

MAKING AN ART OF SCIENCE



When they're not studying birds, these researchers are busy painting them

ON THE FACE OF IT, the three wildlife researchers whose work is displayed on these pages would seem to have had their hands too full to pursue art, even to dabble in it. Ornithologist John P. O'Neill has discovered more new species of birds than any other living person. Ornithologist H. Douglas Pratt rewrote the taxonomic classifications of all native birds in Hawaii. Field technician Patrick Ching spends a number of weeks each year on remote Pacific islands, helping to restore endangered monk seals to their natural habitat.

Yet for all of their efforts studying and protecting wildlife, O'Neill, Pratt and Ching are perhaps best known for their other shared avocation: painting birds. And even though none of the three has ever had formal art training, their achievements on canvas go far beyond the dabbling stage.

"It's been said many times that science and art don't mix, but I think the opposite is true," says O'Neill, a staff research associate at Louisiana State University's (LSU) Museum of Natural

Science. "Field studies have enabled me to get close to wildlife, and they have given me an intimate knowledge of birds that helps me to portray the creatures accurately on canvas." For years, O'Neill passed that knowledge on to Pratt, his former student. Pratt, in turn,

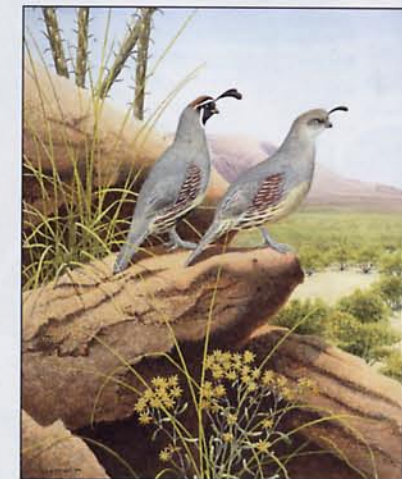
became an important influence on the younger Ching. All three share a common fascination with the feathered kingdom.

For the 51-year-old O'Neill, that fascination dates back to his childhood in Texas. Unlike youngsters who had only the usual pet dogs or cats, O'Neill also raised birds—pheasants, ducks, quail and finches—in backyard aviaries. He drew his first bird, a bantam chicken, at age five.

O'Neill went on to study biology at the University of Oklahoma, where, in 1961, he was invited on the first of

his more than two dozen bird-surveying expeditions to Peru. The South American nation has more species of birds (more than 1,700) than any other country in the world.

During an expedition two years later, a missionary who worked with



A highly respected ornithologist, John P. O'Neill (below) is also an acclaimed artist. He painted these turquoise-browed motmots perched in a *Tabebuia* tree (left) after observing the birds in Costa Rica. His portrait of two Gambel's quail (above) is set in West Texas.



John P. O'Neill

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H. Douglas Pratt

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Aguaruna-Jivaro Indians in northern Peru gave O'Neill a specimen of a bird with a brilliant orange throat and bright blue shoulders. O'Neill took the specimen back to the United States, where experts determined the creature was a previously unknown species: the orange-throated tanager. It was the first of 12 new bird species O'Neill has identified in Peru. The tanager also was the subject of the researcher's first published painting, which appeared in the science journal *The Auk*.

"People tend to think that the discovery of a new species is the most exciting part of such work," says O'Neill. "But for me, the real excitement has always been in learning new information about the distribution of birds."

In the early 1970s, O'Neill earned a doctorate in zoology at LSU and began dividing his time between painting, museum work and leading research trips to South America for the university. "The fact that John is so equally talented means he must make a decision on what he wants to do—spend time painting or working on biology," commented famed bird artist Roger Tory Peterson several years ago.

Despite such advice, O'Neill continued to pursue a double life as artist and scientist, overseeing the field work of ornithology students at LSU. One of those students, Doug Pratt, a North Carolina native three years younger than O'Neill, also showed a remarkable natural talent for painting.

