

Drawing Birds for Beginners: A Simple Guide for the Non-Artist

Jia-En Ho

Drawing birds is a great way to familiarise yourself with them. By recording shapes and details, you can not only understand and appreciate birds more, but also remember distinct features for better bird identification (ID). A lot of birdwatchers and wildlife artists like to keep bird journals, drawing what they've seen and writing down any notable behaviour from observations afield. While some make simple pencil sketches, and others create fully-rendered paintings, there is ultimately no right or wrong way to draw birds, as long as it helps you in the end. In this article, we'll explore different approaches to drawing birds, as well as some resources to take your art further.

The Basic Shapes

Breaking down the subject can help tackle the bigger picture. Take note of the basic shapes that make up the bird's body. Is the head round or pointy? Is the body long or short? Is the tail squared or curved? These overall features already go a long way in differentiating the bird from other species. Lightly draw these shapes together and you get the rough gesture of the bird. This step is also important in ensuring the proportions are correct and all the shapes work well together. Below are some examples I did to show how to interpret different body shapes.

This Bornean Stubtail's overall features are very round (Plate 1). I've reflected this by drawing a circle for its head and body, as well as a curved tail. I've also drawn a couple lines to connect the head and the body and indicate its neck. If you feel so inclined, you can also draw a marking to help you place the eye, as I've done here by drawing a line on the face. For the wing, I split it up into rough sections by feather group, which I'll explore more in the second step.



Plate 1: Bornean Stubtail *Urosphena whiteheadi* image and sketch.

This Milky Stork is much bigger but still has a round body and head (Plate 2). To me, some of its features are a little more hard-edged than the stubtail's, so I've added some suggestion of that to its head and neck.

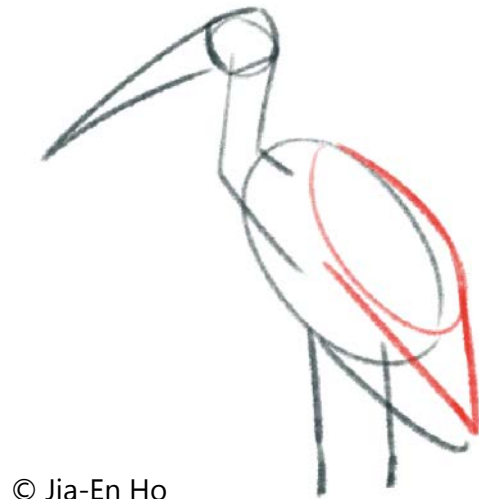


Plate 2: Milky Stork *Mycteria cinerea* image and sketch.

The Ashy Drongo is a bit of a mix of the two in terms of shapes. Its head is a little more square, so I've reflected this by making the top of its head flatter. Furthermore, its tail is also a lot longer and a lot more sharp.



Plate 3: Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* image and sketch.

The Details

Once you have the basic form down, you can start focussing on the overall details. Begin to draw in features such as the eyes, bill, and feet, as well as markings on the plumage, if any (Plate 4). Similar to the overall body shapes, notice the basic shapes of these features to help you draw them more accurately. Feel free to also sketch in any more shapes or lines that can help you better judge the positioning of these details. Markings can seem overwhelming, especially if they're incredibly detailed, but once again, it helps to break it down into different parts. For instance, you can divide the wing into the primaries, secondaries, tertiaries and primary and secondary coverts, noting the markings present in each section. The same can be done for the head if the bird has features such as a supercilium, eye-ring, or malar stripes. Filling in these details, no matter how rough, can be extremely helpful in aiding later identification of the bird if you use the drawing for this purpose. It can also help you better appreciate small elements you may not have realised were there before. More details on [Understanding Bird Topography](#) can be found in the link.

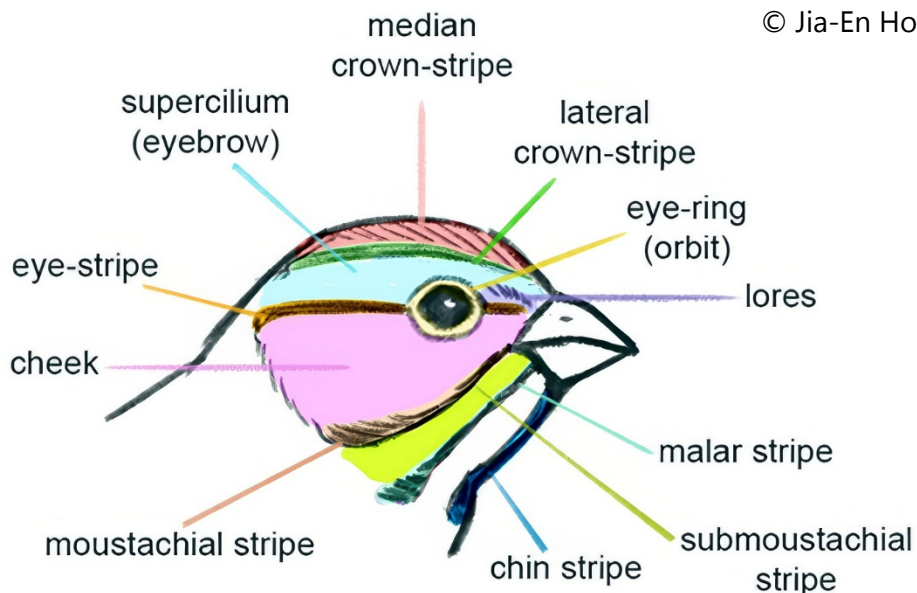


Plate 4: Face and head details.

