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a field guide
to capturing
critters with
pen, pencil,
and paint...

October 2005



It's not hard to capture critters on paper; it just takes some imagination, practice and some basic stuff.

Here's the stuff you'll need:

Paper; the best is a hard-bound sketchbook, the kind that looks like a real book, only the pages are blank. I carry mine everywhere and doodle a lot. The more you draw the better you get. Try different kinds of paper; charcoal or MiTientes paper (in colors), card stock, heavy watercolor paper, mat board.

Pencils; try softer or harder ones, charcoal, pastels, colored pencils (Prismacolor Pencils are very good and my favorite). Crayons are great too!

Try watercolor (get the student grade type in tubes, not the pan sets), get good student grade brushes, not those chipmunk toothbrushes that come

in the pan sets.

You can also use crayons, acrylics, oil paint, oil pastels, pen and ink, ballpoint pens, cola, muddy water, berry juice, soft rocks, burned campfire wood, beach sand, and lots of other stuff.

You'll need binoculars or a telescope on a tripod; most



wildlife won't let you get close. Zoos, aquariums, and bird feeders are great for seeing many animals up close. Taxidermy (stuffed critters) is useful; the animals hold still. Your cat or dog will help you draw lions or wolves. You can use pictures in books, but real life is better.

If you're going out in the rain,



or on a boat, or snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef (or the local lake), a dive slate is great to draw on. That's a piece of white plastic that you can draw on underwater with most pencils...I've only ever found them at dive shops. The fish on the next page were sketched in Chincoteague Bay on my dive slates while I was snorkeling. I noted size and color and behavior, and re-drew them in my sketchbook with pencil and watercolor. A ranger at the National Seashore helped identify them later from my sketches.

A camera is useful too; take your own pictures of critters you meet, and of their environments.





striped burrfish

heart shaped
butt spot
(with fin in middle)



baby
burrfish
very boxy



flounder

lying on
top of sand
grey w/ spots

summer
flounder



minnow with spot

baby spot



zebra dascyllus:
stripes + spots -

bottom
dweller



6-8"

baby kingfish?

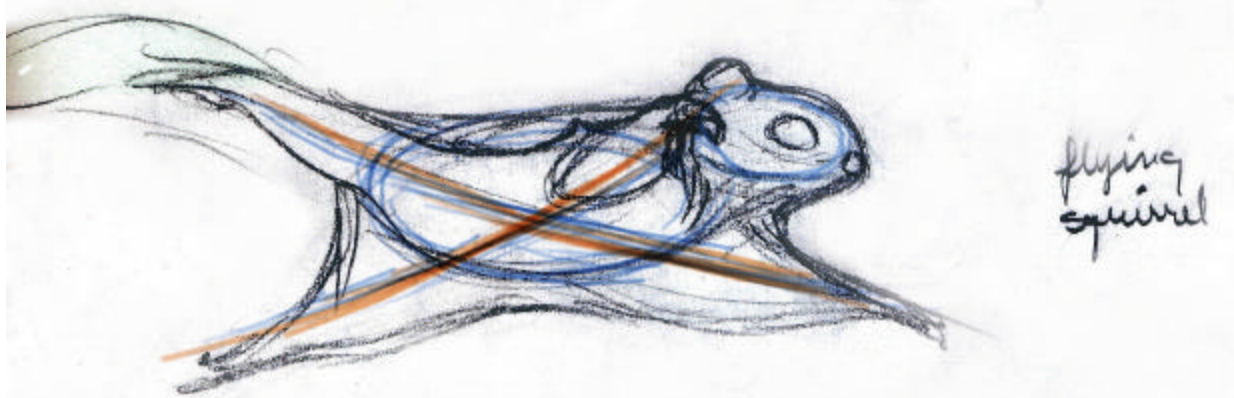
adult has more back fin



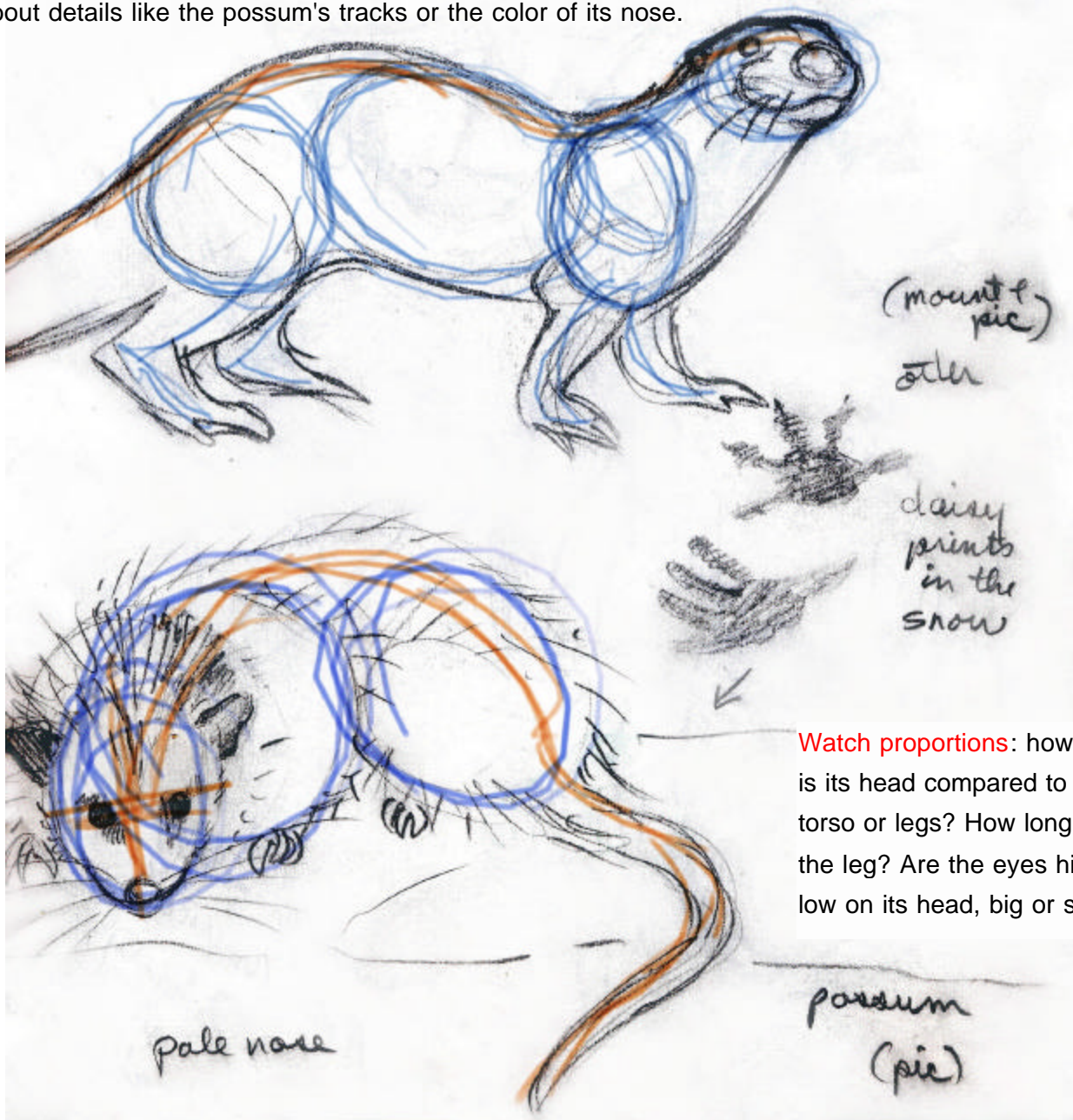
little black fish
could be baby sea bass

