

My fourth grade teacher was right:  
***“a book can change your life!”***

It was summer 1983 (twenty-six years ago!) and I was five years out of art school and on my way to a career in graphic design and advertising. On weekends, I was a “wanabee” wildlife artist – producing animal paintings from my photographs.

That summer, I visited a Massachusetts Audubon gift shop and found a book titled *The Living Birds of Eric Ennion*, compiled and authored by someone named **John Busby**. Neither name meant a thing to me, but I recognized immediately that the drawings and paintings in that book were unlike any animal art I had seen before. Ennion’s birds possessed a vitality, movement and immediacy that left me BREATHLESS! Delving into the text confirmed something I had suspected – all the birds in the book were DRAWN FROM LIFE! From that moment, I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

A few years later, I found out that John Busby had written his own book, and I immediately secured a copy of *DRAWING BIRDS* published by Britain’s *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*. I was just as blown away by John’s drawings as I had been by Ennion’s. I was amazed with his ability to capture a bird’s character with a few contour lines, and even more amazed with his masterful drawings of BIRDS IN FLIGHT!

But John’s new book offered more than eye candy – it was filled with practical, useful advice on ways to approach drawing birds directly from life. Where the Ennion book had shown me what was possible, John’s book showed me ***How to DO IT!*** Now, I was REALLY on my way!

John’s book also served to introduce me to a whole new group of European nature artists, since he included many examples of other artist’s work. I found out about people like RB TALBOT KELLY, Gunnar BRUSEWITZ, Charles TUNNICLIFFE, Bruno LILJEFORS and Lars JONSSON. Discovering the works of each of these artists was like finding a whole new world, ripe with possibilities.

Finally, John's book carried a clear message for wildlife artists and a compelling call to action. In the final chapter he advised:  
***"...be true to your own observations in all matters... Authentic records of moments seen have... more value than the most artful reconstruction, because the experience behind them is genuine."***

And he went on to say:

***"the portrayal of birds is in great need of fresh vision. With so much of our wildlife under threat, the more we can cement our emotional links with nature in a deep, appreciative...way, the more it will strengthen the public will for conservation. Artists have a lot of challenging work to do in presenting the reality of nature as one of the inspiring and urgent themes of our day."***

While I am among many who have benefited from John's example through his books, many others have had the good fortune to learn from him *in person*. In addition to his many years teaching art at Edinburgh College, John started an annual summer SEABIRD DRAWING COURSE in Berwick, Scotland, and it has become a rite of passage for countless students of birds and art. Between his books and his teaching, who can say how many lives, like my own, have been changed.

I've never seen John teach firsthand, but I've talked with some of his students, and they characterize his approach with phrases like ***"hands-on"***, ***"practical"***, ***"lead by example"***. He actively participates in the creative process, drawing alongside his students, all the while infecting them with his boundless enthusiasm. This is in stark contrast with my own University art experience. In four years of art school, ***not once*** did I see one of my professors pick up a pencil or brush and actually draw or paint in front of me!

John, like all great teachers, stresses ***the basics***, with an emphasis on shape, structure, design and composition. First you learn the rules, and only then you can spread your wings and fly! At the same time, he presents a strong spiritual message – the need to cultivate ***awareness, noticing and caring***. And here is where John's life and his art merge together. HIS is a quiet, gentle nature, rich in spirit. Derek Hyatt, in an introduction to one of John's exhibition catalogs pointed out that ***"Being quiet of mind and spirit is essential to observing"***.

Some describe John's art as "**minimalist**". Certainly, he can say more with a single, 6B pencil line than others can with a hundred brushstrokes. When John learned of his selection for this year's Master Wildlife Artist, he wrote to me:

***"I thought they must mean someone else – I don't do masterpieces or "finished" kinds of paintings."***

That's John's humility speaking, but also his world view. He would surely have agreed with Mother Theresa when she said – "***we can do no great things – only small things with great love***".

Last year, my friend Darren Rees (whose work you may know from prior *Birds in Art* exhibitions) wrote a magazine feature about John. After long deliberation, he decided to title it "***Shaped by Birds, Shaper of Men***". I couldn't sum it up any better than that!