

Artist, ornithologist, taxonomist, philatelist, and world champion autoharpist H. Douglas Pratt (hdouglaspratt.com) is a busy birder. He emerged as an authority on the Hawaiian avifauna in the 1970s, among a cohort of birding superstars studying at Louisiana State University (LSU). Pratt was a Research Associate at the university's Museum of Natural Science for 25 years before returning to his home state, where he is Research Curator Emeritus of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. His illustration credits—far too many to list—include *The Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific* and parts of the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. A short interview with Pratt, appearing in the Feb. 2018 issue of *Birding*, focuses on his luscious cover painting of an liwi, the 2018 ABA Bird of the Year, and he was featured in The ABA Blog for that month.

This provocative *Birding* interview pushes all of Pratt's buttons. Let's go!

—NOAH STRYCKER

In his Cary, North Carolina, studio, H. Douglas ("Doug") Pratt fashions a plate for his new field guide with coauthor Eric VanderWerf, *Birds of the Tropical Pacific: Hawaii, Micronesia, and Polynesia*—an update to the classic first published by Princeton University Press in 1987. Photo by © Roderick T. Hester.



# A Birding Interview with H. Douglas Pratt

**Birding:** Do you miss those heady days of the 1970s, road tripping with fellow LSU artist-ornithologist John O'Neill?

**H. Douglas Pratt:** In 1975, John and I made an epic trip from Baton Rouge to Boston. We visited with bird artists John Henry Dick, Guy Tudor, Al Gilbert, Roger Tory Peterson, Don Eckelberry, and Arthur Singer, and we explored the collections of Hawaiian birds at natural history museums in the East: the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (now of Drexel University), the American Museum of Natural History, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. John was a rising star with lots of connections to bird artists, and I happily tagged along.

In New York, we stayed with the Eckelberrys (Don illustrated the landmark Pough guides), and one evening they invited Arthur Singer of *Golden Guide* fame. After dinner, I nervously laid out some recently finished paintings of rare Hawaiian birds for perusal by these two longtime idols. After what seemed like an eternity, Singer looked up and calmly said, "This is good work." I'll never forget it. Two days after I got home, I got a phone call from an editor at *National Wildlife* magazine who had

an article on Hawaiian birds that needed some illustrations. He had just called Gilbert, Peterson, and Eckelberry, and they all mentioned "this guy down in Louisiana." That led to my first nationally published artwork and pretty much launched the rest of my career.

**ABOUT THE COVER ART: "The Noble 'O'o," ca. 1896**—Often considered the king of Hawaiian birds, *Moho nobilis* is still common in the 1890s, but never reliably reported in the 20th century. The species was a victim of a major die-off that decade. Watercolor and gouache on Arches hot-press paper by © H. Douglas Pratt.

**Birding:** What is the story behind the rare flycatchers you painted for the fifth edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America*—Roger Tory Peterson's final work?

**HDP:** Roger Tory Peterson had been my hero since childhood. So when his widow called to ask if I would be willing to finish the last plate for the new book, which he had been working on the night he died, I was deeply honored to say yes. The publisher was able to reuse some images from other Peterson guides, and, with my four, assemble a cut-and-paste plate. It was a small job, but serious professional validation!

**Birding:** How do you create a bird illustration? Can you paint birds you haven't actually seen?

**HDP:** When I was first learning the craft, I vowed never to paint any bird I hadn't seen. I

The interviewee is most famously associated with the Pacific Ocean avifauna, but he is interested in island birds and extinction everywhere. In this painting, a pair of endangered Bahama Warblers, *Setophaga flavescens*, patrol their only habitat, the pinewoods of Grand Bahama and Abaco, before the devastation of Hurricane Dorian in 2019. Watercolor and gouache on Arches hot-press paper by © H. Douglas Pratt.





A. Douglas Pratt  
© 2010



got over that once I realized that I could never be a professional illustrator with that restriction.

The creative process for me starts with a basic pencil drawing, which has to be right or no amount of painting skill will save it. Some illustrators can draw birds beautifully direct

from life or from memory, but I'm not a quick sketcher. I have to put a lot of work into an initial drawing. I use reference photos a lot, but rarely copy an image exactly. Ideally, I like to also have a specimen in hand. My strength is in the painting, which usually takes me much less time than the research and drawing. As for my materials and methods, that's a subject much too long for this interview.

