

Sketching Backyard Birds

For Beginners



Christine Elder

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Welcome!

I am so pleased that you picked up my sketching guide. I have used the techniques in these pages to teach hundreds of people of all ages to draw with more freedom and confidence.

The practice of sketching is one of the best ways I've discovered to build a deep and informed connection with the natural world. Observing and sketching what you see is a time-honored tradition practiced by many of history's great naturalists, from John James Audubon to Meriwether Lewis and John Muir.



If you learn one thing by reading these materials, it should be that sketching is about much more than drawing a pretty picture. I've found that in the process of observing something long enough to draw a picture of it, one learns more about its behavior and form than dozens of photos or books could provide, and you'll have fun while you're at it! I find it so rewarding to share my love of nature sketching and to watch my students gain the confidence to explore the natural world through their sketch books. Enjoy!

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Introduction to Sketching Birds

Beautiful birds are everywhere if you just take the time to look—robins on your lawn hunting for worms, hummingbirds at your nectar feeder, goldfinches in a field feeding on seed heads, and red-winged blackbirds balancing on the tops of cattails at your local pond.

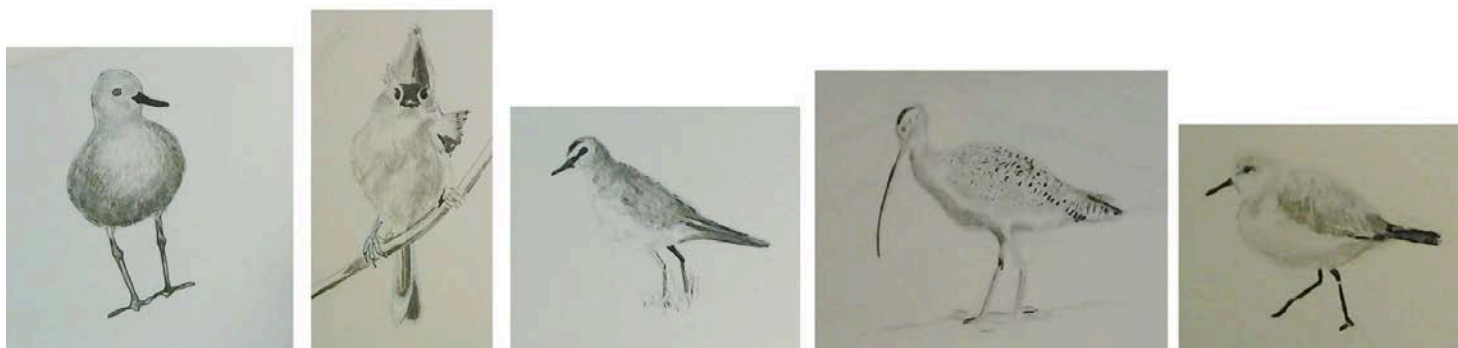
Sketching birds can be a wonderful way to learn more about them, plus it's just plain fun and relaxing!

In this course, you'll learn some basic techniques for sketching birds that are aimed at the beginning naturalist/artist who has little to no experience sketching. I will focus on techniques of creating loose, gesture sketches, the type that could be done while watching birds in your backyard.

I will cover sketching birds from photographs, models and real life.

My overarching goal for you in this course is to enjoy the process of sketching as much (or more) than the product itself, and my hope is that you'll grow to enjoy the practice of sketching as a meditative and fulfilling hobby!

Beginners note: Before you dive in to learning to sketch birds, you may want to first go through my *Getting Started with Nature Sketching* guide that is included as part of this course. It includes basic information for sketching two-dimensional shapes and includes written instruction and a video tutorial on drawing leaves.



Artwork from Christine's students

Recommended Art Supplies

For completing this bird sketching guide, we are keeping it simple and so all that you really need is a pencil and paper. However, my demonstrations are done using my favorite mechanical pencil, with the addition of a soft sketching pencil to add the illusion of color and shadowing, and a blending stump for quick and smooth blending. Below are these three items and the underlined links lead to Amazon for ease of shopping. If in the future you'd like to explore more of the tools I use while sketching in the field, you can view [this page on my website](#) that lists all of my favorite art supplies and watch a video on how I use each of those tools.

[Mechanical pencil](#) – because I love a nice sharp pencil and hate sharpening!



