

The Wall of Birds: An Artistic Journey

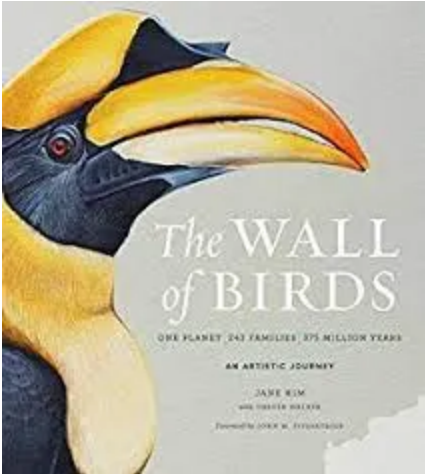
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One Planet/243 Families/375 Million Years

by Jane Kim with Thayer Walker



The Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York, on the campus of Cornell University, was faced with a three-story open space in its new visitor center. They had an enormous wall, 2,500 square feet, which was empty. John Fitzpatrick, the Director of the Lab, hoped for a mural depicting the story of avian evolution. But—he knew of no one who would take up the challenge until he discovered that his own Lab had a talented muralist, Jane Kim, who was excited to take create an enormous mural to grace the huge space.

Jane's plan was to “superimpose prehistoric archosaurs, early birds, and modern birds over a background of the seven continents and oceans.” The mural came to depict

a member of each of the 243 bird families in the world, painted life size and in color. It also includes five extinct families, like the Dodo, as well as a background of the ancient ancestors of modern birds.

Bill Hackos and I visited the Lab in 2014 when Jane was just beginning to paint individual birds on the background map of the continents. Jane gave a talk to our group from atop an enormous construction lift, explaining what she was painting (an Emu) that day, how she selected colors and painted details, and what the overall plan for the wall would be. From our location on the second-floor balcony, overlooking the wall, we were at the same height as Jane. It seemed to us an impossible undertaking. In fact, *The Wall of Birds* was completed in 2016 after Jane had painted 270 life-size birds and animals, plus two painted by Director Fitzpatrick and ornithological advisor, Jessie Barry.

The Wall of Birds is Jane's account of the adventure of developing and completing the mural, with illustrations of each of the birds and animals on the wall. The book is a beautiful collection of the paintings, organized by continent. The first bird in the account, and the first bird that Jane painted, is New Zealand's North Island Saddleback, a bird we actually saw on Tiri Tiri Matangi Island off the coast of Auckland, NZ. New Zealand saved the bird from extinction by reestablishing it on this rodent-free island.

Jane provides detailed descriptions of a selection of birds that she painted on the Wall. She explains that painting the Great Spotted Kiwi was more like painting a rodent than a bird. Its feathers look more like fur than feathers as the bird walks through the forest sniffing for prey.

Throughout *The Wall of Birds* we are treated to beautiful reproductions of the paintings and details about the birds and the challenge of painting them. Before beginning a painting, Jane drew a graphite study of each bird to scale. Each study was checked carefully by a professional ornithologist to ensure that all of the details were correct, including the size and composition of the beaks and feet.

Her painting of the Wandering Albatross was especially challenging because it is so enormous. To give the painting depth and interest, she painted “every single visible wing feather. They have a *lot* of feathers.” The Albatross graces the middle of the wall at eye level.

One hummingbird is included of course. The Marvelous Spatuletail is depicted with its fan-shaped tail feathers flashing upward and forward as it performs in its courtship display. Jane used a “rainbow of paint” to display the hummingbird’s iridescence.

I’m certain that every bird enthusiast will enjoy *The Wall of Birds*. The pictures are striking, the information brief but always interesting, and Jane’s work amazing. The book’s endplate shows us how the entire wall looks from about the place we were standing to see it as Jane began. The first photo in the book shows Jane atop the construction lift with paintbrush in hand.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Harper Design, 2018

