

For the Birds

A lifelong interest in nature and the environment has sustained Hank Tyler's creative and professional life.





Main: Hank Tyler in his Eltham, Victoria studio. Photo: D.D. Tyler

Three Sandpipers, bubinga, 2009, Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, Massachusetts, USA. Photo: Bill Duffy

Sandpiper Family, bubinga, 2013, Museum of American Bird Art, Canton, Massachusetts, USA. Photo: Bill Duffy



Hank Tyler is a self-taught sculptor and a trained marine biologist. Growing up within a community of artists in Maine on the North Atlantic coast, Hank made model sailboats from scraps of pine and later joined a bird watching group that caught and banded birds to track bird migrations. The two interests merged as Hank he undertook studies in biology and oceanography. 'During my high school years, sales of bird sculptures paid for most of my university expenses.'

Learning and experimenting with techniques has allowed him to explore the subject that has absorbed him for 61 years. 'Sandpipers and shorebirds are my favourite subjects. With several hundred sandpiper species, I have the opportunity to explore and sculpt birds of different sizes and

shapes with a variety of bill forms. During the last seven years, I have been sculpting owls in black cherry and osage orange.'

'All my sculptures are in one contiguous piece of wood', says Hank. He explains how the shape of a branch, crotch or knot will influence the design, which then begins with a sketched out template. 'I plan my sculptures to be a bit asymmetrical, with curved lines, and slightly tilted to indicate action.'

The base is a critical part of his designs and usually displays an environmental habitat. Smoothed or etched textures show the movement and skimming of waves, or depict sandy surfaces dotted with beach stones and occasionally the imprint of birds' feet.



Sandpiper, osage orange, 2017, Ward Museum of Waterfowl Art, Maryland, USA. Photo: Hank Tyler

Abstract, bubinga, 1988. Photo: Bill Duffy

Leach's storm petrel pair, lignum vitae, 1972, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wisconsin, USA. Photo: Bill Duffy



Carbide burs in a die grinder are his main tool for removing wood in tight spots, and for smoothing rough chiselled surfaces. An array of well used hand tools are then used to smooth and shape. 'I am still using five US-made Nicholson files that my father gave me over 50 years ago. For fine detail, shaping and smoothing, I use Italian handmade riffilers created by the Malani Family in Pietrasanta.'

Hank generally sands to 600 grit and finishes with tung oil. Bowls, spoons, spatulas, spreaders and knives are finished with food safe walnut oil. 'Most of the wood I sculpt has been given to me; Brazilian rosewood and bubinga wood in the early 1960s and later, as my reputation grew, other species of wood. 'My favourite North American woods are black walnut, black cherry and osage orange. In Australia, as a member of the International Wood Collectors Society, he says, 'I am enjoying exploring many new species and expanding my knowledge of Australian trees and timbers'.

In the 1970s Hank came to Australia as a backpacker and returned several times in the decades that followed to attend conservation conferences, and to explore more of the country. He now lives in Eltham and teaches at the Melbourne Guild of Fine Woodworking.

Learn more about Hank Tyler at www.hanktylersculptor.com