[Thick core soft sketching pencil](#) - use on its side to quickly add shading and color



[Blending stump](#) – these are great for blending your soft pencil marks



[Sketchbook](#) – This is hard covered and spiral bound, and even comes with a decent paint brush



Step-by-Step Sketching Tutorial

This tutorial is aimed at getting you comfortable drawing a bird from a photograph. Later, we'll tackle drawing living birds in your backyard. All you need is a pencil and paper. Please watch the video I created on drawing a robin titled 'Foundational Drawing Skills Day 2' (Foundational Drawing Techniques). In the video, I'm using a photo of an American Robin that you can find on the next page if you'd like to follow along. This list may seem like a lot of 'rules' but these techniques of learning to really observe closely and see what you're drawing become second nature the more you practice, so fear not!

Here is a bulleted list of the topics I mention in the video in case you'd like to refer back to them as you practice drawing.

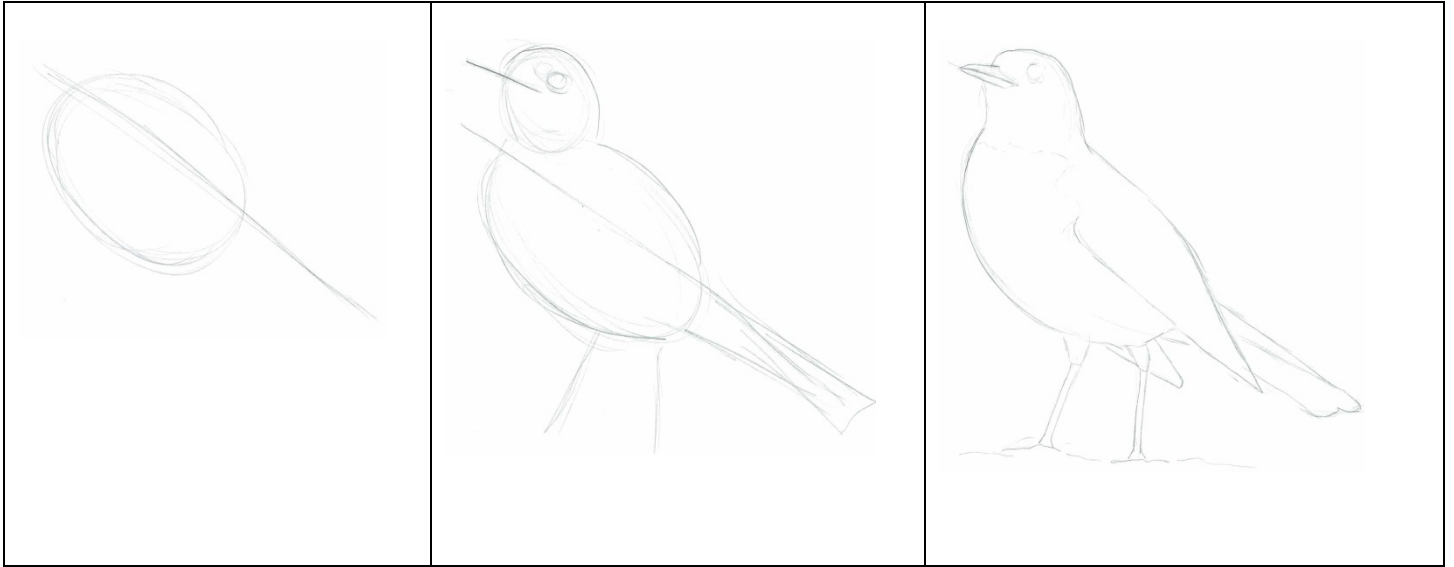
- Hold and move your pencil lightly and loosely.
- Steady your drawing hand by making a tripod of your pencil, little finger and palm.
- Start your sketch with the lightest lines possible.
- Avoid erasing – it is better to stay in the creative mode now and leave the editing mode for later.
- Draw a line that represents the greatest length of your subject and the angle of its posture.
- Add light shapes that represent the major body parts – chest, head, wings, tail, legs.
- Use your pencil as a measuring tool to measure angles of the bird's silhouette off the vertical or horizontal.
- Use your pencil to check alignment of two parts relative to each other-above or below, left or right.
- Use your pencil to compare the relative sizes of two body parts – as you add a new part, check its length and width compared to a part you've already drawn.
- Notice the negative shapes around your subject, such as the shape of the area between the legs.
- Frequently glance back and forth between your photograph and your sketch to 'ground truth'.
- Work everywhere lightly, avoiding working on any one area too much until you have established the correct shape of the silhouette.
- Once you've sketched the whole bird very lightly you might want to try the right brain trick I use to double check my drawing. Turn both the drawing and the photograph upside down and look again at both. You'll be surprised at the difference between the two that you may not have noticed before.
- Once you are satisfied with the external shape of the bird, you can begin adding the internal structures like the eye, wing, feathers.