paralichthys
dentatus
(fluke)

find basic shapes: circles, blocks, triangles etc.(I used blue circles here) and action lines (red lines)...build the "skeleton" first, then the muscle and skin over it...draw from the inside out



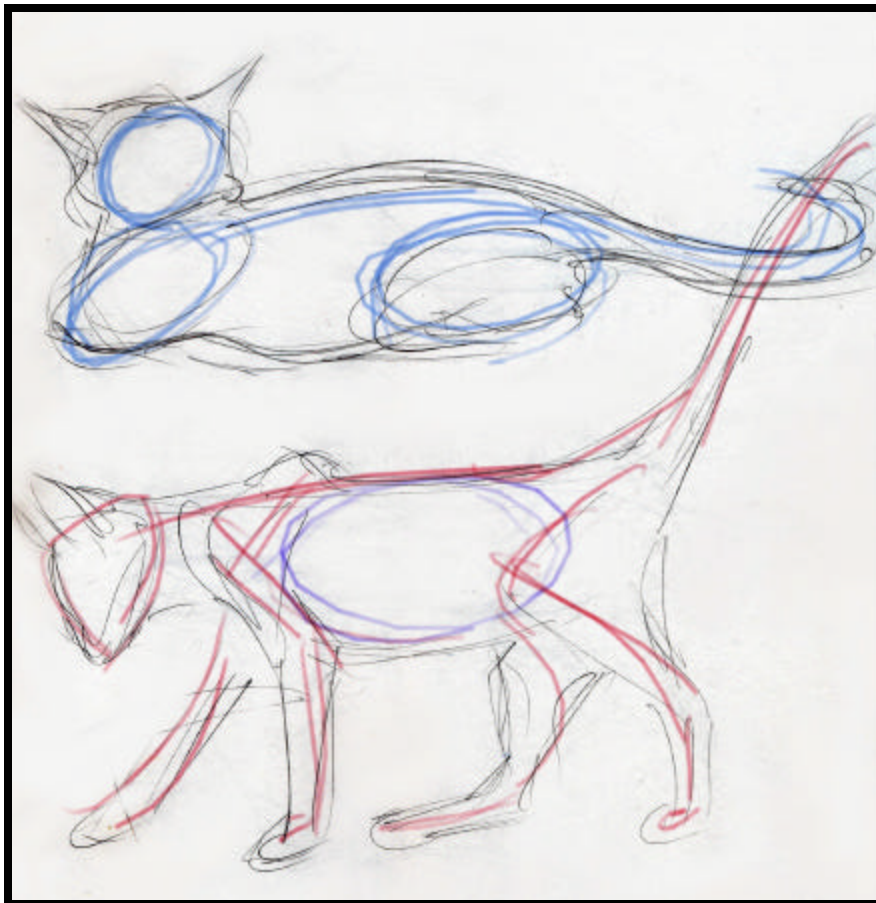
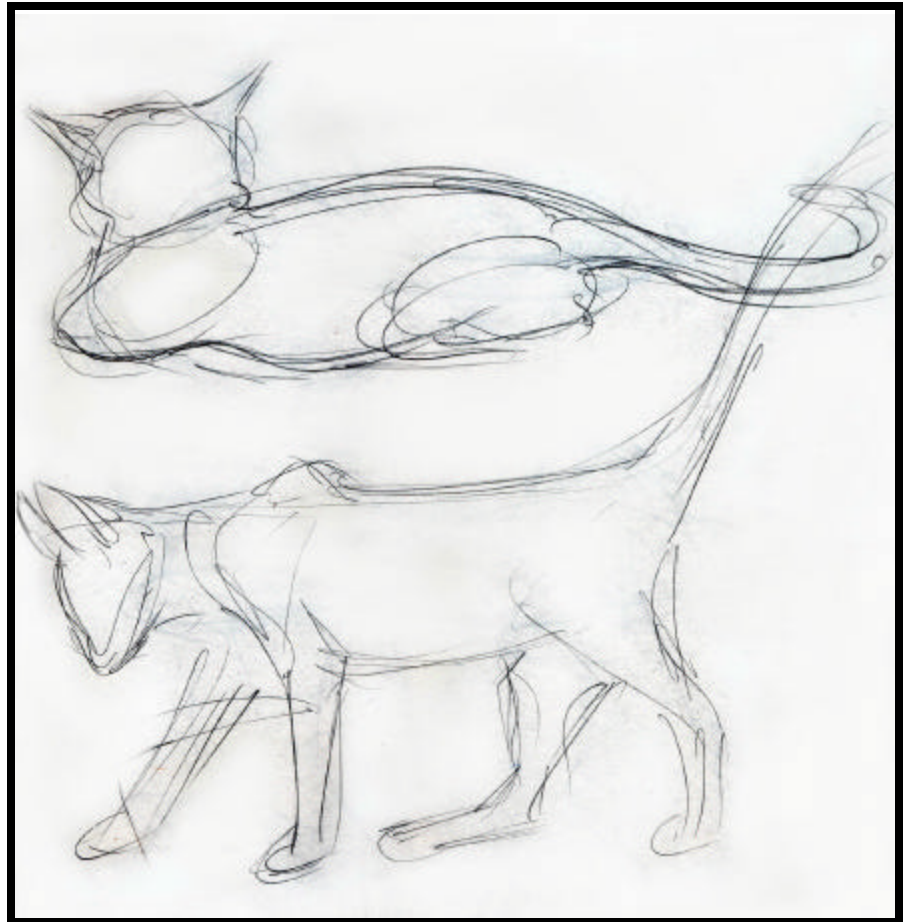
I sketched these at Nixon Park using taxidermy and photos. I make notes on the sketchbook page about details like the possum's tracks or the color of its nose.