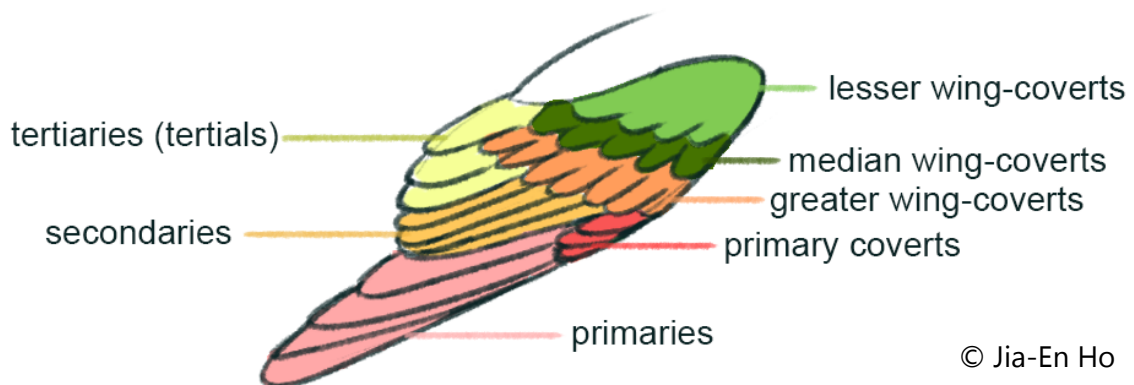
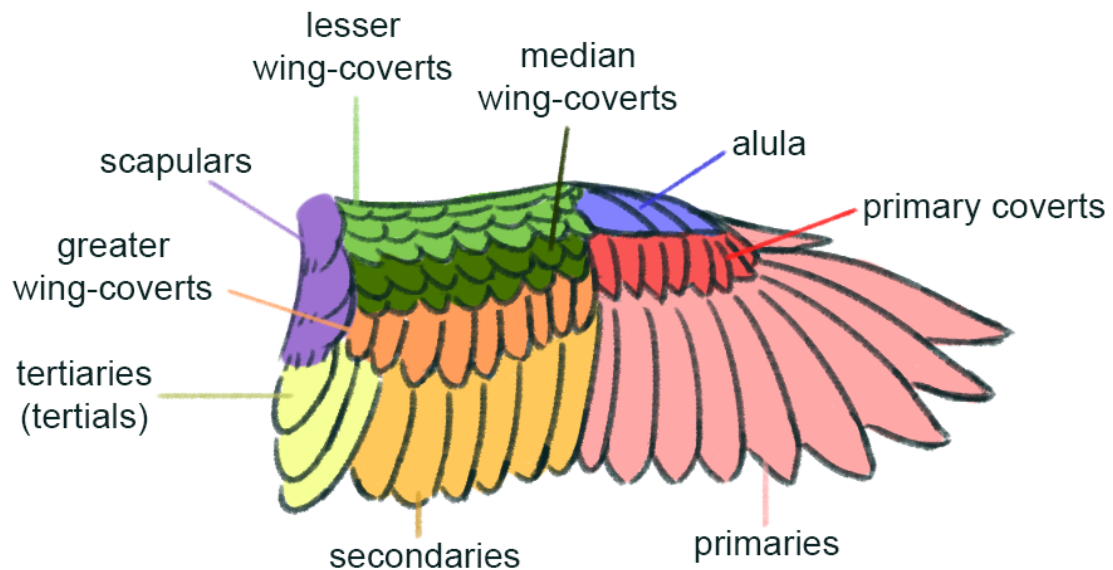


Plate 5: Wing parts and details (closed wing).



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Plate 6: Wing parts and details (open wing).