Now it's your turn: refer to the photo of the robin on the next page and sketch it in the box on the page after that. Then check out the additional photographs of North American backyard birds I've provided and continue practicing.

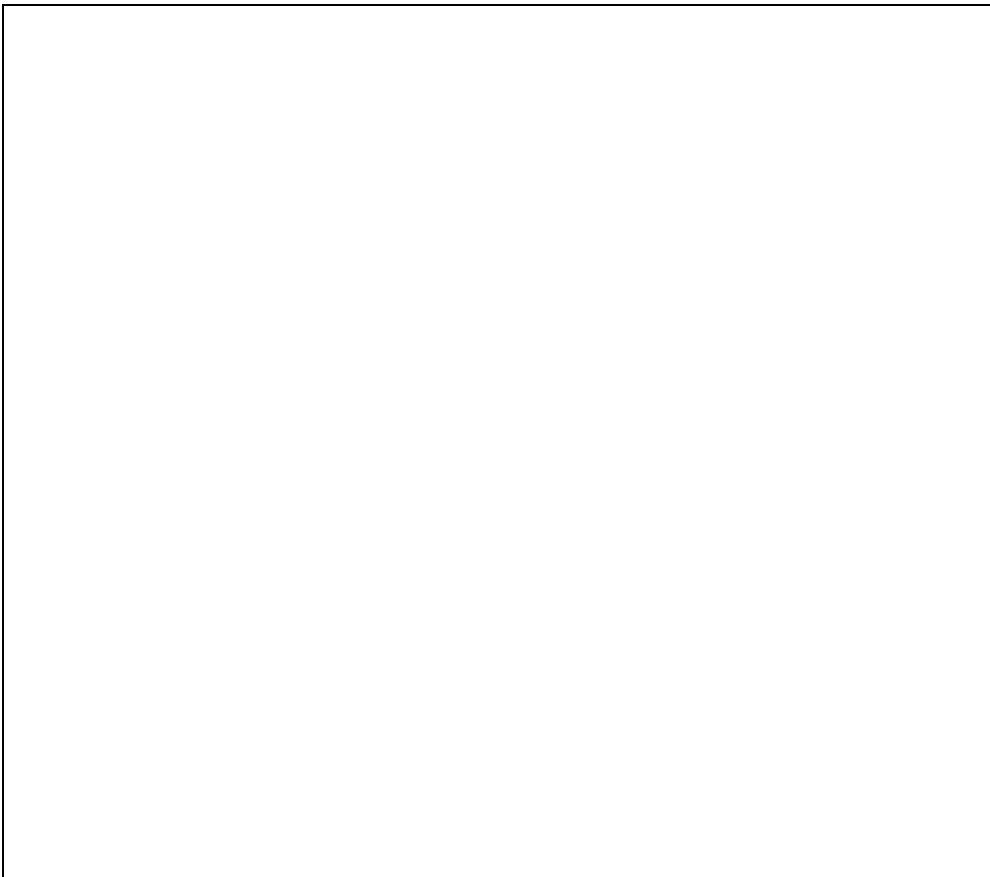
American Robin



Three steps to drawing a robin



Now it's your turn to practice drawing the robin (use photograph on previous page)



Creating a Shaded Pencil Drawing

In this lesson we'll practice adding more realism to your sketches by using shading to depict highlights, shadows and 3-dimensional form.

Watch the 30 minute video entitled 'Shading a Robin – Day 5. If you want to follow along you might want to gather the materials I am using –a soft sketching pencil, blending stump, eraser and the sketch you created on the previous page of the American Robin.

Here is a bulleted list of the topics I mention in the video in case you'd like to refer back to them as you practice drawing.