Watch proportions: how big is its head compared to its torso or legs? How long is the leg? Are the eyes high or low on its head, big or small?

This is a page from my sketchbook; one of my cats (Nightcrawler), if you can draw this kind of cat, you can draw anything, from ocelot to Siberian tiger.

Nighty is about five months old here. In the top sketch he's making the kind of round boneless shapes cats often make; I used a lot of circles (drawn very fast) to sketch him. In the bottom sketch, he's walking, and making more angular shapes. Look at how my lines change...

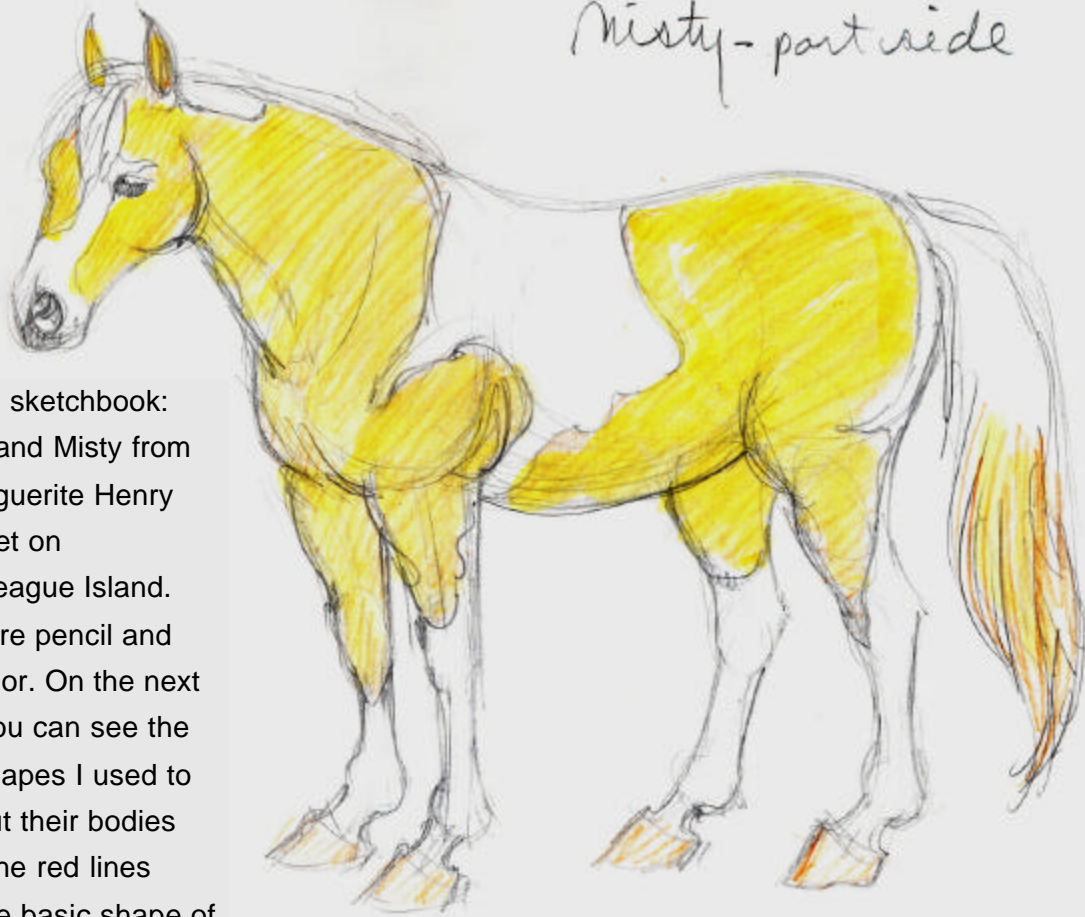


The color lines show the basic shapes I start with.

cats,
arrrgghh!

it's as if
they have
no bones...