**Birding:** What inspires you about Pacific Island birding?

**HDP:** It's the spirit of adventure, exploration, and discovery. When I got a copy of the 1962 second edition of Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds*, I turned immediately to the new section on Hawaiian birds. It told of a recent expedition on Kauai that had rediscovered several birds long thought extinct in a place called the Alakai Swamp. I knew then that I would one day try to see those fabled species.

A decade later, I did just that with my future coauthor Phil Bruner, a Hawaii resident I had met at LSU. After that first trip, I changed my research focus to systematics of Hawaiian birds. In the rest of the Pacific, few islands had any resident birders, and visits by ornithologists were rare, so the pioneering sense was ever-present. On early trips, I did some "field paintings," but later, with limited time on each island, I realized they took time away from more pressing research matters.

**Birding:** Why were you such an early and vocal advocate for including Hawaii in the ABA Area?

**HDP:** I could not fathom how one of our 50 states could be excluded from the ABA Area when the boundaries were political, not biological. If it was to comprise the U. S. and Canada, then it should include all of both countries. It was also very unfair to birders in Hawaii, who were being treated like outsiders. A more noble reason was that I thought birder attention might generate some national interest in saving rare Hawaiian birds.

**Birding:** Are we still losing birds in Hawaii?

**HDP:** Forest birds face a grim future. The main problem is non-indigenous mosquitoes that transmit foreign bird diseases like avian pox and malaria—often 100% fatal to Hawaiian birds. Kauai's Alakai Wilderness Preserve sits at roughly 4,000 feet, well above the upper lim-

The finished field painting faithfully captures the bird, which was thought to be a honeyeater at the time. The interviewee and others got it into the correct family—eventually. Watercolor on illustration board by © H. Douglas Pratt.

On his first expedition to Micronesia in June 1976, an up-and-coming Doug Pratt paints a Golden White-eye, endemic to the island of Saipan, in the Northern Mariana archipelago. Photo by © Phillip L. Bruner.





it where mosquitoes lived when I first went to Hawaii, and it still harbored nearly all of its historically known birds.

But climate change has driven the “mosquito line” ever higher, and the pestilential insects finally penetrated the Alakai around 15 years ago. Indigenous birds in accessible areas crashed. Now the last few dozen Akikiki, Akekee, and Puaiohi are holding on in a tiny, high-elevation patch, and mosquitoes will inexorably invade that last bit soon. Today, a visit to the Alakai, one of the birdiest areas I ever saw, is like going to a hospice ward.

Maui still has a lot of forest above the malaria zone, but its two most critically endangered species are not doing well. An attempt to reintroduce Maui Parrotbills, with a population of about 150, into newly restored dry forest saw many of the birds die of malaria; the mosquitoes had gotten there first. The Akohekohe, an ohia specialist, now faces a new threat in the form of a fungal disease called ROD—rapid ohia death. Ohia trees are about 80% of the forest trees in Hawaii, but ROD has destroyed vast tracts of lowland ohia forest on the Big Island, and has already spread to other islands. That’s a horror story too big to tell here, but it seems Hawaii’s native birds just can’t catch a break.

Some promising techniques are being developed, but

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Hawaii is not the only place to suffer mass extinctions. The U. S. Territory of Guam is the scene of the other great Pacific bird disaster of the 20th century. It lost nearly its entire native avifauna to brown treesnakes that arrived in military cargo from the Solomon Islands after World War II. Three endemic species went extinct, two others survive in captivity, and the rest survive on other islands. These paintings are from a triptych commissioned by a former island resident, showing all the historically known land and freshwater birds of Guam.

TOP: The Guam Kingfisher, extinct in the wild, was once commonly seen on powerlines. Other islands in the Marianas host a different species of kingfisher, so repatriating this one will depend on controlling brown treesnakes on Guam itself. Here, kingfishers perch in a lovely portia tree, widespread on tropical shorelines.

BOTTOM: The flightless Guam Rail was extinct in the wild for nearly 40 years. Captive-bred birds were released to try to establish populations on the adjacent snake-free islands of Cocos and Rota, but snakes have recently invaded Cocos, and the Rota population remains small. The blue fruits from the yoga tree shown in this image were not eaten by the rail, but added color to its forest floor habitat. Watercolor and gouache on Arches hot-press paper by © H. Douglas Pratt.





they may be a day late and a dollar short. Recent attempts to repatriate Hawaiian Crows on the Big Island are not going well. Scientists are heroically trying to combat mosquitoes with a technique that involves release of nonbiting male mosquitos infected with *Wolbachia*, a bacterium that, when passed to females during mating, prevents the eggs from hatching. But it's slow-going, with an incredible gauntlet of permits and approvals needed. The latest estimate for serious implementation is 2023, maybe a couple years too late for the five critically endangered species mentioned above.

