

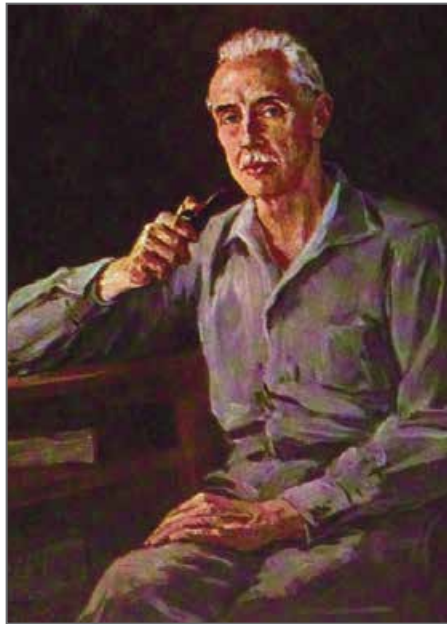
REX BRASHER: PHENOMENAL PAINTER OF BIRDS

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Having collected and enjoyed natural history books all my life, I learned decades ago that I had to use some sober judgment regarding which ones I should acquire for my library. After all, there are limitations when it comes to budget, shelf space, and time to read. Relevant nature books back in the 1950s and '60s were relatively uncommon compared to the books covering an enormous variety of topics that are being published at an astounding rate in recent times.

With an overlapping interest in art and biology, the wildlife art section of my bookshelf has still managed to creep steadily along, including books on dinosaurs and their only surviving descendants — birds. Many of these texts have such fascinating stories behind them, including the background of the artists and the challenges they overcame — rugged expeditions, painting steadily for decades, securing funding (from jobs, patrons and advance sales), and all the intricacies of dealing with publishing firms and galleries. The skill, dedication, and sheer workload achievements of many natural science artists of the past are often inconceivable.

One of these wildlife artists represented in my library is Rex Brasher (1869-1960), whom I knew little about until recently. In his massive two-volume magnum opus, entitled *Birds and Trees of North America*, he took on the challenge (without formal training) of preparing 875 watercolour paintings covering the 1,200 species and subspecies of birds based on the contemporary Checklist of North American Birds (American Ornithologists Union), plus integrating 400 native trees and shrubs in the portraits. Both genders of birds as well as immatures were presented, in habitat, and depicted typical activities. In total, he painted 3,000 individual birds (including now-extinct species); for example, eight Hairy Woodpeckers are illustrated, representing both sexes and six subspecies. This remarkable



Rex Brasher, self portrait.

project generated more than twice the number of bird plates produced by John James Audubon or Louis Agassiz Fuertes. The work was described as “The most ambitious publication of colored plates of birds executed in this century,” by Sidney Dillon Ripley (famous ornithologist and Secretary, Smithsonian Institution from 1964-1984).

Rex Brasher's first edition in 12 volumes appeared between 1929 and 1932; my two volumes were published in 1962 by Rowman and Littlefield Inc, New York, which sadly, for economic concerns, deleted numerous plates. With dimensions of 16 x 12 inches (41-31 cm) and weighing a total of 17.2 lbs (7.8 kg), this work is definitely not a field guide, but truly wonderful books to enjoy at a desk. Turning page after page of these dazzling portraits becomes overwhelming, and it is hard to believe that one person could possibly generate such a body of work in their lifetime.

Rex Brasher began painting in his early teens, encouraged by his father Phillip (a Wall Street broker), who was also a keen naturalist and bird taxidermist. As the story goes, Phillip had made an appointment to visit John James Audubon in 1840, but upon travelling some distance and arriving at his home, he was rudely informed that



Rex Brasher at his Chickadee Valley homestead.

Audubon was too occupied to meet him. Able to view into a back room from the porch, he could see Audubon painting a dead bird hanging from an easel. Upon hearing this tale later, eight-year-old Rex resolved to become a better bird painter than Audubon. From that moment on, for rebuffed father and son, there was a definite goal on every trip into the countryside to observe and hunt birds for specimens, with young Rex first using a slingshot, then graduating later to a gun. Between his father's bird collection (soon to be donated to Yale University), and Rex's rapidly growing collection, the inevitable happened. One day, when Rex arrived home with fresh specimens of an Eskimo Curlew and Long-tailed Duck (at the time known as an 'Old Squaw'), he was told in the most direct terms by his mother that “There will be no more birds in this house. Those are the last two you can stuff.”

In the ensuing years, Rex increased his knowledge of bird life and anatomy by absorbing every book on birds he could find in local libraries and shops. At first, understandably critical of Audubon's work, he later developed an appreciation for the pioneer's achievements in painting 489 bird images. For a number of years, Rex took on odd tasks (e.g. farmhand, hardware store clerk, working on a fishing vessel, lithographer, engraving for Tiffany's, and betting on horses) to finance his painting materials and field excursions. One of



American Avocet.

his winnings at the track netted \$10,000, which more than covered his expenses for an extended trip to the Mid-West. Travelling by train and for months on foot, he visited every state and several provinces, lying for hours at a time in a blind, observing and sketching birds in their natural habitats.

Once, when staying at a boarding house in Louisiana, the proprietor asked Rex: "Ah! you hunt les oiseaux. But why have you not the gun?" Rex responded "I hunt with a pencil, not a gun." In addition, Rex studied bird specimens at the American Museum of Natural History in New York and, in 1907, he befriended Louis Agassiz Fuertes, whose skilled portraits of birds influenced his own painting. Suddenly dissatisfied with his early work, he twice burned all his paintings, numbering an estimated 700 canvases — the result of 14 years of labour. Interestingly, Rex later contributed numerous drawings for the renowned book *Birds of America* (1936), which featured 514 bird portraits by Fuertes.