- Let's start with a silhouette of the robin we drew previously .
- Our goal is to add some quick realism without getting lost in the weeds or taking all day – since we are working on learning how to sketch quickly outdoors.
- It's best to practice with photos first, then move on to bird models, bird videos, then living birds.
- Using a full range of values from light to dark in your sketches adds interest and realism.
- We'll first create a 4-value scale with our soft drawing pencil.
- We'll compare our value scale to the range of lights and darks we see on our subject.
- An easy trick to help you practice seeing values is to turn your photo upside down!
- First we'll depict our lightest values – the reflection in the eye, the broken eye ring and white feathers.
- Next, we'll depict our middle values – the grey coloration of the feathers.
- Lastly, we'll add our deepest shadows – under the chest, the back wing and under the tail.
- Next, we'll use the blending stump to soften and blend the values.
- Finally, we'll use a sharpened pencil to give a little more emphasis to the darkest values and we'll use our eraser to clean up any smudges and lift out our lightest lights.

Sketching From Bird Models

Your next challenge is to proceed from sketching birds using photographs to sketching live birds in your backyard or park. But first, I'd like to introduce you to some activities that will make this transition easier. Sketching from models and sculptures of birds is great practice for three reasons. First, you have the ability to observe the 'birds' from many angles. Second, you can see their three dimensional form easier than in photographs. Lastly, you can sketch the 'birds' at different times of day, and when it's sunny and cloudy, noticing and depicting how the direction, angle and brightness of the sun changes and how that effects where the highlights, shadows and cast shadows fall on your subjects.

Here are two exercises to try:

1) Sketch from sculptures

Find a local park or other public space that has sculptures of birds (or other animals). Sketch them from different angles and at different times of day.



2) Sketch from bird models

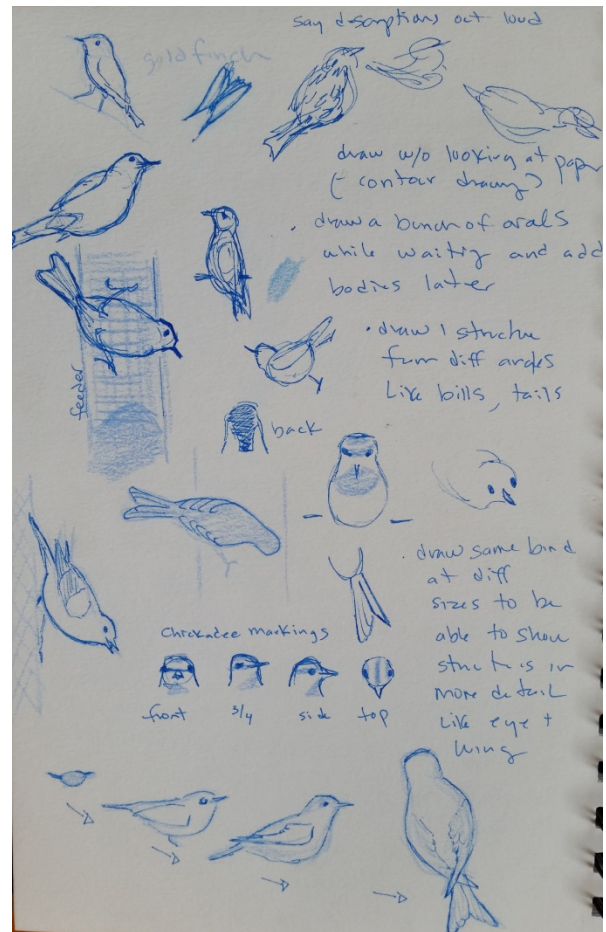
Even easier, but not quite as realistic as drawing from sculptures, is drawing from models of birds, though some are surprisingly life-like! Then benefit of sketching these is that you can do it at home at your leisure, and practice sketching them at different angles from a light source—such as the sun or a lamp. Here's a set of bird models that I recommend, available [from Safari Ltd](#) and craft stores.



Sketching Birds from Videos

Before you try the techniques for sketching live birds outlined on the previous pages, you may find it easier to start with sketching from videos of birds found online, such as [Paul Dinning's Wildlife in Cornwall YouTube Channel](#).

I have also included a video in this lesson called 'bird-feeder-video-Day-4' (Backyard birds at feeders in Oregon) that you can practice from. Below you'll see some sketches of goldfinches and chickadees I did from the same day and location I shot the video.



Sketching Live Birds

After you've had some practice sketching birds from photographs and models, you may want to try your hand sketching live birds in your backyard or a local park. You might also find birds to sketch at a local zoo, natural history museum, pet store, wildlife rehabilitation center or a friend's pet canary or parrot.

