

Issue of Tracing Photos

I have heard recently some concern about the practice of tracing from bird photos so I would like to address this in this 'Tip'. Incidentally much of what I say also applies to drawing mammals.

It is impossible to draw and paint wildlife in the detail we require directly from nature, the animals simply do not pose long enough. Working from observation and then memory – not easy either for the same reasons. It requires a lifetime of living with a subject to render it well. So working from photos is the only way I know to get the necessary detail.

It is illegal, a copyright infringement, to trace or directly copy any photograph that is not your own. If you know who the photographer is, it is possible to make contact and get written permission, sometimes this permission will incur a fee, but not always. You may use photos from resources such as magazines, books, or downloaded from the internet as REFERENCE only. These images are very helpful however to see or understand information unclear in your own photograph. But they are to be used as reference only, no tracing or copying. If your aim is simply to learn more about an animal, or practicing a technique NOT to sell the resulting work then I see no problem using images other than your own.

Taking your own photographs in the field is essential to understanding more fully how the bird moves, feeds, it's general anatomical characteristics such as bill shape and length, legs and feet, pigment patterns and color, the habitat in which the bird lives, in general becoming completely familiar with the species. The list is actually much, much longer, but you get the idea. Additional photography, field notes and sketches made in aviaries, zoos or rehabilitation centers are good for additional close up information, but these birds are often under stress or there because of injury so be sure to know this in advance.

Now to the practice of tracing images.

When I teach I have students trace a photograph. It simply saves time very few in the class have taken bird anatomy or have much experience in drawing birds. It takes years of practice, knowledge of anatomy, observation and 'doing' to get to the point where a subject can be drawn accurately from memory or accurately from a photograph. It is hard and a great deal of study is necessary. When I say 'trace' this is what I mean, the information traced is very basic, simple outlines recording measurements, general placement of bill, eye, primaries, tail feathers, legs and feet. Later on another layer of tracing paper it might be necessary to record a complex pigment pattern. No detail. After the layer of tracing paper is moved off the photograph the detailed drawing is added, this can take hours or days. Only then will it be ready for paint. The process can only be done with accurate observation and anatomical knowledge. The original tracing simply shortens the process a little, not much but a little. It is a tool much like projecting the photograph and then tracing the projected image would be, these tools are used by many artists even if not discuss. I am NOT suggesting that one traces every detail and moves directly on to painting, the image would be stiff at best and more often disastrously inaccurate at worst. It is simply a

preliminary step in a VERY long process of getting the drawing right. Do I draw with no tracing? Sometimes. Do I create a preliminary tracing? Often. But you will never know which method I used as it is the detailed drawing, done slowly and carefully with years of knowledge of how to accurately read photographs that makes my work accurate – most of the time, when I am paying close attention, not when I think I know better! I will more often than not piece together a number of photos, a head from one, body from another, create the posture of the feet to fit the perching branch I have chosen, but to do this I use every ounce of my morphological knowledge and experience. You can make the choice to trace the initial information or not, but know it is an option.

The use of optics by artists has been recorded as early as 1430, and could have been used even earlier. In 1500 Leonardo wrote about and drew designs for the camera obscura. Artist used or experimented with the camera lucida in the early 19th century. Projection (which I do not use) or tracing paper (which I do) are tools to use or not, your choice, but make no mistake tracing does not make the process any easier it is just a beginning and often done so poorly as to ruin any chance of a well rendered image.

Examples:



The photograph I used for this drawing is mine the bird is a Rufus-collared Wren. The photo is clear and sharp. I have the image on my iPad so I can enlarge the image and see and understand details – using another tool to assist me. I have out on my work-table as

may other visual references as I can find. I also have written text – I use a Handbook of the Birds of the World for this but will check other sources.

First step: Simple tracing which helps to identify placement of 'parts'. Even though you are 'tracing' you still need to do it with knowledge and careful attention to the parts.

This took approximately 10 minutes.



Second step: Drawing. Adding details of feather separation especially the wing feathers. Close observation of bill and eye. Recording direction of growth of the loose feathers of the belly, a more detailed rendering of direction of growth will be created on a separate layer of tracing paper. Detailed drawing of legs and digits, additional digits may be added later, this will depend on the subject I choose to have the bird resting on. Pigment pattern on back and wing recorded. This took approximately 3 hours. I will now put it aside and revisit it again tomorrow, look at the drawing with fresh eyes.

I will work up additional layers to complete my study:

1. Drawing of the skeleton to be sure the legs are in the right position.
2. Direction of growth diagram of the feather tracks.
3. Diagram identifying the 'parts', this forces me to pay attention to what I am drawing.
4. I will double check the primary and tail feather count in the text.
5. If necessary I will do a separate pigment pattern diagram

6. A diagram indicating a single light source, this will add volume – 3 dimension to the bird.
7. Before transferring to paper I will need to resize this drawing as it is too big, this little guy is only 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ ” but I drew it 9”. I could also decide when I am creating the final composition to flip him so he faces right.....Not sure yet.