Misty - part side



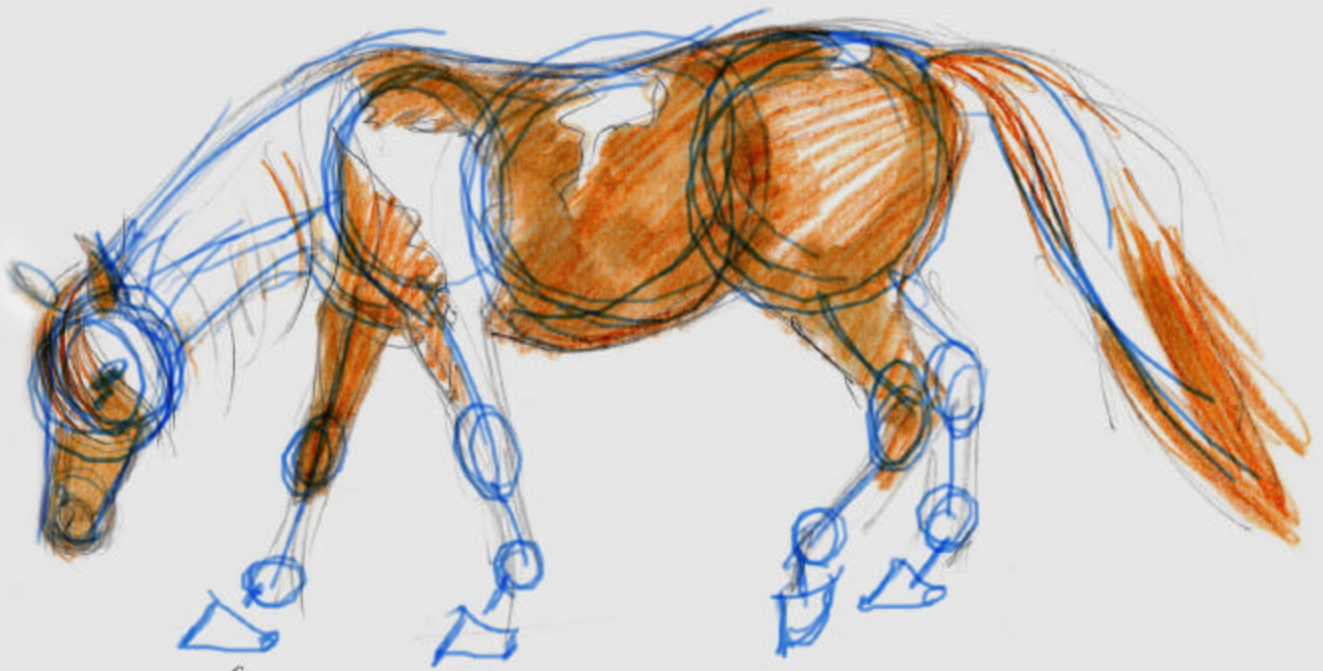
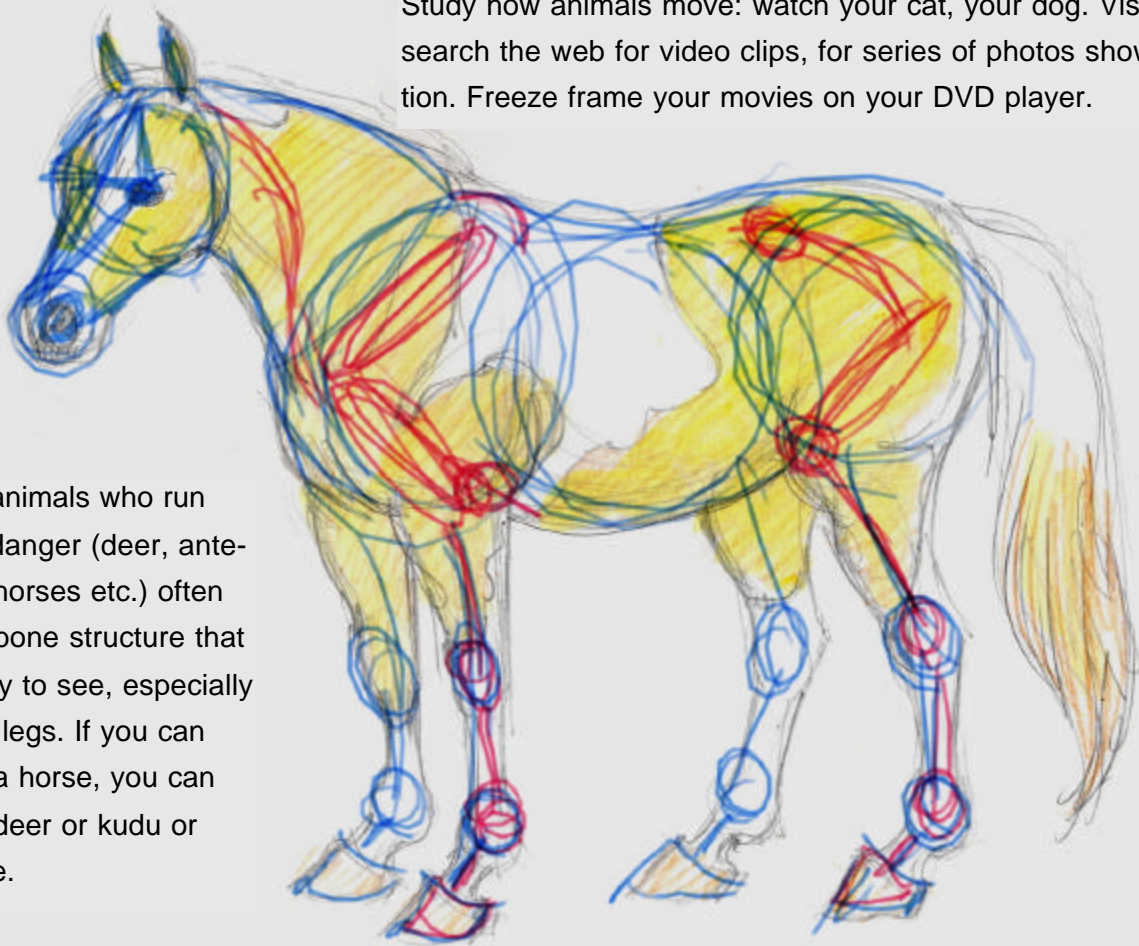
from my sketchbook:
Stormy and Misty from
the Marguerite Henry
books set on
Chincoteague Island.
These are pencil and
watercolor. On the next
page, you can see the
basic shapes I used to
block out their bodies
(blue), the red lines
show the basic shape of
the bones of neck,
shoulder, hip, legs.



