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and are even less preconceived than my drawings. It's a very organic process. I use many, many layers of paint. Bark, trees, branches, background, light direction, bird posture and position, overall color—all of these considerations are included in the piece spontaneously. Not infrequently I paint an entire piece on a horizontal canvas and then take a knife and cut it into a vertical composition. I have worked forty hours on a painting, neared completion, and then decided to turn the head of the bird another five degrees. It ain't right, until it's right. I just don't know where that is until I get there.

Thirty days. Let's see, I need several days to research the bird. I read all I can find and look at any pictures or video on the internet. I don't use reference material during the actual painting process, so it's important that I have a good mental image of the gestalt of the bird. I check and make adjustments for specific measurements, feather tract overlap, general topography, and other considerations when the painting is nearly completed.

I decided to do the color illustrations in acrylic. It dries fast. First I apply many layers of gesso to masonite. Each layer is sanded lightly. Overlapping brush strokes are left exposed in the gesso. This allows a random tooth in the board that will show through later. Then I apply a layer of paint over the entire board. I use sandpaper to scratch out the first impression of the image in the dried paint.

This also exposes the high points in the tooth of the gesso.

The process is repeated many times. The first layers tend to be very broad applications of paint and crude scratches with the sandpaper and knives. Eventually, the layers of paint are more detailed and the sanding is done more selectively. The last few layers usually involve glazing with very thin paint between opaque layers. It's a tedious process and I don't wish it on anyone. But it suits me as the means to produce images as I see them.

Well, here it is the twenty-ninth day. The drawings are complete. The paintings need only a few details to be completed. After some complication, I have managed to e-mail images of the art to Ted for final consideration. All that's left is to close this piece and call it a day.

— Ray Nelson, 14 December 2006

Please visit Ray Nelson's website <raynelsonart.com> to see more paintings.

On 14 November 2006, I received a call from Ted Floyd, editor of *Birding*. He asked if I would be interested in producing drawings and color illustrations for an issue of *Birding* dedicated to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Ted needed rough sketches for two color illustrations and as many as ten black-and-white drawings by December fifteenth. The artwork could be completed after the fifteenth, but he needed mock-ups for layout purposes. I said sure, it sounded like a fun project.

I didn't let Ted know, but as soon as we got off the phone I was sweating bullets. Thirty days is a very short deadline for me. You see, I don't do preliminary sketches or mock-ups of drawings. I never have a clue what the outcome will be until I am working toward the finished product. I don't seem to have much control over the process. I knew if I forwarded sketches to Ted of a bird preening, the end result could be a bird riding a bicycle. Therefore, I had to produce completed pieces in thirty days.

My color illustrations are usually oil or acrylic paintings