

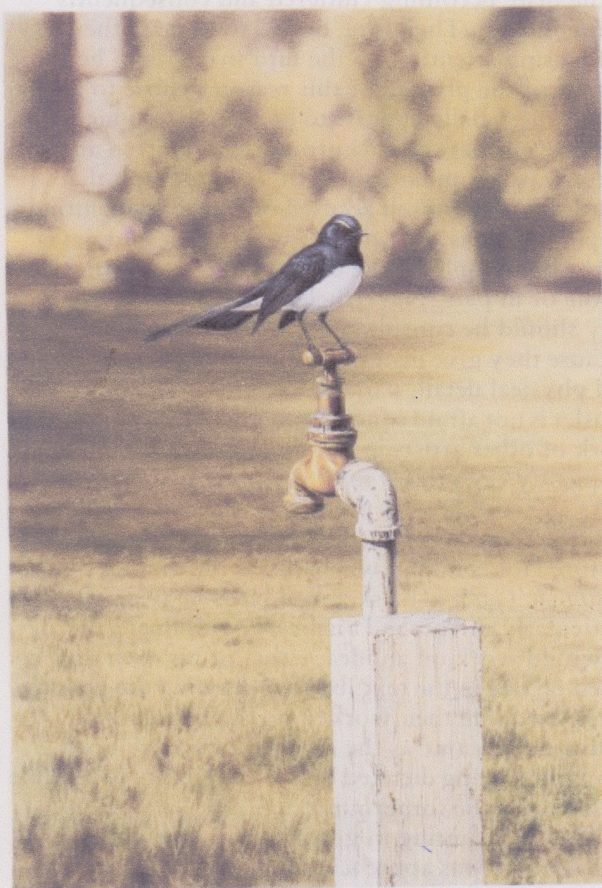
PETER TRUSLER

Australia has some dramatic-looking garden birds, but when Peter Trusler, a native of Yallourn, Victoria came to paint them for a book he was surprised to discover how little he knew about the plumage details of some of the quite common species. He filled in the missing details from a number of sources, among the most important of which were drawings and notes made from birds that had been mist-netted for banding (ringing). By examining birds in the hand he was able to find out crucial information about the colours and structure of the soft parts that are so often overlooked in the field and are so misleading in stuffed specimens. Looking so closely at these birds he was fascinated by the expressiveness of their eyes.

Peter Trusler approaches illustration with a combination of both science and aesthetics. He graduated from Monash University with a zoology degree, but he gained a higher certificate in art at school. Later he received private tuition in oil painting from Jessie Merritt of Ballarat, Victoria.

Born in 1954, he is still in his early thirties and has been a freelance artist and illustrator since 1975. His work appeared on the Gould League of Victoria wall charts of bird habitats and he was one of the illustrators for *Every Australian Bird Illustrated*, published in 1975. However, it was with his 80 plates for *Birds of Australian Gardens* (1980) that he began to receive real public recognition. It was commended 'Best Illustrated Book' by the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales in 1981 and the plates are in the National Australia Bank Art Collection in Melbourne. His approach to the daunting task of painting these 80 plates was typically thoughtful as his Artist's Notes in the book show.

'In principle, the task of providing illustrations for a book about birds seemed straightforward. I had to be able to produce paintings of birds that were diagnostic in colour and shape, from which readers could identify the birds they saw. The work had to be a "visual shorthand" that would reduce the need for lengthy



Willie wagtail. Peter Trusler. (National Bank)

description, but it could also make an aesthetic and decorative contribution. It soon became apparent that my involvement ran much deeper and that there were many facets that needed to be communicated.

'In addition to my purely illustrative function I have tried to capture something of the "living magic" that

the authors and I find as we watch birds go about their daily activities. It can be just as equally appreciated in the manmade tapestry of the urban environs as in the natural splendour of the wilds.'

As Trusler considered the possibilities for the paintings he found himself very interested in the characteristics, textures and spatial relationship of the plants and objects that were to form part of the illustrations. As can be seen from the plate of the willie wagtail, he has shown the contrast between the hard brass tap and the soft substance of the bird's feathers. The effects of sunlight, with its particular Australian intensity and colour that is so different from the sombre light of cloudy days, has been exploited to give variety to the lighting in the plates. 'Representing something of the seasons as we experience them in Australia,' he wrote, 'the use of light, and the fleeting activity of birds has also encouraged me to try to communicate the impression of time.'

He decided against bringing all the themes together in each plate, because to do so would be to run the risk of the plate becoming cluttered and consequently losing impact. Therefore, he had to find another way of focusing attention on the bird that was to be the subject of the plate. 'For this reason I chose to adopt what superficially appears to be a photographic style.' This meant that the background was blurred and the effect was so similar to that of a photograph that Trusler found himself accused of basing his paintings on photographs. His answer was that he had never used photographs in the context of copying them in whole or in part. Nevertheless he does not deny that they should be consulted, with common sense, because they give insights into movement, behaviour and physical detail, particularly of the soft parts. Trusler is not afraid of admitting that he examines 'the work of other artists in the same way and this frequently crystallises my own ideas.'

As an artist Trusler prefers to work from life. In addition to sketches made in the field and from birds captured for banding, when he was illustrating *Birds of Australian Gardens* he sketched birds in aviaries, particularly parrots and finches. For his final paintings he would work on an idea, either of his own or based on one in the text, by first drawing the posture of the bird. He then worked on the background. Refinements came as the composition developed, sometimes being dictated by the availability of suitable material for the foreground.

The final painting in gouache and transparent watercolour was approached from the background, again with refinements coming as the painting developed. The book's authors, as well as other experts, were consulted as the painting developed.

Trusler appears not to have resented their comments; instead he welcomed their advice and felt that it strengthened both the design and accuracy of the finished work. The artist's imagination is clearly shown by the variety in the plates - three white-throated honeyeaters feed on 'nectar' from a pottery bowl in one; in another a pair of red-rumped parrots drink from water collected in part of a rusty industrial boiler; and in a third there are eastern spinebills attracted by the nectar of a cultivated fuchsia. Trusler's Australian garden birds are a mouthwatering ornithological feast for the birdwatcher from abroad.

Working on these garden bird plates Trusler learned not only about the birds but also about himself. Painting, he claims, has become a tool for analysis of himself, his relationship with people and his surroundings. This has led him towards the portraits, landscapes and still-lives that were the beginnings of his painting. He feels that there is no important difference between his paintings of wildlife and those of other subjects. He uses them to communicate his thoughts and feelings. He believes that it is necessary to have involvement with the subject, be it a bird or something else.

For Trusler the most important differences exist between those paintings that are commissioned and those he paints for himself. Commissioned illustrations are different because the illustrative function is paramount and brings with it both the discipline of illustrating the text and the constraints of the printing process. An extreme example of this is the paleontological reconstructions in which he has become an expert. All the existing information about the animal must be rigorously adhered to, but considerable artistic creativity is needed to interpret the known facts and fill in those that are unknown. Consequently he has become involved in the gamut of paleontological research from specimen preparation, gathering and evaluating further information and assessing the significance of any variation to making judgements about the comparative anatomy, functional anatomy and ecological adaptation.

He is also building up a collection of paintings and drawings for exhibition. These are predominantly portraits, landscapes and still-life. A wide choice of media - pencil, conte crayon, pastel, watercolour, gouache, oil and ink - mirrors his wide choice of subjects. Trusler is clearly not an artist who can be labelled and his willingness to tackle such a variety of subjects and yet be able to produce acceptably accurate paintings of birds argues against the narrow specialisation of many 'wildlife' artists.