

Carving a Cartoon Vulture in Cottonwood Bark



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Introduction

This instructional guide is written for the James River Woodcarvers' mini project.

The cartoon vulture can be carved from a piece of basswood or cottonwood bark. Since I enjoy carving cottonwood bark, I'll walk you through carving the vulture from bark. Same principles apply to basswood.

At the end of this guide, you will find multiple patterns. These patterns are a spin-off of Gary Batte's "Buzzard". I like the fat tummy concept of his buzzard, that I designed my vultures in a similar fashion with a big tummy. Crystal Thompson created the patterns for me based on my concepts and carvings.

The first set of patterns are for the vulture with the wings resting on his full tummy. As an alternative view, the wings can be carved to the back as indicated by the dashed lines (like Gary Batte's buzzard). There are a couple different head/beak styles you can choose from. The one with the bags under the eyes is more of a challenge.

The last set of patterns are for the vulture with his wings in front holding a knife and fork. Or he can be holding any object you come up with. This one has a bib/handkerchief tied around his neck.

If you are carving with basswood, you will need to carve the base that the vulture is standing on. If you are carving bark, let the bark become the base.

Carving the Body

For the James River Woodcarvers' mini project, we will be carving the vulture with his wings overlapped on his fat tummy. I have sized my vulture body pattern to be a 2" x 2" x 4", or length of bark. The actual vulture body is 2"x2"x2.75". The remainder length is the base. The head is proportional to the body.

I outlined the pattern onto a thin plastic sheet. This allows me to place the clear plastic pattern against my carving. I can see through it to gain my proportions as I carve away the pattern. It does help. Although I overlapped the head pattern with the body in the image below, they are two different pieces.

I found a remarkably interesting piece of bark that I will use in this guide to carve the vulture. I measured the bark piece to make sure the pattern would fit.



Using a flattish gouge (#2 or #3 sweep), I remove some of the rough bark and flattened the sides where I will be carving. Then I glued paper patterns to the bark. I don't normally do this, but it's an idea if you haven't been carving for long. You can also just transfer the pattern by using carbon or tracing paper.

As you can see in the pictures below, my pattern is almost centered on the bark. That's because there is a natural crack in the bark there and I want to take advantage of that. Now I must remove the excess, but I want to leave a lot of the material to the left of the vulture. I will cut out the basic vulture shape using a coping saw. I do this in several stages. First, I remove the top excess. Then I go around the front profile to remove excess from sides of vulture using the coping saw.



So now there's a problem. I've removed the side view of the vultures. This is when I use the plastic pattern to look through it to draw the wings, neck, and belly. You can't glue a paper pattern back on since it isn't flat. If you try to push the pattern inside the cut curves, you'll soon find out that it is out of proportion. Best thing to do is draw it by hand using the clear pattern as a guide. I use a sharpie or white chalk to draw on bark. It's a bit tricky, but you can do it! Once you have the outline "guide" drawn in, you can use the coping saw or gouges to remove the other profile. The gouges I use at this stage are pretty flat (#3) or a rounder one (#9) for the round areas.



Once you cut the side profile in, you'll notice that you have lost part of the pattern in the front. Time to take out the plastic pattern and roughly draw the arms and neck feathers back in.



Once the front and sides are roughed in, we need to clean up the back of the bark and draw in the wing and tail placements. I didn't glue a paper pattern to the back. The bark is uneven in the back, so I just smoothed it out as much as possible without removing too much of the bark. Here is the comparison to another vulture I carved. I outlined the finished piece in white chalk so you can see the indentations better.



More views in comparison to a vulture that I already carved. As you can tell, the vulture is still pretty square and flat. Push the shoulder wings back. Use the clear plastic pattern as a guide.



It's time to start rounding and shaping the wings. The vulture's right wing is over the left wing resting on his belly. Shape the vulture's left wing first to help get the depth of the right wing. Remove some of the excess bark from the inside "elbow" bend of the wing. Carve up to the bird's body. I used a #9 sweep gouge on the inside of the elbows. I use a #3 gouge to shape the main part of the wings. I use a v-tool under the wings to separate them from the body.

Thin the upper section of the wings. Carve the shoulder section of the wings back away from the neck so that the wing appears to be attached behind his neck. This allows the neck feather section to stand out. As you carve the wings, round the belly down to his claws.

Notice that the left wing feather tips show up below the right overlapping wing. Shape the wings from the back too. Compare your results with the finished carving.