Since you are drawing from living, moving birds, keep in mind that your sketches will inherently be more loose and unfinished looking than what you can attain when drawing birds from photographs. Don't despair! Instead, celebrate being outdoors on a beautiful day, and the process of observing birds. You'll be amazed at what you will learn about their shapes, colors and behaviors compared to when you've simply looked at, or photographed these same birds.

If, when you are done sketching you hate what you've drawn, don't fret! It is in the act of drawing that you learn. Place your energy on the *process* not the *product*. And the more your practice, the better you'll get!

Quick tips for sketching living birds:

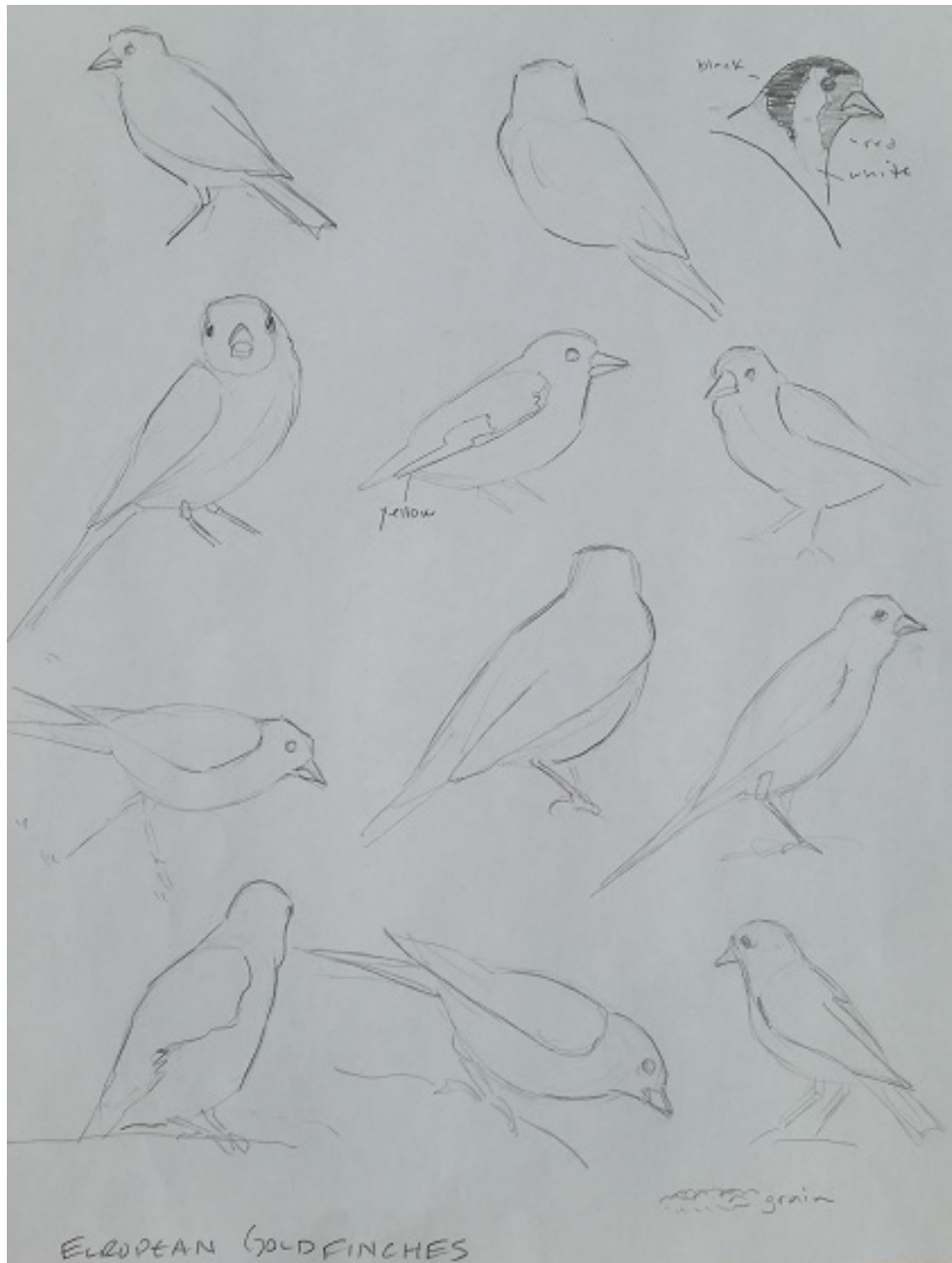
- Learn the habits of the birds in your area so you will know when the best times are to observe them and where they tend to gather.
- Wait quietly and patiently so the birds will get used to your presence.
- Find a comfortable position and orient yourself so that your sketchbook is in the shade or shaded by your body, for the glare of the sun on white paper can give you a headache and also startle the birdlife.
- Bring along some bird seed, nuts or crackers to entice birds to land near you.
- Sketch lightly and loosely, keeping your pencil moving and avoid wasting time erasing your marks.
- If no birds are around, just doodle – practice some basic bird body shapes - and wait.
- The faster the birds are moving, the smaller your drawings should be.
- Glance quickly back and forth between your paper and your bird. Look, sketch. Look, sketch.
- If there are multiple species, focus on just one at a time until you've sketched it in every pose it takes.

