

— MAKE IT YOURSELF —
HAND-CARVED BASSWOOD BIRDS



*Skill Development:
Hand Carving in the Round*

 Lee Valley

MAKE IT YOURSELF

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Skill Development: Hand Carving in the Round

Carving in the round is a subtractive process; you make something by removing material to create a three-dimensional representation of an object. The challenge is to carve to the correct proportions without removing too much material. Small birds are great subjects for trying your hand at carving in the round. To get you started, we provide two precut basswood blanks: a basic small songbird, such as a chickadee, and a basic cardinal/blue jay. You will learn the techniques for shaping and refining each bird's form with just three tools: a 2" Frost knife, a 1/4" 70° parting tool and a 3/8" #3 gouge. And since keeping your tools sharp is key to carving, the instructions will also explain how to do this with honing compound and a leather strop.

Skill Level: Beginner to intermediate. 14+

Time to Complete: 5 to 9 hours for each bird, plus 24 hours for the finish to dry and cure.



Note: This project presents one technique for hand carving a three-dimensional object. Since you will be using repetitive movements that might not be familiar to your hands, you will need to take frequent breaks along the way to rest your hands and eyes.

We have divided the project into two days; one day for carving the general shape of the bird, and one day for refining the details, but please take your time and work on this project at your own pace.

CONTENTS

- Precut basswood bird blanks (2)
- Frost slöjd knife, 2"
- Palm parting tool, 1/4" 70°
- Palm gouge, 3/8" #3
- Cut-resistant gloves
- Pencil
- Honing compound
- Leather strop
- Walrus Oil furniture finish
- Wet/dry sandpaper sheets (one each of 360x, 400x, 500x, 600x, 800x, 1000x)
- Scrap piece of wood
- Cotton rag
- Vinyl gloves
- High-friction guard tape



Note: Basswood is a light-colored, medium-density wood favored for carving. It is easy to work, with straight grain and a fine, even texture that takes detail well.

Other items you will need (not included):

- Safety goggles
- Dust mask
- Lamp
- A small towel/craft mat
- Apron

DAY 1: COVERS STEPS 1 TO 4.

TIME TO COMPLETE: 2 TO 4 HOURS FOR EACH BIRD.

1 SETTING UP YOUR WORKSPACE

- a. Select a clean, well-lit work area.

Tip: Carve where you are able to sit in a relaxed position. So that you can clearly see the details of the work that you are doing, have a lamp over your work or try to carve next to a window in direct sunlight.

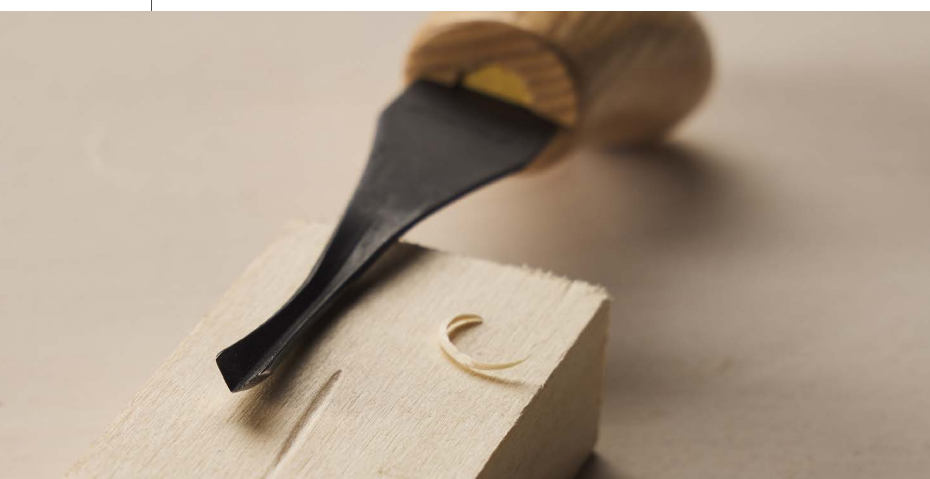
- b. Remove the contents of the kit from the box and set them aside, but nearby. Unfold the box and use it to protect your work surface and collect wood chips (or place it on the ground to collect the wood shavings).