**Birding:** In our current sixth era of mass extinction, which now-extinct birds have you seen—and which species do you want to see before they disappear from the wild?

**HDP:** I take no pleasure in the fact that I may hold the current record for the number of extinct bird species on my life list. The tally is now five (Kauai Oo, Ou, Kamao, Poo-uli, and the extinct-in-the-wild crow) in Hawaii, plus four on Guam (Guam Flycatcher, Bridled White-eye, and extinct-in-wild Guam Rail and Guam Kingfisher). I could maybe add

one more because I believe I saw a Bachman's Warbler in Louisiana in 1974, but, without a photo, I doubt it would pass muster with any of the bird records committees I've served on.

At the top of my wish list is the Tuamotu Sandpiper. It used to be second, but I lucked into a sighting of the Tooth-billed Pigeon in Samoa in 2006. Others include the four endemics on the Northwest Hawaiian Islands (Laysan Duck, two finches, Millerbird) and some that may already be gone, like the Pohnpei Mountain Starling. With the Tooth-bill and the five Hawaiian birds mentioned earlier dangling over the abyss, I could well reach more than a dozen extinct species in my lifetime.

**Birding:** What taxonomic trends do you foresee in the tropical Pacific region?

**HDP:** I once joked that I was embarking on a splitting rampage across the Pacific, and I have now mostly completed that, with some helpful backup from the DNA folks. I just published a paper ([hdouglaspratt.com/mybibliography.html](http://hdouglaspratt.com/mybibliography.html)) that splits the Common Fairytern (White Tern) into three. At least two other ABA Area splits (Hawaiian Noddy, Silver

These paintings were part of the series Doug Pratt unveiled to legendary bird painters Don Eckelberry and Arthur Singer in 1975. They launched his career as an illustrator. The images vividly portray species that were very rare at the time and are now extinct.

**LEFT:** The Ooaa, or Kauai Oo, was the last survivor of the Hawaiian endemic family Mohoidae. It held out in the Alakai Wilderness until the 1980s, when its haunting and evocative voice went silent.

**CENTER:** The Poo-uli had just been discovered in 1972 when in 1975 Doug Pratt hiked into the East Maui wilderness to see, photograph, and record it. This painting depicts an immature because the adult plumage was unknown at the time. The last Poo-uli died in captivity of avian malaria in 2004.

**RIGHT:** At the time he painted the Molokai endemic Kakawahie, last seen in the early 1960s, the artist held out hope it might survive—but an expedition in which he had participated failed to find it.

Watercolor, gouache, and airbrush acrylic on illustration board by © H. Douglas Pratt.







H. Douglas Pratt  
1976





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Noddy) and a few in Micronesia and Polynesia are still in the pipeline. My new field guide, with coauthor Eric VanderWerf, will have over 100 new species resulting from taxonomic splits.

**Birding:** Fairytern? Spelled like that?

**HDP:** My fairytern paper shows that what most checklists call the White Tern is actually three species—one in the Atlantic and two in the Pacific—and the DNA folks have shown that they constitute their own subfamily Gyginae, not closely related to other terns (Sterninae). For a while, they were grouped with noddies, which, in some taxonomies, have their own subfamily (Anoinae). I am resurrecting the popular traditional name “fairyterns” for the Gyginae, written as one word so it will be indexed separately from the typical terns and distinguished from the Fairy Tern of southern oceans.

**Birding:** How did you get the commissions to design postage stamps for Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands? What's different about painting on such a small canvas?

**HDP:** When I was in D. C. working on one of the Nat Geo guides, I got a call from the Inter-

Governmental Philatelic Corporation in New York asking whether I would be interested in designing some bird stamps for these newly independent nations. As a lifelong ornithophilatelist, I couldn't resist. The stamp designs are painted at a comfortable size and then reduced for printing, just as with field guide plates.

**Birding:** As the only ornithologist ever to have won the International Autoharp Championship, do you think there is a special connection between birds and bluegrass?

**HDP:** I do, but not just bluegrass. I think there is an obvious connection between birds and music generally. The most popular workshop I offer at autoharp gatherings is “Music of the Woods,” a bird walk where we mostly listen. A surprisingly high percentage of birders and ornithologists play instruments. Good ears for birds are good ears for music, maybe because we hear subtle pitch changes and nuances that others miss.

By the way, although I sometimes play autoharp with bluegrass bands, it is not a “standard” bluegrass instrument, and I play much more than bluegrass on it! 🎵

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