- Start sketching a bird and when it moves, just start a new sketch of the birds' new pose. As your bird or another one comes into one of the same poses that you started sketching, just go back to where you left off until each sketch is complete.
- Pay special attention to the features of birds that are unique to that species, such as the bill shape and color patterns on the face and body.
- If there are many birds in your view, avoid overwhelm, by drawing just one anatomical feature of the birds you are observing, like their bills or eyes. Sketch them from as many angles as you can in order to gain a full understanding of their shape from any view.
- If a bird seems too far away to draw; like perching on a wire or in a tree, practice drawing its silhouette.
- If birds are moving too quickly to draw, just observe them intently and try sketching from memory once they're gone.
- Try whispering the birds' unique features to yourself, ie: an orange crown, black eye stripe, short finch-like bill, etc. This will help you learn to identify the bird and draw it more accurately.
- Written notes are just as useful as drawings. Note the bird's colors, sounds and behaviors on your paper.
- Always carry your sketching supplies with you so they'll be available at a moment's notice!

Ideas for where to find live birds to sketch

- Your backyard, local park, pond, river, vacant lot, grassy field, fallow farm or golf course
- Pet stores, which often have canaries, finches, parakeets, cockatiels and lovebirds on display
- Natural history museums, zoos, aquariums, wildlife rehabilitation facilities
- A local farm which may have chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, peacocks, pheasants, ostrich or emu

Below you'll see some sketches I made that show the level of detail you might aim for when drawing living birds. You will notice these sketches are a lot more light and loose than the robin we sketched from looking at a photograph.



Congratulations, You've Finished!

Thanks so much for taking the time to read this guide. I hope that these sketching activities were helpful in giving you some practice and some confidence to apply what you've learned and to inspire you to go out into the natural world and enjoy recording what you see.

If you've enjoyed this introduction to sketching birds and found that you'd like to learn more, please see the references I've compiled for you on the following pages.



Field sketches of birds by Christine Elder, 2015

References for Further Learning

Below you'll find a set of resources I have compiled for further learning about birds; their identification and conservation, books on how to sketch them, and visual resources to create sketches from.

BOOKS:

(Underlined links go to Amazon Books)

Books on drawing birds:

- [Identify and Draw North American Birds: A Field Guide for the Artist and Naturalist by the Walter Foster creative team](#)
- [The Laws Guide to Drawing Birds, John Laws](#)
- [Drawing Birds by John Busby](#)

Books on field sketching and journaling:

- [Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You by Clare Walker Leslie](#)
- [The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature by Cathy Johnson](#)
- [How to Keep a Naturalist's Notebook by Susan Leigh Tomlinson](#)
- [A Life In Hand: Creating the Illuminated Journal by Hannah Hinchman](#)
- [Field Notes on Science and Nature by Michael R. Canfield and Edward O. Wilson](#)

Books on birds and basic identification and anatomy:

- [Sibley's Birding Basics by David Allen Sibley](#)
- [Birding, A Nature Company Guide by Joseph Forshaw et al](#)
- [National Geographic Birding Essentials by Jonathan Alderfer and Jon Dunn.](#)

Resources for creating bird-friendly gardens:

[-The Backyard Bird Lover's Ultimate How-to Guide: More than 200 Easy Ideas and Projects for Attracting and Feeding Your Favorite Birds](#)

Project Feederwatch: <http://feederwatch.org/>

WEBSITES:

Websites of bird photographers for practicing sketching:

[-Stephen Shunk of Paradise Birding](#)

[-Steve Brad](#)

[-Christopher Christie](#)

[-Robert Royse bird photography](#)

[-Cal Photos](#) (at University of California, Berkeley project with 400,000 images!)