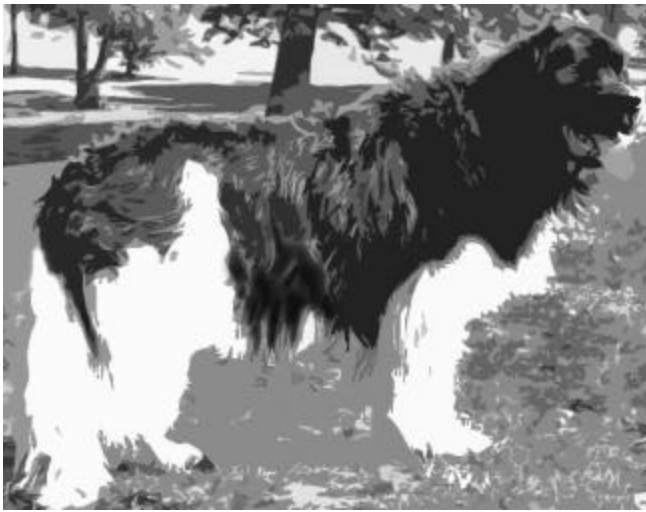
Stormy

Study how animals move: watch your cat, your dog. Visit a zoo, search the web for video clips, for series of photos showing motion. Freeze frame your movies on your DVD player.

Prey animals who run from danger (deer, antelope, horses etc.) often have bone structure that is easy to see, especially in the legs. If you can draw a horse, you can draw deer or kudu or moose.

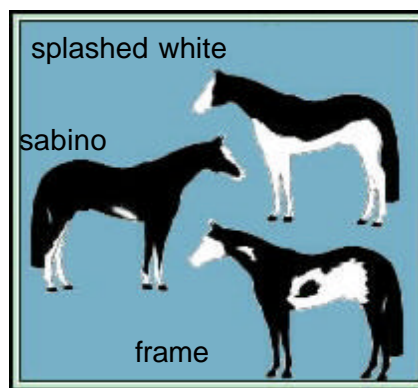


Each species moves differently: horses gallop differently from dogs (dogs have all four feet off the ground twice each stride, horses only once, and horses use a transverse gallop, dogs a rotary gallop).

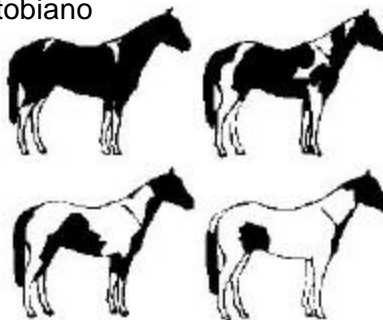


Patterns vary with species: a spotted dog is very different from a spotted cow or cat or horse...spotted horses come in many distinct patterns: tobiano, overo, tovero, splash, sabino, appaloosa. A pattern can be any color plus white. You can find information on the internet on horse colors and patterns as well as other critters (for horses, use "horse colors" "Paint" "pinto" "brindle" as search engines) In my other sketches: Misty is palomino color, tobiano pattern, Stormy is tobiano too, but chestnut in color

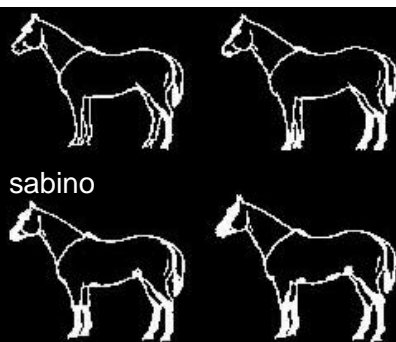
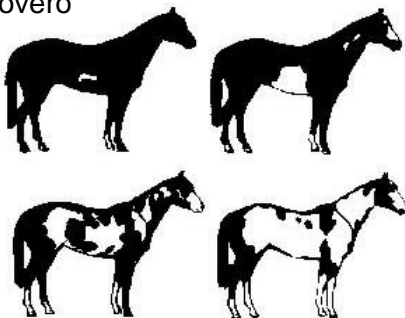
The patterns of the two Landseer Newfoundland dogs above are typical of many dog



