

**Birds in Art and Culture Series:
Featuring bird artist Yeow Teck Chai**

How and why did you become interested in birds? Any interesting anecdotes?

Birds and their melodious calls have always intrigued me. It was these same lyrical bird songs that drew me, a young carefree boy, to explore the jungles around my hometown Kuantan in pursuit of the source of these melodies. As my intrigue grew, I learnt to mimic different bird calls, teasing them to respond.

I kept a Common Myna as a pet and lured Spotted Doves and Zebra Doves into cages, training them to call on command in the hopes of attracting more of their own kind. Once, I visited a place with many caged Spotted Doves and made a fighting call. All the male doves got excited and started making fighting calls back, surprising the owner with my ability to communicate with his birds.



Great Hornbill © Yeow Teck Chai

Tell us how you became involved in and developed as a bird artist and came to publish a bird book. Did you receive any formal training in drawing and art? What art medium do you use?

As an artist who enjoys painting various subjects, including birds, I was looking for my next fundraising project after holding art exhibitions in 2018 and 2019. Inspired by birder Dr. Samuel Ong's stunning photos of Malaysian birds, I realised the beauty of our local wildlife and decided to transform these photographs into paintings. Despite finding many bird books, none focused exclusively on painted birds with stories behind them.

So, I planned to create a watercolour book featuring Malaysian birds in their natural habitats and hold an exhibition to sell the paintings and books together. However, the Covid pandemic halted my plans for an exhibition. With charities struggling to raise funds, I chose to proceed with painting and published the book knowing we could sell the book without an exhibition.

I'm mostly self-taught in art, with my main mediums being watercolour and ink, and only had art classes in school.

What makes you choose a particular bird or species group to draw? Where do you find your inspiration?

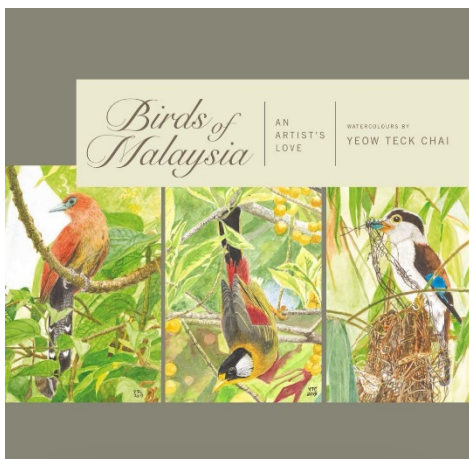
I paint birds of all kinds without focusing on specific groups, inspired by the beauty and intrigue of their photos, aiming to capture them in watercolour with their natural habitats as backgrounds.



Grey-headed Swamphehen © Yeow Teck Chai

How long does it typically take you on one art work of a bird species? Any tips for artists who are just starting to draw birds or have a desire to become a bird artist or a book illustrator?

Depending on the intricacies of the subject matter and size of painting, it can take me from one day to a week to complete the painting. For those new to bird painting, enjoying birds is crucial for finding inspiration. Being skilled isn't necessary to start; what matters is how you interpret a bird's image, whether in an impressionistic or realistic style like mine. Practice is key. With time, you'll develop your unique style, possibly becoming a bird artist or illustrator.

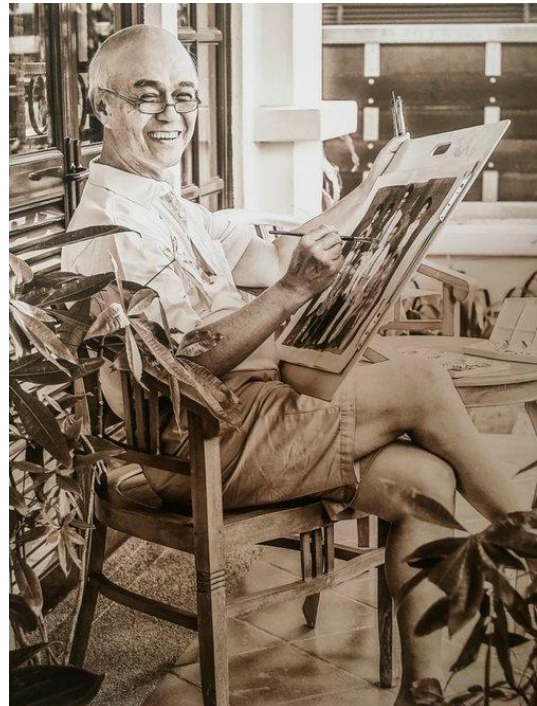


You have given 80% of the proceeds of your book "Birds of Malaysia" to two charities. Could you tell a little more about this and why you did it?

Painting is my hobby, and I've always wanted to use it to support good causes. This led me to seriously pursue painting to raise funds for charities through sales of my artwork and books. I could have taken the easy way out by just donating to the charities but I thought my donation has limited impact and why not use this talent that God has given me to generate a greater source of income for the charities. This move not only provided me the inspiration to paint but also gives me the satisfaction of being able to contribute back to society.

We notice that you have published a new art book on children with your daughter "Let Our Children Dream". Could you tell us more about this and what you plan to do next?

After publishing and selling "Birds of Malaysia," I planned to work on a project about my childhood in Kuantan. However, the concept evolved to focus on children and their dreams. My daughter Charlotte, who was instrumental in my bird book's publication, took on the writing and editing for 'Let Our Children Dream'. This 100+ page hardcover features over 70 original watercolour prints of children. It is an homage to the freedom of childhood and explores the journey of growing up, questioning whether children's dreams are truly their own or influenced by their surroundings and circumstances. It also addresses the challenges some children face in achieving their dreams and highlights societal inequalities, urging awareness and action towards bridging these gaps.



We would be happy to receive more information that you deem relevant and interesting.

Painting, just like birding as a hobby, is a very relaxing and gratifying activity. I would like to encourage birders to try taking up painting and painting birds that they have photographed. It is also my hope that birders will be able to find ways to utilise their hobby to raise funds for charities.



Citation: Birds in Art and Culture Series (2024): Featuring bird artist Yeow Teck Chai. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 1/2024, March 2024: pg. 86-88.