

by Andrew Guttenberg

About the Cover Art

The easiest and most enjoyable birds for me to draw are those that are most familiar. With long and repeated observation, I get a feeling for subtle postures and habits. A merganser glides low through the water, while a Gadwall bobs high, as if filled with air. A Grasshopper Sparrow perches atop a tall stalk to sing, but his Baird's Sparrow neighbor sings just a few inches lower, enough to be totally invisible. A Sharp-shinned Hawk pushes its wings forward, accentuating its relatively long tail and stubby head. Colors come alive in a painting when they are drawn from real life. Think about the subtle differences in warmth among the empids, or the varying grays of the gulls; those things cannot be fully understood without learning from personal experience.

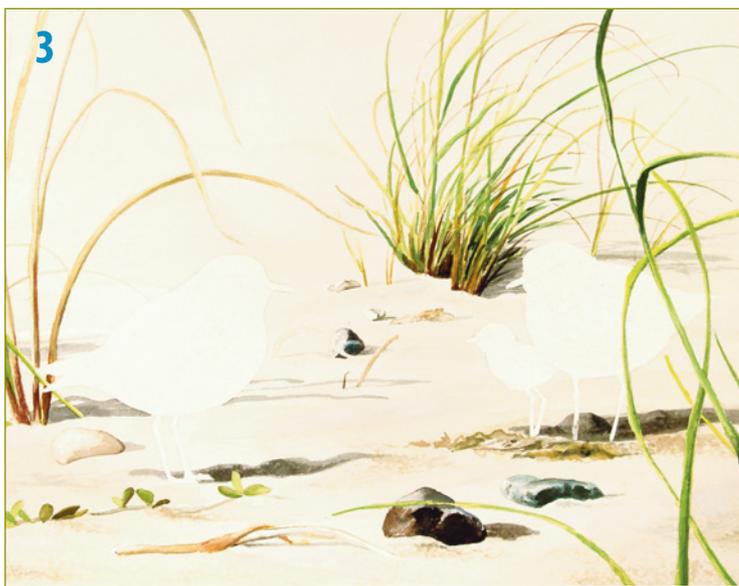
Simply put, when I draw birds I know, they look better.

For this reason, when I was asked to draw a Snowy Plover, I was slightly hesitant. I saw a handful of Snowy Plovers on a trip to the Salton Sea in 2009, but that is the extent of my exposure to the species. Small plovers in general are hard to come by in my home state of Montana, so my points of reference in this situation were hazy at best. Thus, I turned to my second-best resource: the internet.

Shorebirds have notoriously subtle visual differences. The two North American populations of Snowy Plover are quite distinct, as is the recently split Kentish Plover, but showing the distinctions would be a challenge. I chose to draw the Gulf Coast subspecies, the population with the least-extensive black markings and the palest-gray upperparts. I began by poring over photographs and scientific data, familiarizing myself electronically with every facet of the species that I could. After amassing more than 50 photographs of male, female, and chick Gulf Coast Snowy Plovers, as well as habitat references, I was ready to draw!

I The first step was to quickly lay down a few sketches, until I settled on the layout I wanted. This was an interesting process because the gatefold cover requires three different balanced compositions,





with outside, inside, and unfolded views. The original idea did not include a chick, but seemed incomplete without one!

2 After finalizing my idea, I worked out a final sketch on smooth watercolor board. The birds are relaxed, but slightly tensed against the breeze that lightly tosses the grass. In my brief encounter with the species, the plovers seemed to appear from nowhere, running briefly across open spaces in the sand. Then, at the moment they stopped, the birds would disappear. My aim was to show the plovers in this inconspicuous state, resting quietly, perfectly suited to the pale sand and grass.



3 With the birds and beach scene arranged, I used liquid mask to cover the birds and plants, and painted in the sand with gouache. I tried to show a suggestion of sand through shadows and contours, leaving the actual surface to the imagination. After this wash dried, I took the masking off the plants and painted them, as well as fine tuning the pebbles. This process was all quite simple, but took the better part of ten hours.

4 Now, with the habitat finished, I began putting the family of plovers in place. I work in colored pencil, for the fine accuracy and ability to mix color on the paper. The main challenge was to keep the plovers visible, but retain the cryptic color camouflage that makes the small plovers famous. I started with the male on the

left, then the female, and finally the chick. After about eight hours of colored pencil work, I decided to stop fiddling. I did some final touch-up on the habitat, and the piece was done!

For the artist, drawings like this are interesting because the accuracy is heavily based on research, with actual experience playing more of a supporting role. It certainly whetted my appetite for a Gulf Coast birding trip!

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Check out more of Andrew Guttenberg's artwork online: guttenbergart.com.