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Book Review: *Baby Bird Portraits by George Miksch Sutton: Watercolors in the Field Museum* by Johnsgard, P. A. (1998)

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Book Review by John Janovy, Jr.

Johnsgard, P. A. 1998. Baby Bird Portraits by George Miksch Sutton: Watercolors in the Field Museum. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK. 81p. \$19.95

George M. Sutton's baby bird portraits are his most captivating works. The subjects are isolated against a stark, raw-paper background, and they stare out at the viewer with eyes typically naive but alert. Sutton's artistic mastery of the foot is integral to the underlying biology in these pictures: sturdy and sure against the table for a ruffed grouse, curled inward and near useless for a gallinule on dry land, and almost casually clutching a twig, the hallux resting loosely, for a newly-fledged grosbeak. The match between these pictures and Paul Johnsgard's text is perfect. In his first two paragraphs, Johnsgard gives us a small taste of what it is like handling almost sacred materials (in this case the watercolors) in the hidden depths of a major museum's most secure rooms. And throughout the text, Johnsgard seems to respect the paintings as much as the birds themselves. Few other writers could bring such a breadth of literary and artistic experience to the task of making "Doc" Sutton's work available, in a very special way, to the general public.

The short essays accompanying each picture are a mixture of ornithology, personal encounter with the subjects, and commentary on Sutton's field notes, all supplemented with suggestions for additional reading. The result is a highly unusual bird book, possibly Johnsgard's best, and certainly a collector's item. Benjamin Williams, special collection librarian at the Field Museum, provides unusual background on the paintings' history, acquisition, and preservation. The reproductions are excellent, including those that were enlarged. Sutton's drawing and watercolor techniques are consequently revealed, but not necessarily to the extent they can be copied successfully. Both the paintings and the text need to be

savored repeatedly and completely. The rewards range from Sutton's penciled notes, his rare use of white opaque, and near erasures that reveal an artist's decisions (indigo bunting), to Johnsgard's habit of checking his home town libraries for favorite childhood books, his recollection of Sutton's story of cardinals feeding goldfish, and the record of Sutton's ashes being scattered over the Black Mesa. Even the dust jacket is beautiful. This book is a truly elegant production that should be given as a gift to everyone who loves birds.

About the Author: A faculty member of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 1966, Dr. John Janovy is the Varner Professor of Biological Sciences and the Director of the Ceder Point Biological Station. The author of 60 papers and 10 books, including Foundations of Parasitology for which he was co-author, John Janovy took all of Sutton's courses at the University of Oklahoma in the 1960's and had the pleasure of handling many of Sutton's watercolors.