An eye for nature

OPEN THE PAGES OF A BOOK ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM T. COOPER AND BIRDS FLY OUT, FRUITS BEG TO BE EATEN AND LANDSCAPES BECKON.

STORY PENNY OLSEN

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, world-renowned natural history documentary-maker, has called William T. Cooper "the best ornithological illustrator alive". But Bill, aged 80, is much more than that. Birds might be his forte, but he is also a fine landscape artist.

Bill grew up on the outskirts of Newcastle, NSW, where his father taught him bush skills and his mother encouraged his interest in natural history. Books and illustration. High school had little appeal and Bill dropped out after throwing his exercise books—their pages bordered with sketches—off the top of a cliff.

Taxidermist, window-dresser and tie salesman were just some of his incarnations before his landscapes and seascapes began to bring him sufficient income to allow him to try his hand at painting full-time. He achieved this with no formal art training, learning technique as he went along and taking tips from friends who painted, including William Dobell, who lived at nearby Lake Macquarie.

"There was no call for bird illustration then," Bill says. "His shift to focus on birds in his mid-thirties was entirely fortuitous, and, as his friends say, obvious: while they were enjoying a quiet beer he was off sketching some bird that he had spotted. By then, it was the late 1960s and there was a growing interest in illustrated natural-history books. Skinning and stuffing animals as a taxidermist had taught him about their structure, and his landscape painting provided settings for his portraits.

Bill's first major bird book was 'Parrots of the World', and it was also the first of many done in collaboration with ornithologist Joseph Forshaw. Initially, Joseph had asked Bill whether he'd like to paint the Australian and African species, and Bill still laughs when he remembers how he cockily suggested, "Why don't I do the lot?" The lot, it transpired, was several hundred species and their variations. Bill sought out as many parrots as he could in life, travelling in Australia and to New Guinea, then settled down to paint, borrowing reference specimens from museums where necessary.

Bill was never comfortable in the city and had earned enough from his landscapes to buy a half-share in a 50-hectare property at Bundawil, the Myall Lakes, with a half-mile of flatfrontage. But, in the late 1980s, tired of smoke from the neighbours' burning, Bill and his wife Wendy moved to Toopan on the Arbeath Tablelands in Queensland. They bought 40 hectares of rainforest on the edge of Wooroorooroon National Park. The little waterfall where they saw platypus was the deciding factor, along with the green ringtail possums, and the calls of golden cockatoos and choughillas.

At Bundawil, the Coopers had learned to identify all the plants, assisted by several books on the vegetation of the area. But at Topan everything was unfamiliar. There was a great abundance of species and little to guide them. And so began an exciting phase that culminated, after more than 17 years of research, in three lavishly illustrated books on Australian tropical rainforest fruits, covering close to 2500 species.

"The Coopers have travelled across Australia and the world in search of subjects for Bill's books and commissions. "Many people who have spent their lives on the land are wonderful observers of nature," Bill says. "Wherever I have been in the outback I have found the people friendly and generous, even though they may be in the grip of drought or some other adversity."

One favourite spot is Noonbah Station, in the Channel Country, where Bill has sketched Major Mitchell cockatoos eating melons, red kangaroos, dainty diamond doves and cobalt fairy-wrens, among others. Other regular destinations are Artemis and Dixie stations, at the base of Cape York. On a recent trip to Artemis, Bill researched a commission for a painting of the endangered golden-shouldered parrot, which nests in termite mounds. He had been many times but wanted to "seal it in and get a feel for them" before he tackled the work.

Typical of Bill's efforts, for his forthcoming book with Joseph on the pigeons and doves of Australia, the Coopers travelled as far as the Kinchega, in Western Australia. His gentle, respectful manner and deep understanding of nature mean that he notices details, and that wild animals allow him closer than many people think possible. At Mitchell Falls, on the Gibb River, Bill happened upon one of the species he was seeking: "I found a group of three or four white-winged rock-pigeons. ... After a while they became quite curious and crept closer and closer to where I was sitting. They finished up about four metres away and were quite relaxed, stretching and preening. I did drawings on the rim of my hat and later transcribed them to my sketchbook."

In the 1970s, while Bill was working on 'Parrots of the World', he painted 14 hours a day, seven days a week. He says it was never a chase and every now and then he would take a week off and "head bush" to relax and observe his subjects. But he'd also be ready to fly out of the studio at a moment's notice to observe an animal. "I always had my boots on," he says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Red-tailed black cockatoos; rainbow lorikeets on grass trees; artist William T. Cooper in his studio in Toopan, Qld. The lorikeets feature on the cover of An Eye for Nature, The Life and Art of William T. Cooper by Penny Olsen, published by the National Library of Australia and available now ($49.99).