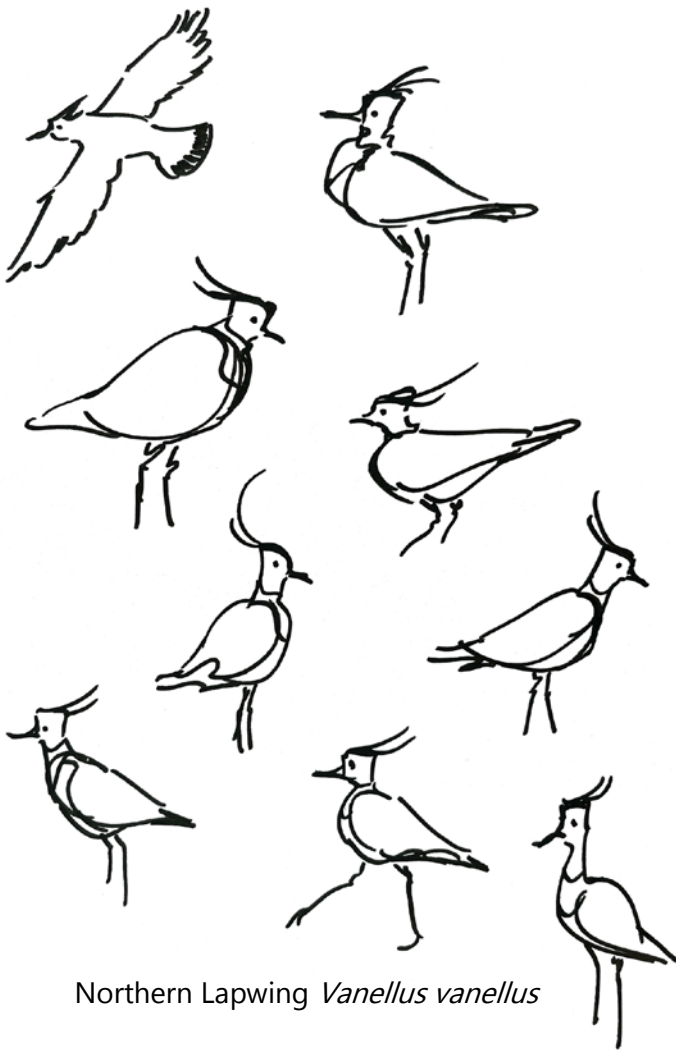
Shading and/or Colours

If you want, you can take your drawing a step further and render it. Doing so requires an understanding of light direction and three-dimensional form. Note where the light is shining from and how that interacts with the bird's body. Parts that are not in direct light would appear a little darker than parts that are. There are many different drawing techniques to shading, but I usually do so by using a hatching technique that follows the contours of the body. This entails drawing short lines that vary in closeness to convey shadow. The closer the lines are, the darker it appears.

The same technique can be applied if you are using something such as colour pencils. If you are painting with something such as watercolour or gouache (an opaque watercolor prepared with gum), you can paint in the overall shadow first using a dull, cool colour such as blue or purple before painting your colours over it.

Overall, it's important to not always worry about the quality of the drawing, but rather if it has captured the essence of the bird. If you've managed to record the body shape and key identification features, that already goes a long way in making your subject recognisable. Most of all, have fun and approach it with curiosity; become interested in how we can appreciate and learn more about birds through drawing.

Below are some examples of a range of my bird artwork, to give an idea of how different drawings are effective in different ways (Plate 7).



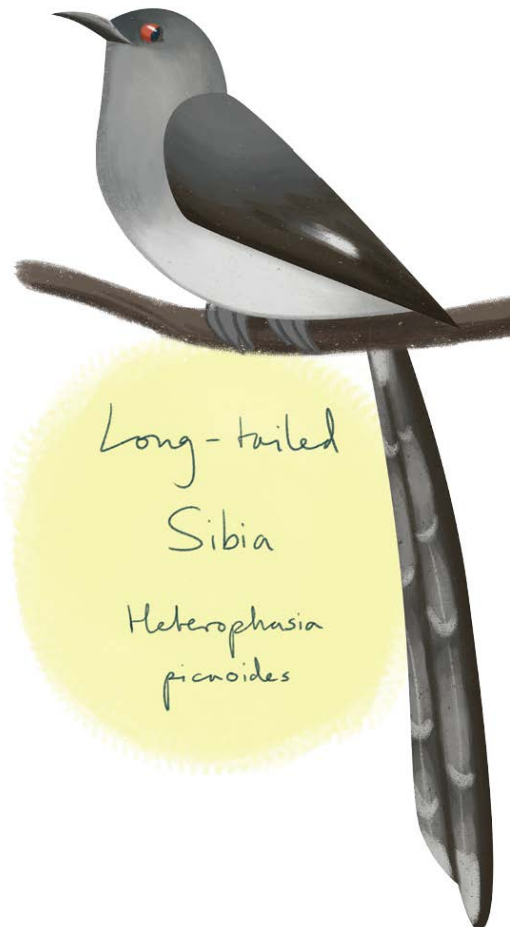
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*



European
Robin
Erithacus rubecula

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Black-crowned
Pitta
Erythropitta ussheri



Long-tailed
Sibia
*Heterophasia
picnoides*

Plate 7: Examples of bird drawings and rendering.

If you're interested in further learning, I recommend the website of John Muir Laws, a naturalist and artist who has free online tutorials on many different aspects of drawing birds. You can access his website at: <https://johnmurlaws.com/>. Ornithologist David Allen Sibley has also published a short guide on making rough but informative sketches. You can read this article on the National Audubon Society's website at <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/learn-draw-birds-david-sibley>. Drawing birds can be a rewarding activity that helps us connect with birds in new ways, and with each pencil stroke you'll be understanding them a little better.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Amar-Singh HSS for the kind use of his images and Swee-Yian Lim for reviewing the article.

Citation: Jia-En Ho. (2025). Drawing Birds for Beginners: A Simple Guide for the Non-Artist. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2025, Sept 2025: pg. 86-91.