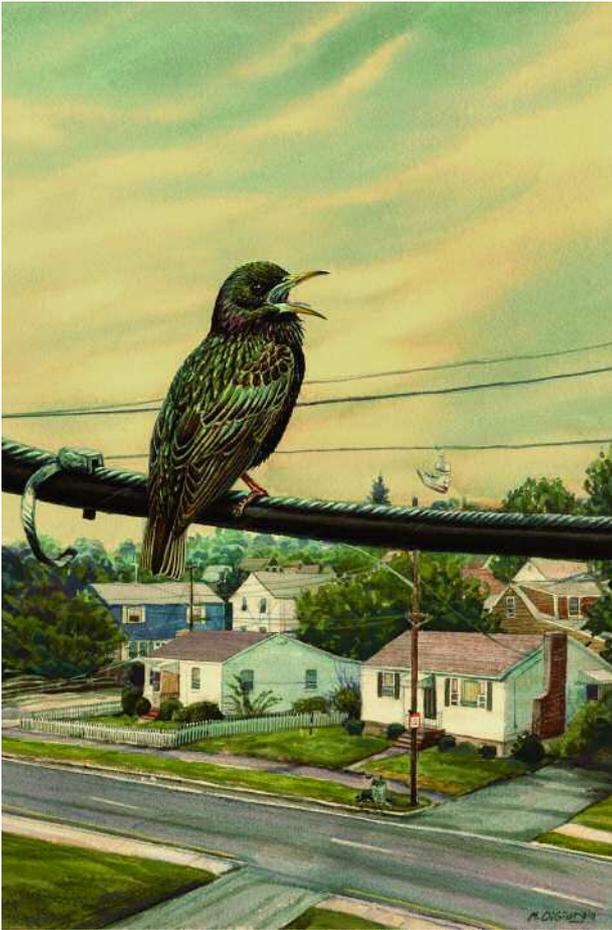
A quick tour of this composition of **Mourning Doves** begins by considering the circular movement that continually directs you to the heart of the painting. Next, follow the abstract branch that draws you to the birds, then fades away. "I avoided detailed feathers, so that your eye would focus on the faces," explains Ray Nelson. The male sitting in a watchful pose, the female's head across the breast of the male, and the halo of early morning backlighting present unified iconography about the relationship of the birds. Anti-anthropomorphizing purists might scream "Sacilege!" Most of us simply like to have our heartstrings tugged now and then. *Oil on canvas.* © Ray Nelson.



"Laugh if you must," says Julie Zickefoose, "but I love to watch, draw, and paint **Rock Pigeons**." For a Cornell Lab of Ornithology commission, from which this image is excerpted, Julie obtained a way-laid racing pigeon from the local humane shelter to serve as a live model. The more she drew Walter, the more the subtle angles of his head eluded her. A Rock Pigeon's powdery plumage

"I've probably produced more paintings of **American Robin** than of any other bird species," explains Barry Van Dusen. Robins can be observed year-round near his Massachusetts home, and they seem to take on a different character with each season. The rotund, fluffed-out robins that visit the crabapple trees in winter are very different creatures from the rangy, post-breeding birds of late summer. But all the various moods of these handsome birds are a delight to Van Dusen. "From my





"I think the first bird I ever noticed when I was a boy might have been a **European Starling**," recounts Michael DiGiorgio. His earliest memory of watching birds was when he was sitting under the massive grape arbor at his grandfather's house. DiGiorgio would throw breadcrumbs to the birds, and starlings would come within a few feet of him. He was amazed at the beauty of their oily



The setting for this painting is a favorite birding spot—Malibu Lagoon, just north of Los Angeles—that Jonathan Alderfer used to frequent. The little lagoon at the mouth of Malibu Creek has had its share of rarities over the years, but much of the appeal of a local patch lies in growing familiar with its landscape and the common birds that can be studied there at leisure. "There's nothing unusual about this particular **Ring-billed Gull**," observes Alderfer, "a first-spring bird with somewhat worn

The **Song Sparrow** was one of John Schmitt's "benchmark birds", playing an important part in the development of his bird-identification skills as a young bird-watcher. Even though the species is widespread and common, Schmitt reports a "sense of rediscovery as I encountered Song Sparrows again and again throughout their vast North American range, and I remember well the odd 'jolt' I got when I observed a Song Sparrow on Wash-



As a bird-crazed little kid in the Midwest, with no binoculars and no contact with other birders, Kenn Kaufman built a ramshackle birdhouse and put it up. **House Sparrows** moved in. Kenn was thrilled. "They were intense, alive, and available," he says. "I spent untold hours watching and sketching them. My love for sketching birds from life began with those House Sparrows." In writing for beginners and for the general public, Kenn avoids negative terms for birds: "The concept of a 'trash bird' would have been so discouraging for me when I was getting started. You want newcomers to appreciate *all* birds." Pencil on paper. © Kenn Kaufman.