tobiano



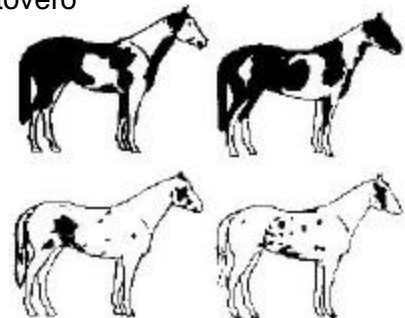
overo

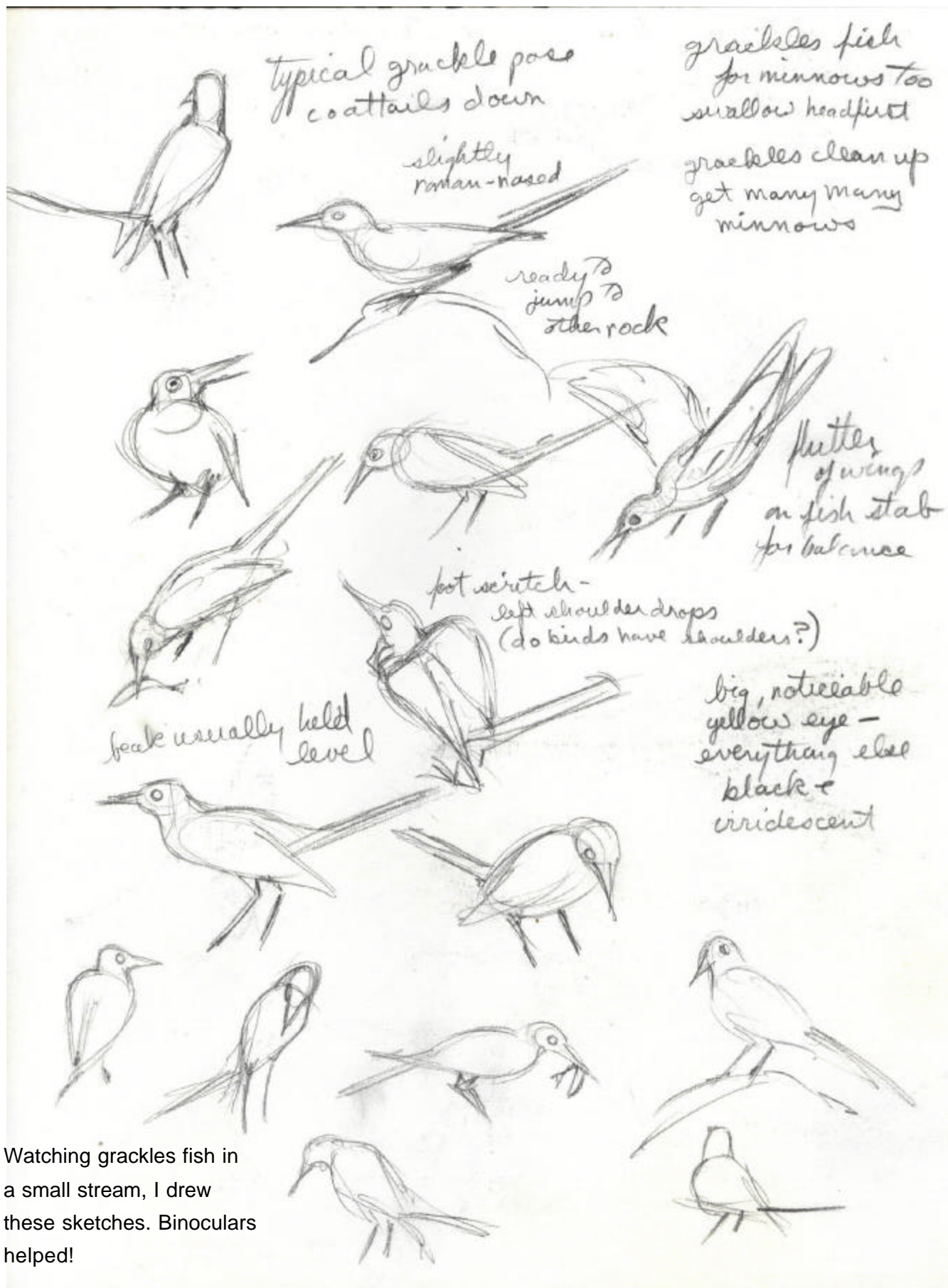


breeds, and similar to the patterns found in cows or cats.

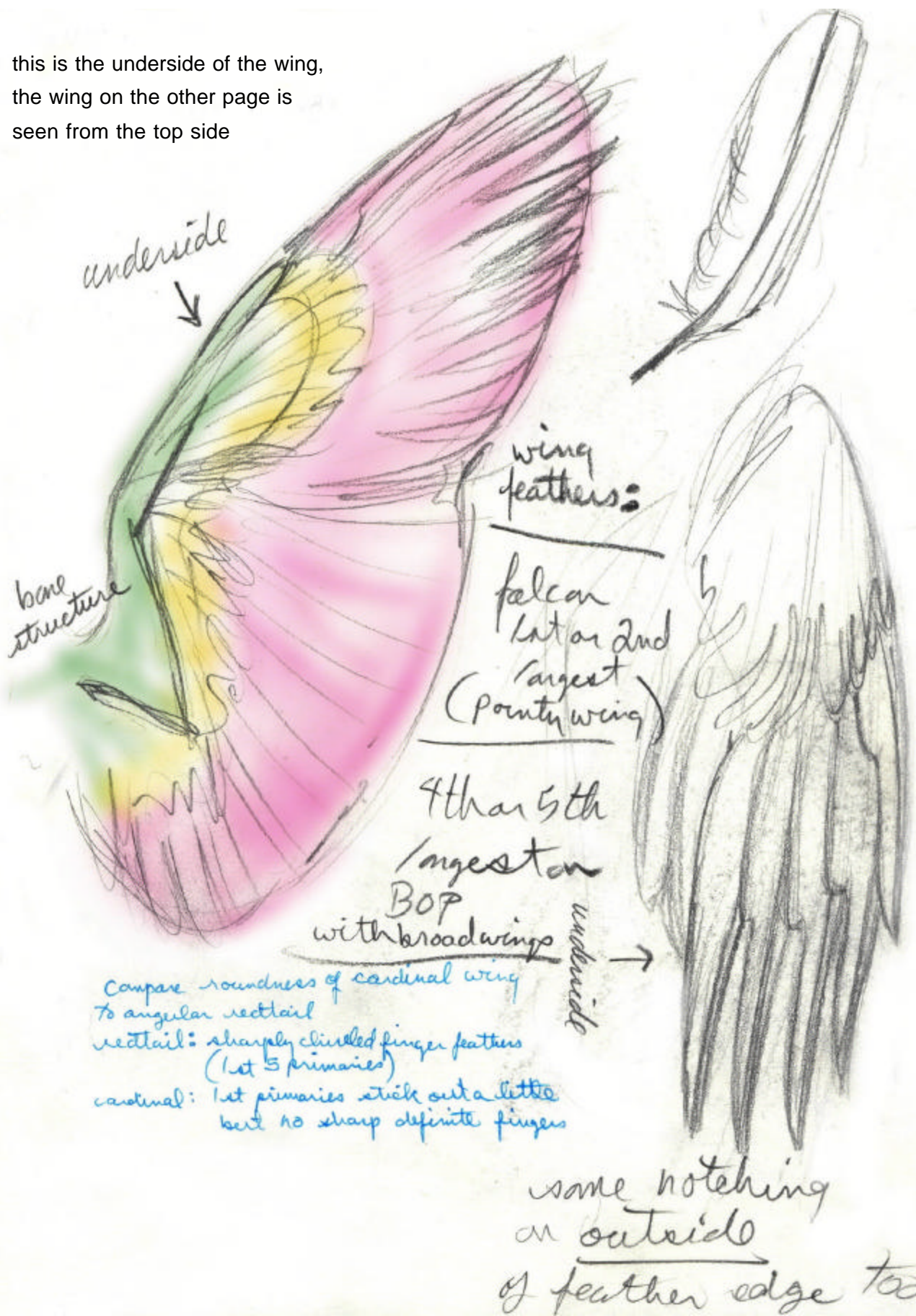
Pinto or piebald patterns are not found often in nature, they appear more in domestic animals, though some wild animals (skunks, orcas, other dolphins, birds) may have bold patterns. These patterns are usually warnings (like the skunk's) or break up the animal's shape so prey or predators don't see them very well. (Zebras in a herd become a mass of confusing stripes. Orcas in murky water become a confusion of black and white blobs.)