"It's a hobby that got out of hand," says Pratt, who enrolled in graduate school at LSU in 1970. Four years later, he illustrated a new book, *The Mammals of Louisiana*, a project that took two and a half years to complete. That



PAINTING COURTESY OF H. DOUGLAS PRATT

Ornithologist H. Douglas Pratt (top) created this blue jay (above) for a book depicting all of the birds found in colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. An expert on South Pacific species, Pratt painted these cuckoos, parrots and kingfishers (right) for a guide to the birds of Hawaii and tropical Pacific.

led to other wildlife art assignments from *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the National Geographic Society, which commissioned Pratt to paint 60 plates for its *Field Guide to Birds of North America*.

When National Geographic needed an additional artist for that project, Pratt recommended his mentor at LSU,

John O'Neill, who was hired to paint 11 plates for the book. "The funny thing was they used me—John's student—to be the scientific consultant for his paintings," says Pratt, who credits O'Neill with teaching him much about the art of illustrating birds.

In 1979, Pratt earned his doctorate in ornithology after completing a study of Hawaiian birdlife. In the process, he conducted strenuous fieldwork and updated the entire evolutionary history of the islands' native birds. His taxonomic research, which was adopted by the American Ornithologists' Union in 1983, is still considered to be the definitive scientific classification for Hawaiian species.

Over the years, Pratt has painted most of the islands' native birds, after spending countless hours studying them in their habitat. "You can work with photos and museum skins," he says, "but I don't understand how anyone can really paint birds accurately without spending time observing them in the wild."

For a young native of Hawaii named Patrick Ching, seeing some of Pratt's paintings for the first time several years ago at an exhibit in Honolulu was an eye-opening experience. "Doug not only portrayed the birds accurately but also their habitat. He's had a profound influence on me ever since," says the self-taught, 31-year-old painter.

Ching grew up in Honolulu with no exposure to the islands' indigenous animals and plants. "The only animals we learned about in school were those brought to the Hawaiian Islands by the early Polynesian settlers—pigs and dogs," he recalls.

In the late 1970s, Ching attended a 30-day Outward Bound summer wilder-





Patrick Ching

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ness survival course on the island of Hawaii. "I saw Hawaiian hawks and other native birds for the first time," he says, "And someone showed me a photograph of a Hawaiian monk seal. I was both amazed and angry. There I was already a high school student, yet I had never heard of any of these animals."



Honolulu native Patrick Ching (top) portrayed this red-tailed tropicbird (above) in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, a remote region where he spends time studying wildlife. These Hawaiian black-necked stilts (right) are feeding near a Kauai taro field.

After graduating, Ching eventually landed a position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working as a field technician at Kilauea Lighthouse National Wildlife Refuge on Kauai—an important seabird nesting area. He also volunteered to help National Marine Fisheries Service scientists conduct studies of en-

dangered monk seals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

For the past 10 years, Ching has made an annual trip with other researchers to the remote, largely uninhabited group of islands several hundred miles northwest of Honolulu that are the last domain of the dwindling seals. The trips, designed to census the animals and study their behavior, can last anywhere from a few weeks to about four months. "The heat, rain and rough living conditions can make life very miserable at times, but you feel like you're helping a vanishing creature," says Ching. "And living in such isolation among animals provides an excellent opportunity for me to practice my artwork."

Not long ago, Ching began producing a series of coloring books for Hawaii authorities to help educate children about native species. "Through my art, I want to help make Hawaii residents more aware of their wildlife heritage," he says.

Like O'Neill and Pratt, Ching's paintings have been displayed at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum's annual bird art exhibition in the community of Wausau, Wisconsin. The prestigious show includes work by some of the world's finest bird painters.

"When my life is over," says O'Neill, "very few people will know or care about what kind of scientific papers I wrote. But I would like to think that my wildlife art will provide both pleasure and educational benefits that reach far beyond the scientific community."

—Mark Wexler



PAINTINGS COURTESY OF PATRICK CHING