Once you have roughed in the wings, drill a small placement hole for the neck of the bird. You can wait on drilling a larger hole when you have carved out the head. I borrowed a head for this stage. The hole is a little higher than I like, but I can live with it.



Give the wings some movement by curving the wing tips upward. Clean up the carving and begin texturing the vulture's feathers. You don't need to carve each feather. Just give an indication of feathers. It almost looks like hair.

I lost a little bark on the right side, so you can't see the vulture's claw on his left side. I carved 3 talons on the vulture's right claw. The claw is not too clear in the photo. The image with the claw was added later.





A borrowed head!



Carving the Neck and Head

I cut out and inverted the head pattern to fit on the scrap of bark. Glue the head pattern to the bark. Make sure to align the neck “with the grain” for best support. This piece of bark is 1” thick (a little too thick). Don’t glue on the front of the head pattern. Use the pattern drawing as a reference. Because this piece is so small, I clamped it to my tabletop workbench. Use a coping saw to get the rough cut around the head, making sure to stay outside of the pattern lines. Once it has been roughly cut, use gouges or a knife to get closer to the pattern lines. Use whatever carving tools you have. I used a small #3 sweep gouge to remove material. I used a small #7 and #9 sweep gouges to carve across the curves, matching the sweep to the pattern. Be careful around the neck. Keep the neck thick for now.



I drew the front of the head pattern onto thin plastic sheet. I drew a center line on the front of the head/beak. Using the plastic pattern, I can draw a partial pattern for the beak and forehead. The cheeks are not visible to draw properly. I’ll wait to draw those once the beak has been carved down.



Start carving from the back of the beak on face and square off the beak to match pattern. All we are doing is blocking out the pattern for now. Used a #3 gouge or knife to remove the material.



Shape the sides and top of the head starting at the eyes. We don't want to carve below the eyes at this point. We need to keep the bark there for the cheeks.



The pictures below show the carved head and markings for next step.

Once you have carved the top of the head, carve below the cheeks to include a thick neck.





I didn't like the width of the head on my piece, so I narrowed it down on both sides before I started working on the cheeks. I also put the clear plastic pattern against my piece. I needed to remove more bark to match sizing of pattern better. I stayed to the outside of my pattern lines when I initially blocked this out, which made the head grow!!! I used the calipers to measure against the sample head we are using to compare the width of the head. You won't have that option using Zoom.

Start narrowing and defining the beak. To start the shaping, use a small gouge about a #9 or #11 and remove some of the bark. Because of the grain direction it might be easier to start carving from the center of the side of the beak and upward to the center of the eye. Then go back to the center side of beak and carve down around to the underside of the beak. Do that on both sides. You may need to repeat this process to get the required depth. See images below.



Now shape the top and edges of upper beak. This is where you begin to shape the beak. Don't forget about the lower beak. It will set inside of the upper beak, so don't go too narrow on the bottom of the beak. Watch the direction of the grain. Carve bottom up to prevent breaking the beak. If it does break, there's always super glue.... Carved the beak down to about 1/2" wide at the base of the beak next to the face.



Before carving the lower beak, round out the head, and bring out the cheeks. Cheeks are about 7/8" wide from one side to the other. I use a #9 gouge to indent the sides right above the cheeks (even with eyes) and the spot at the top of the head between the eyebrows. Yes, vultures have eyebrows. Behind the top of the eye channel, the head dips down a little before going back up to the bump on the back of his head. You can use a gouge or knife to round out the head. You will need room for the lower beak, so don't remove too much under the beak. Flatten out the eye area in preparation of carving in the eyes.





Time to carve in the lower beak and eyes. Draw in the lower beak starting right before the cheek bulges. Use a micro v-tool or #11 gouge to follow your line. Once you have a path, you can use your knife to deepen the beak separation. Taper the beak under the upper beak. Taper the upper beak. Use a small gouge to place a couple nostrils on the sides of his beak.



Use a small gouge #11 to outline the outer rim of the eyes. To ensure the eyes are about the same size, use a gouge that is the same size as the eye to make the initial indentation. From the corners of that gouge mark, use a small gouge to finish the cuts to the beak. Once you have an outline, remove some of the material from inside of the eye, rounding the eyeball slightly. The eyes are placed on the end grain so it may feel a little rough carving on the end grain. I temporarily colored the eyes with white chalk and black Sharpie so you can see the eye better.



Give the beak some character by creating bumps on the top of his beak. This is done by removing small sections from the top of his beak. Don't get carried away.