Tip: You can also carve over a towel or a craft mat. This will not only protect your work surface, but it will also be more comfortable for your forearms and elbows to rest on as you carve.

2 GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE CARVING TOOLS

Note: For this project, it is important to keep your carving tools as razor sharp as possible. A sharp tool is safer, gives better results and makes your carving experience more enjoyable. You will need to strop the tools frequently, especially when you start feeling some resistance and notice a difference in how the tools behave. This should certainly happen before you have completed the first bird, so it's best to take a moment to familiarize yourself with how to do this. Stropping takes only a few minutes, and it's wise to get into the habit of doing so every 15 to 30 minutes of carving. The section entitled **Tool Care** explains how to do this with honing compound and the leather strop.

The **Frost slöjd knife** has a 2" long blade. It is a good beginner-friendly, general-purpose wood carving knife with a straight blade. This knife is useful for roughing out shapes, as well as for paring cuts, stop cuts, slicing cuts and general shaping.



The **palm parting tool** has two straight cutting edges that make a sharp 1/4" wide V-shaped groove set at 70°. This tool is effective for carving grooves, lines and channels. Use it for adding details and texture, as well as for outlining design elements to obtain the desired shape and depth.

The **#3 palm gouge** is another beneficial tool for small carving work. Gouges are identified by a number. The #3 refers to the size of the curvature, or sweep; the larger the number, the greater the curvature. The 3/8" curved edge of the gouge is positioned bevel down. This gouge is useful for removing excess wood as well as for carving grooves. This size scoops out a shallow groove with a slight curvature that is 3/8" wide, which is suitable for carving by hand. Use it after marking the outer perimeter with a parting tool, for example, to ease the curvature of the transition between sections.



3 MARKING THE BIRD BLANK

When carving, you will need to keep the grain direction in mind. It is easier to carve with the grain than against it. Any knots in the wood can significantly change how the wood grain behaves when you are carving. As such, knots tend to be more difficult to carve.

- a. Observe the direction of the grain on the bird blank. It should be running lengthwise from the beak to the tail.

***Tip:** When the grain is running in the same direction as the tail and the beak, those areas will be much stronger and less likely to split off than if they were located cross grain.*

- b. Use your pencil to mark the direction of the grain on the bird blank. These lines will help to remind you of the direction your knife should be going.



Tip: While you are carving and establishing the bird's proportions and features, you will find it helpful to have several images of birds nearby for reference.



- c. Mark the center lines for the top view and side view for reference.
- d. You can also sketch in the general location of the wings, head, eyes, beak and tail.

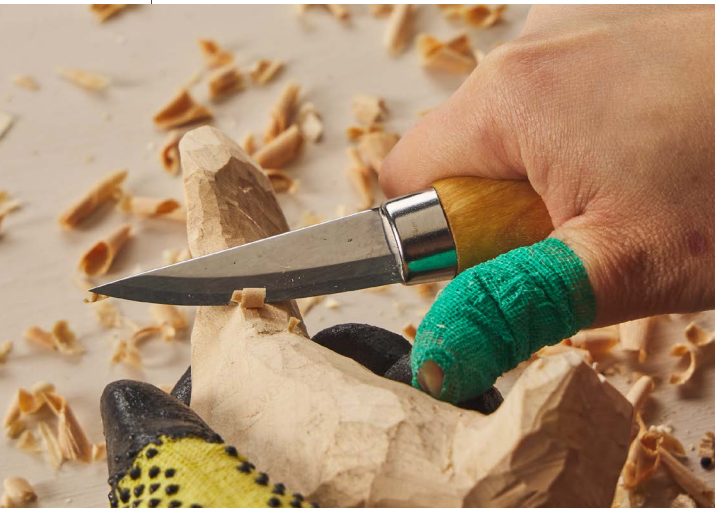
Note: These guidelines will help to maintain your carving's proportions and ensure that you are not carving too deeply next to them. You will generally carve away from these center lines, towards the outer edges.