Websites of bird videos to practice drawing movement and behavior:

[Paul Dinning's Wildlife in Cornwall YouTube Channel](#)

[-What Bird website](#)

-Cornell Lab of Ornithology: -

[-Cornell Lab of Ornithology nest cams](#)

[-Macaulay Library of audio and video of birds and other wildlife](#)

[-Cornell's YouTube site](#)

Additional artists whose products you'll love:

[-Dorian Iten](#) – creator of *Accuracy: A Drawing Guide*

[-James Gurney](#) – creator of a variety of guides to drawing and painting in nature

Visit Christine's website for nature sketching tutorials www.ChristineElder.com

Reference Photos of Backyard Birds

On the following pages you'll find photos of 20 common backyard birds of the United States. I chose photos that represented species in a variety of positions and that have a variety of body shapes to give you practice in drawing them. These high resolution photos have been provided by photographer Stephen Shunk of [Paradise Birding](#). You may print them out or view them on your computer screen to practice drawing them. To find more great photos and learn about each of the following species, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [All About Birds](#) website.

American Robin....19

Anna's Hummingbird....20

Northern Mockingbird....21

Northern Flicker....22

Indigo Bunting....23

Mourning Dove....24

American Crow....25

Varied Thrush....26

Steller's Jay....27

Rufous Hummingbird....28

Pine Siskin....29

Painted Bunting....30

Northern Cardinal....31

House Finch....32

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Evening Grosbeak...38

American Robin



Anna's Hummingbird



Northern Mockingbird



Northern Flicker



Indigo Bunting



Mourning Dove



American Crow



Varied Thrush



Steller's Jay



Rufous Hummingbird



Pine Siskin



Painted Bunting



Northern Cardinal



House Finch



Downy Woodpecker



California Quail



Dark-eyed Junco



Blue Jay



American Goldfinch



Evening Grosbeak



About the Author



I feel so lucky to be able to combine my three passions of art, nature and education.

In college, I earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in biology, then completed a graduate certificate in science illustration. I've spent over 20 years helping folks young and old find new ways to enjoy and appreciate the natural world. I've had the privilege of working with such fine organizations as the National Park Service, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the Botanical Society of America, and many others.

I find deep solace in nature and I enjoy passing on that feeling of joy to others. I love interpreting the natural world through multi-disciplinary techniques that incorporate art, song, dance and writing.

My passion for the natural world has taken me far and wide; from the Arctic tundra of Alaska to the tropical rainforests of Honduras. I've had many adventures like scuba diving with sharks, being chased by moose, tracking bears by moonlight, and even studying the sex lives of carnivorous plants! I now make my home among the pine-clad foothills of central Oregon's Cascade Mountains.

Keep in touch, and happy sketching!



Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my partner in life, love and travel; Stephen Shunk, who always believes in me, and all my art teachers including Dolores Jordan, my high school art teacher, who is still a close friend and practicing artist!

Let's Keep in Touch

Here are a few ways you can keep in touch in order to learn more about nature sketching, as well as keeping up-to-date with what I share from my travels and explorations of the natural world.

Share your nature sketches

I would love to see what you've sketched during or after completing this guide. Share your work on my private Facebook group, [Drawing From Nature](#), which I created just for my students.

Learn more about nature sketching

Get access to my fun video and written sketching tutorials, and also download my "play" sheets on my Nature Sketching Tutorials page. You may also be interested in learning about the nature sketching retreats I lead to such exotic locales as Mexico and Honduras!

Receive my newsletter

If you'd like to get even more help, plus my nature notes, travel tales, wildlife spotlights, and behind the scenes access to my studio, sign up at: <http://christineelder.com/join-nature-notes>

Connect on Social

-Say hello on [Facebook](#)

- Follow me on Twitter and Periscope at @Awildnaturalist, Instagram at That Elder Girl

Contact me

I'd love to hear from you with any comments or suggestions to improve this guide. I would especially love to see examples of the sketches you've produced as a result of working through this guidebook.

Also, I'd love to know what you'd like to learn next. Would you like tutorials on sketching flowers, mammals, reptiles, fish or amphibians? What media or techniques are you curious to try?

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