

# Drawing to Learn

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

I wasn't really a birder yet, but my favorite model in Mrs. Pfaff's seventh-grade art class was a badly stuffed American Bittern. Big, fragile, and highly allergenic, this castoff from the science classroom was a skulker even in death, and it emerged from the dark supply closet, as if from cattail fastnesses, only a couple of times a year. I drew it, in pencil on a great white sheet of butcher paper, and my sketch won second prize in that year's art fair—one of only 24 second prizes awarded in a class of 25.

The better part of valor is to quit while you're ahead, and apart from the occasional unrecognizable smear (too modest even to be called a doodle) in the margin of a notebook, I did not draw a bird again for decades. The sketches I ran across by others—including the gifted participants in the ABA/Leica Young Birder contests—should have been an inspiration, but the obvious care and manifest skill they displayed simply convinced me even more that I truly was lacking all the T's: the time, the temperament, and the talent.

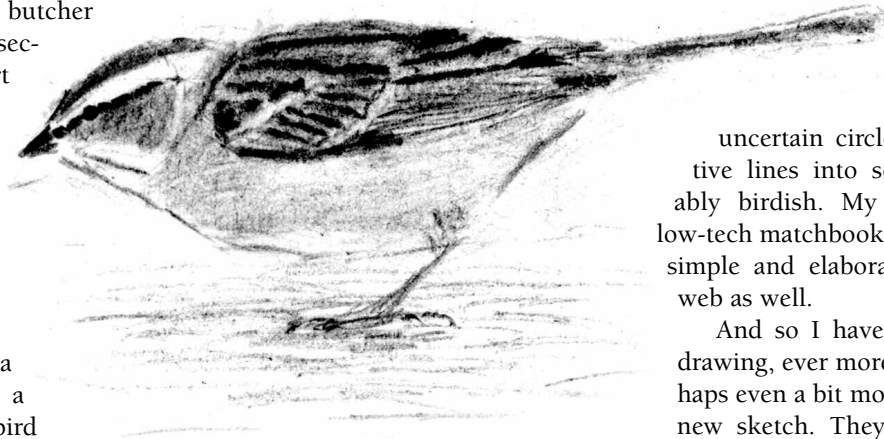
This summer, I discovered that I was wrong. Not wrong,

alas, in the assessment of my time (short), my temperament (verbal, not visual), or my talent (non-existent); but wrong in the belief that those are the necessary and essential elements of artistic triumph. Like most things in birding, drawing birds is easier for those in possession of some innate ability. But for the rest of us, that absent talent can be made up for by technique, a few easy but startlingly effective tricks that turn a squashed oval, an

uncertain circle, and a few tentative lines into something recognizably birdish. My own tutor was a low-tech matchbook cover, but how-to's, simple and elaborate, abound on the web as well.

And so I have spent these weeks drawing, ever more confident and perhaps even a bit more skillful with each new sketch. They are neither pretty nor art, as my friends have rushed to affirm, but my little drawings have already introduced a new discipline and a new challenge into my birding. Just try to sketch the wing of an Aztec Thrush, just try to draw the tail of a Lark Sparrow!

Or better yet, just try. It may take some time before you, too, start to win second prizes, but you will find right away that learning to draw is really drawing to learn.



Young birders set high standards!  
*Chipping Sparrow by Davie Rolnick.*

**Editor:**

Rick Wright

**Design:**

Ed Rother

**Production:**

Bryan Patrick

Address editorial correspondence to:

*Winging It*

251 E. Rudasill Rd.

Tucson, AZ 85704-6024

winging@aba.org

(520) 544-7502

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