4 SHAPING THE BIRD'S BODY

Note: Be sure to wear the **cut-resistant gloves** to protect your hands from cuts and help you to grip the basswood blank. Alternatively, you can wear one glove on the hand holding the carving and wrap high-friction guard tape on the fingers of your dominant hand.

- a. Hold the blank with your non-dominant hand.
- b. Starting with the sloyd knife, pare the sharp edges around the head, body and tail, using the lines on the top and bottom as a reference. Make sure to keep the bevel of the knife blade flat against the wood, and keep in mind where your hands and fingers are at all times.
- c. Remove thin shavings, taking care not to take too much wood off with a single cut. Thin and shallow cuts will help minimize the possibility of tear-out.



Tip: When carving, you will be taking thin shavings and short strokes with your knife. If you brace the thumb of your knife hand on the wood somewhere, you control the cut simply because there is only so far your hand can then travel. The action is similar to that used for peeling potatoes or apples with a paring knife.

- d. When you notice your knife digging into the fibers of the wood instead of making clean shavings, you are no longer carving with the grain; it's time to change the direction of your cut. It's also a good indication that it's time to stop the blade.

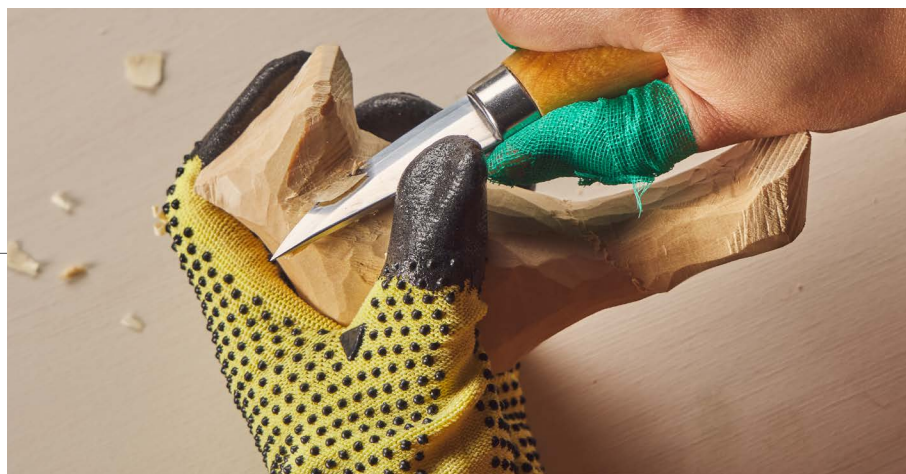
Tip: Be careful while carving at the mid-point where the grain changes direction. Make multiple thin cuts so that, if you do grab the grain and gash the wood, it won't be so bad that you can't carve or sand that spot smooth. Work this way at any spot where you feel your knife grab the grain. Every piece of wood is different and sometimes grain does not go in the direction you think it should. If you tear a piece accidentally, just go back over that spot from the opposite direction, taking only thin slices of wood. Try to use the tip of the knife blade as much as possible; you will be less likely to take too much off this way.

- e. Change the orientation of your carving as needed to access the different sections of the bird, and avoid the temptation to incorporate fine details.

Note: At this time, you want to round only the major outline of a bird and keep the tail portion thick. The goal is to carve the general shape so it roughly resembles a bird. Any details you wish to add to the wings, feathers and tail will be dealt with at a later carving step.

Tip: Keep part of the bottom of the bird flat to ensure the carving sits nicely on display once it is complete.

- f. From time to time, check your carving's proportions as well as the areas where the body merges with the head and tail.





- g. Pencil in any lines as required for continued reference.
- h. Keep paring the top, sides and bottom until you are satisfied with the overall shape of your bird.

END OF DAY 1

DAY 2: COVERS STEPS 5 AND 6.

TIME TO COMPLETE: 3 TO 5 HOURS FOR EACH BIRD.

5 REFINING THE BIRD'S SHAPE

- a. Use the gouge and parting tool to refine the shape as needed to create depth between the beak and the head, the head and the body, the body and the wings, as well as the tail and the body, to give the visual impression of a three-dimensional bird.
- b. Sketch in some wing feather details for reference. Mark the top row of feathers (called the covers), the secondary feathers, as well as the longer primary flight feathers that form the tip of the wings.