Begin carving the neck down. Keep the neck thicker at the top since it is weaker there. Before you get too far along, determine the direction you want the head to face: up, down, left, right. Drill the hole at an angle that you want to display your vulture's head. I like mine pointing down and slightly turned as if he is contemplating eating something yummy below. Continue narrowing the neck down to fit the drill hole you made in the body. If you happen to get the hole too big, just glue in a sliver of bark in the hole. Let glue dry and try fitting the neck again. You may need to drill the hole again. No worries. The first vulture I carved, I glued the head in. Now I just push the head on (tight fit) and can take head off anytime for packing, without worrying about breaking the neck. If you notice that the neck doesn't slant down like the pattern. I didn't have the pattern and just carved away. Now the beak doesn't face downward on the body as much as I like.





Finishing

Before I apply the finish, I go back over the vulture and do any clean up needed, add more shadows where needed, and sand down parts (not all) of the vulture.

- Emphasize the division between the wings and body by using a knife and carving a sliver out to create shadow.
- Undercut the wings on the bottom and sides to create additional shadow.
- Layer the wings by setting some of the feathers back under other feathers.
- Lightly sand the belly, beak, and head with 400 grit Abranet sanding cloth or whatever you have available. I use the Abranet because it doesn't leave chunks of "sand" in the bark. After sanding, wipe off all the dust with a cloth.
- Add indents on the vulture's bump on his head using a stylus. Optional smile wrinkles on face.
- On the raw bark side of the tree, I burnished it using the wooden end of a thick paint brush.

I like to use shoe creams on my bark carvings as a finish. I don't recommend using shoe creams on basswood unless you seal it first. I used acrylic enamels to paint the eyes.



Painting the Eyes: Apply Frost White or Wicker White Enamel acrylic paint for the foundation of the eyes using a small paint brush. Add a round circle of Licorice (black) Enamel acrylic paint for the iris. Use a toothpick to add a small dot of white to the side of the black iris to give the eye a glint.

Once the eyes dry, break out the shoe cream. Since Meltonian has been discontinued, I've switch to using Moneysworth & Best (m&b) shoe creams. I still have some Meltonian shoe cream. I also use Kelly's shoe cream.

Undercoating: Using a semi-stiff artist's paint brush, apply a light coat of neutral shoe cream over the entire vulture body and head. Make sure it is rubbed in and no blobs of cream show. The piece should look wet. When it dries, the bark will lighten up. Buff the vulture body and head with a long-haired shoe brush. I keep two shoe brushes, one for neutral shoe cream and one used for other colors (antiquing brush). The second brush adds an antique finish to my pieces since it has been used with so many colors.



Head: Use a red shoe cream on the head, except for the eyes and beak area. Once that dries, buff it with an “antiquing” shoe brush. Avoid brushing across the eyes and beak areas. See picture below to see how I hold it. Paint the beak with the Kelly's Light Brown shoe cream. It's almost an orange color. I also have a yellow that might look good against the bark but didn't try that.

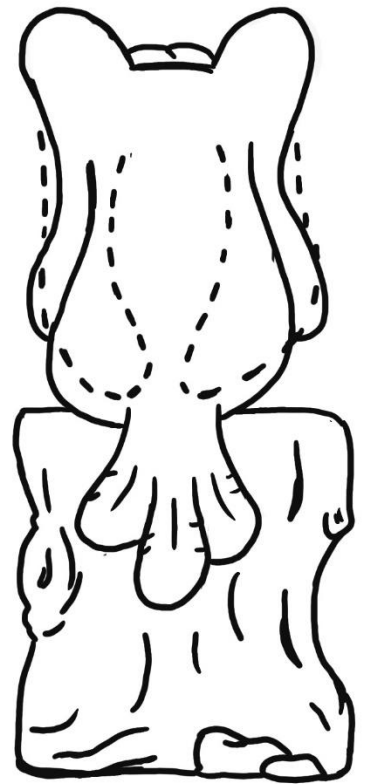


Body: Leave the neck feathers for last. They will be painted white so avoid that area. The body is finished with a black shoe cream (m&b). Black is a dangerous color for the bark. You want to go slow with it. Only use a dab at a time and rub it out across the piece. I like to be able to see the bark underneath, so I like it thin. After it dries, buff it with an antiquing shoe brush. Some of the wax is removed by buffing and shows the grain underneath. Add white to the neck feathers. But don't buff this. Put a little bit of white on the claws and a bit of gray on top of that to dampen the white.

Bark: Texture any bark and add a little color to blend it back to match the rest of the bark.



DONE!



GRAIN

