

## ABOUT THE COVER

by Barry W. Van Dusen

*Barry W. Van Dusen created the watercolor of a Little Egret for our cover this month to celebrate the recent appearance of this vagrant in the United States. When asked about the creative process, Barry offered the following thoughts.*

The character of a work of art often comes down to the matter of the artist's intent. When I first see a piece of art, I ask myself what do I imagine were the artist's intentions, and do the elements of the piece—the composition, the color, the handling—contribute toward realizing these objectives.

In the uncommissioned work that I do for my own enjoyment, my intentions are often quite different from those involved in producing for publication a portrait of a particular species of bird or of a rarity. In my own work my intentions usually involve conveying the excitement I have felt in some personal discovery in the natural world or communicating a strong impression or emotion produced by an outdoor experience. Often seeing a new or unexpected aspect of bird life sets my creative gears cranking; other times it may be an effect of light, color, or atmosphere. With common birds it is often the unusual attitude or behavior or finding a bird in a less characteristic situation or environment that may lead to a fresh and exciting picture. I frequently find myself compelled to depict birds that I've observed in off-season or immature plumages. I marvel at the crisp chevrons on the backs of young Roseate Terns or the handsome mixture of contrast and subtlety in the plumage of a fall Blackburnian Warbler, and I'm often attracted by the more subtly colored females in the dimorphic species.

In some of what I consider to be my most successful "bird" pictures, the bird may take a backseat altogether, and the real intention is to play up some other aspect or element. This spring I found myself repeatedly awed by the beauty of flowering shadbush during that too short period in which it blooms. I was irresistibly drawn to the twinkling blossoms and rich crimson leaves against the softly colored backdrop of springtime woods. The resulting picture into which I placed a Chipping Sparrow is really more about shadbush blossoms than about Chipping Sparrows. As contemporary wildlife artist Eldridge Hardy said recently, "So many things can be the subject of a painting: mood, atmosphere, weather, the light."

Setting out to picture a rarity like Cox's Sandpiper, Little Stint, or Little Egret, on the other hand, has a quite different set of intentions. These birds are well known to only a few more experienced birders; thus the primary intent is to reveal to those less familiar with the rarity just what it looks like. The artist must

clearly describe the bird's structures and how it may differ from other closely related species. In other words, the portrait should be as characteristic as possible. Unusual angles or poses are out. Foreshortening distorts shape and proportions; likewise, dramatic or unusual lighting may alter color and value. The challenge then is to create a dynamic picture within these pictorial confines.

**BARRY W. VAN DUSEN**, whose artwork is currently on view at the Maine Audubon Society in Falmouth, produced the watercolor of a Little Egret as his third cover for *Bird Observer*. His illustrations regularly appear within these pages, in *Sanctuary* and other publications, and at exhibitions throughout New England. Barry has illustrated three books scheduled for publication in 1990, and his artwork appeared in Richard Walton's *Bird Finding in New England*.

If you would like to be notified of future exhibits, please drop a note to him at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, MA 01541.

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