- c. Use the parting tool to create grooves between each feather.
- d. Pare the outer edges of the tail to thin them out, keeping the middle section of the tail about twice as thick as the outer edges.



- e. Draw evenly spaced pencil lines to indicate the location of the center and the outer tail feathers.
- f. Use the parting tool to define the outer edges of the feathers, and then use the gouge to pare shallow individual feathers, such that the center tail feather gives the illusion of overlapping the outer tail feathers.
- g. Give your bird a thorough once over to ensure you are happy with the overall shape and definitions. Make any adjustments as needed.



6 FINISHING

- a. You can leave the carving as is, showing the texture of the knife marks, or you can sand it smooth to suit your design, being careful not to sand so much that it obliterates any fine details.
- b. To personalize your carving, you can stain, paint or wood burn it before you apply the finish coat.

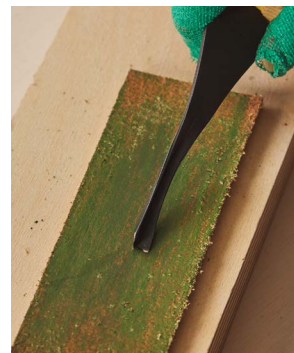


- c. Wipe the carving with a section of a clean, dry rag to remove any wood dust.
- d. Slip a pair of vinyl gloves on and apply a thin coat of the Walrus Oil furniture finish all over the carving.
- e. Allow the finish to dry for 15 minutes or so, and then buff the carving to a shine in the direction of the grain with the cotton rag. You may need to use a little bit of elbow grease to buff the surfaces out to obtain a semi-gloss sheen.
- f. Allow the finish to cure for 24 hours, or overnight.

TOOL CARE

The key to efficient and safe carving is having sharp carving tools at all times. Each time your carving tool passes through the wood grain, it is effectively dulling the edge. As such, you will need to strop your tools approximately every 15 to 30 minutes of straight carving to ensure you have the best overall carving experience. You will soon get a feel for how often you should do this.

- a. Rub a thin layer of the honing compound onto the rough (suede) side of the leather strop.
- b. Set the leather strop on the edge of a flat surface and hold it firmly down with your non-dominant hand.
- c. Grip the handle of the carving tool in your dominant hand and lay the bevel of the blade as flat as possible and at a consistent angle on the leather strop.
- d. For the **Frost knife**, drag the edge of the blade down and across the strop, going from base to tip and using a trailing stroke towards you, then away. (A leading stroke will cause the blade to slice the leather.)
 - i. For the **parting tool**, place one side of the V firmly on the strop, drag the blade toward yourself. Drag the other side of the V on the strop in the same manner.
 - ii. For the **#3 gouge**, drag the U-shape along the strop, gradually rocking it from one side to the other to ensure you are stropping the complete bevel.
- e. Give each bevel an equal number of passes against the strop (10 to 20 passes).
- f. Repeat the honing process on the other (smooth) side of the leather to polish the edge further.



Note: When you notice that stropping no longer has an effect on the blade's edge, it will be time to sharpen your tools with the wet/dry sandpaper and the scrap piece of wood, and then follow up with stropping with the honing compound and leather strop, as described above. For a tutorial on using sandpaper as sharpening media, please watch our **Film & Paper** video on our **Sharp-Net** page on our website.

NOW WHAT?

The tools and supplies in this kit are reusable. The more you make, the more the tools will be of continued service. We hope that you will be inspired to continue developing your carving skills and try your hand at carving other objects.

Visit our website to discover our broad selection of **wood carving tools** to accommodate a variety of carving techniques, as well as a range of budgets. We also carry **basswood blocks**; however, you can make your own from pruned branches or trees that were cut down for safety reasons. Maple, cherry, walnut, pine, birch and poplar are good options.



CREATED BY LEE VALLEY. MADE BY ME.

We would love to hear about your experience and see your completed bird carvings.

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MK111 Hand-Carved Basswood Birds

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