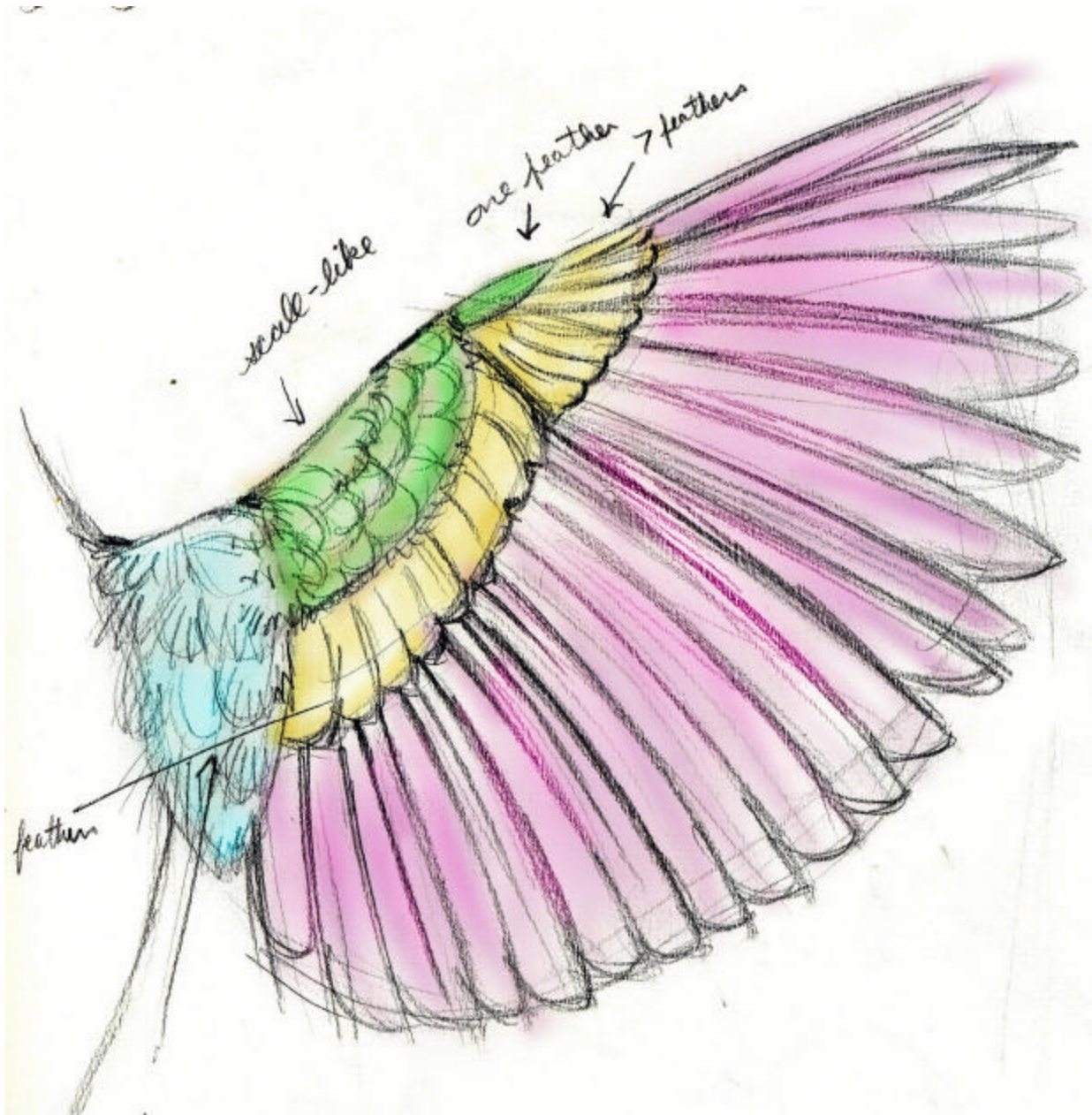
tovero





this is the underside of the wing,
the wing on the other page is
seen from the top side