Over the years, his niece, Katherine Marie Louise, was a close companion for Rex at his remote homestead he called Chickadee Valley, near Kent, Connecticut. She was instrumental in keeping the home, inspiring his paintings, aiding

his research, and typing up his notes. Then one day she remarked "Well Rex, you have only eight more to do" and he responded "Yes, and most of them are those damned sparrows." The LeConte's Sparrow was the last species in the massive collection completed in 1932, which all told consumed 48 years of his life. Often working 10 hours a day, with an occasional day off for chores and to greet visitors, he had succeeded in hand-colouring many thousands of individual bird reproductions to make 100 complete sets of his 12-volume books. What a remarkable display of passion and perseverance.

Rex was finally ready to publish his artwork and text, but the cost of printing all these colour plates was so prohibitive that no publisher would contemplate the venture. Not to be discouraged, Rex came up with the



Downy Woodpecker.

solution of having black-and-white images printed, and then meticulously hand-colouring (at 60 years of age) the many thousands of prints himself, using a watercolour airbrush and stencil technique that he developed, a task that took four years. After overcoming almost insurmountable technical, printing and financial challenges, he and his partners were finally able to produce a limited edition of 100 sets. At the end of each of the books were added complete notes on species' status, habitats, distribution, reproduction, and his personal observations.

Following several successful and prestigious exhibitions, including at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, Rex sold the entire collection of original paintings to the State of Connecticut in 1941 for \$74,900. The intention of the State was to build a new gallery to house the collection, but with the failure to raise sufficient funds during austere times, the collection was transferred to the University of Connecticut and, since 1988, is now located at the Thomas J. Dodd Center for Human Rights in Storrs, Connecticut.

For much of his life, Rex lived simply on his farm (without electricity), preferring to paint by natural light, and even chopping firewood to heat his home. He finally passed away at the age of 91. The Rex Brasher Association was formed in 2008 to promote broader knowledge about this remarkable person's contributions to natural history, to investigate ways of exhibiting his collection, and to inspire a new generation of bird enthusiasts. I am hopeful that someday a publishing firm will decide to make his complete collection of bird paintings available in a



Piping Plover.

new book — a testament to one man’s passion. I would love to see a copy sitting on my library shelf. My 1962, two-volume, abridged set has long been out of print, but it occasionally is offered for sale by book dealers.



A page from Rex Brasher’s biography (#86 page, 54).

Selected reference

Brasher ME (1962) Rex Brasher: painter of birds, a biography. New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 345 pp. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015031095261&view=1up&seq=414>

Dr. Robert E. Wrigley is a retired ecologist living in Winnipeg. He was the Curator of Birds and Mammals, and Museum Director, of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the founding Director of the Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre, and the Curator of the Assiniboine Park Zoo. Although trained as a mammalogist, he developed a passion for entomology, particularly beetles, and prepares annual donations of specimens to museums. 🐦

HUMAN NATURE: MCBRIDE LAKE

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Have you ever been to a cabin and looked at the lake or woods and felt a sense of freedom that you can’t have in the city? That’s how I feel when I go up to my grandparents’ cabin at McBride Lake every summer. I really enjoy the four-hour drive to the cabin because my brother and I watch the landscape change. When we leave Regina, there is lots of open prairie. As we get farther north, we begin to see a lot more trees. We know we are close to the cabin once we hit the forest. There is an exact line where the farmland changes to a forest line. My dad says it’s where “prairie meets pine”.

When we are at the cabin, one thing I like to do is go quading with my dad. There are many hunting and logging trails around the lake. Sometimes we get to see some of the forest animals. One time we came around a corner and a black bear was on the trail. She ran off, but we saw movement to the side and there were two bear cubs climbing a tree. It was the closest I had ever been to a bear. You have to be careful when quading, as you might run into a bear or you could even get a bug in your ear. Once a bug flew into my dad’s ear and he couldn’t get it out. It was buzzing against his ear drum so bad that he drowned the bug in his ear and had to go to the hospital to get it flushed out.

We also go fishing almost every day when we are at the cabin. I prefer to still fish. We don’t catch a lot of fish but we bring lots of snacks on the boat, which is

good. There are lots of things to see when we are fishing. We sometimes see a beaver swimming around the edge of the lake. One summer there was a pelican with a broken wing so it just stayed on this one bay. Some people would give it fish to eat since they felt bad for it. Often, we see deer coming down to the lake to get a drink. There are many loons that sing and dive under the water and we wait to see where they will come up. When we get back to shore, we often chat with the neighbours about who caught what. We try to have fish for supper once in a while.

When I am not doing things with my family, I do stuff with my friends. I have a little group of friends I hang out with. The last time I saw my best friend, Coen, at the lake was before the COVID-19 pandemic started, but I think I will see him this year. He is from Japan and he comes to Canada to visit his grandparents. Coen and I go on bike rides to the creek, go swimming, and go tubing together with his grandpa’s boat. We also hang out in each other’s cabins and have campfires with smores.

Summer is coming and I am looking forward to enjoying the freedom of the environment. This summer I will probably use our new kayaks a lot more. Kayaking is a good workout and I probably will be able to get closer to the birds on the lake. This past year my teacher taught me about all the different kinds of birds, so I am going to see how many different bird species I can identify. I hope the Saskatoon berries are better this year. I like to go pick them and the wild raspberries. I wonder what animals we will come across this summer? 🐦



McBride Lake. Photo courtesy of James Dahl.