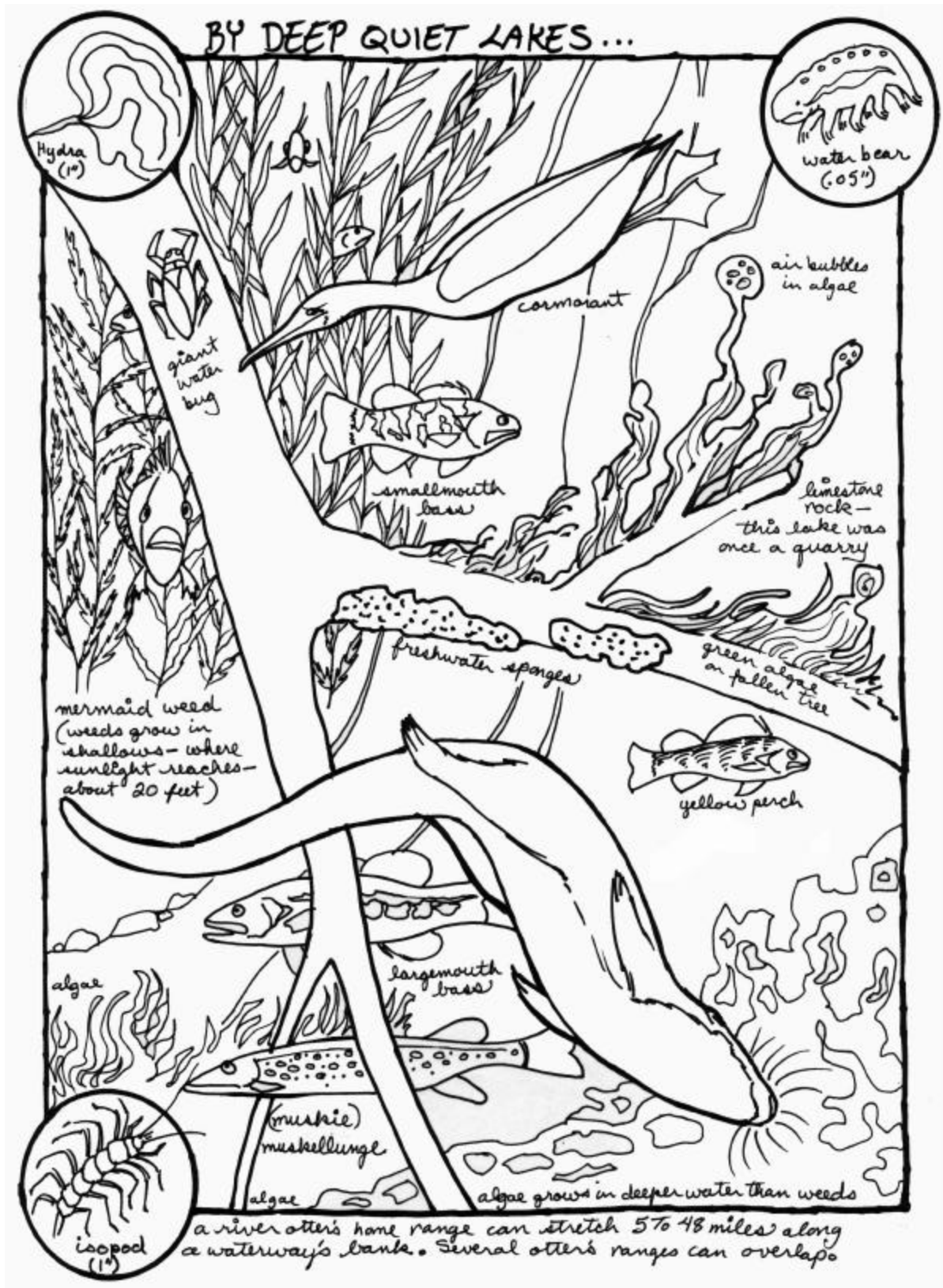




Understanding how it's built helps you draw it better

This cardinal wing is a very different shape from the redtail hawk wing on the other page, but the basic structure of bones and muscle and feathers is the same. I studied a few dead birds closely to understand how wings are put together. The pinkish feathers are the flight feathers: the ones nearest the body are broad to carry the weight of the bird, the ones near the ends of the wings are pointy, and help in steering. The gold and green feathers give the wing its curved aerodynamic shape, (the green part is where the muscle and bone is). The blue bit fills the space between bird and wing, making the bird aerodynamic. For technical terminology like primaries, secondaries and coverts, field guides and other bird books are helpful.

An otter coloring book done for a wildlife rehabilitator who specialized in otters. The hard part is drawing just an outline (to keep it simple enough to color) but showing the detail of the otter's environment as well as the round flowing form of the otter, making it feel solid and heavy and real.





Nixon Park: The chipmunks are part of a display; a life-sized look into a chipmunk burrow. It's scientifically accurate, but whimsical (fun and funny) at the same time. The chipmunks were done on eleven feet of brown paper using Prismacolor Pencil and pastels. The red-backed salamander is part of a display called "Soil, it's not just dirt". We needed something fun to make dirt more interesting, and we needed a critter that lives in the soil...but earthworms don't have hands, and are hard to cartoon. This was done in watercolor with pencil line.

Chesapeake Bay, on the last page, is a combination of several watercolors (the guy, the bay horse/sea and the white horse were done separately). I combined them on my computer's Photoshop program, and used the airbrush feature for finishing touches. The spotted horse is "bay" color (red-brown/black mane), and the marking on his neck is a map of the Chesapeake Bay.



art doesn't have to look like a photo!



Pictures tell stories. What kind of story are you telling? A scientific one full of facts? A myth or faerie tale with deep truths in it? A tale where you look through the animal's eyes and imagine what it would be like to be them? A story for little kids like Peter Rabbit, or for older kids, like the Redwall series, or Gary Paulsen's wilderness adventure books? For adults, like Bernd Heinrich's books about ravens?

This is a bookcover I designed as a sample to send to publishers, the book has not been written yet. What do you think the story is?

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