

A Bird in the Hand

Woodcarver offers comfort to those in need

By Kathleen Ryan

Frank Foust would like to bring peace, joy, comfort, and the strength of his faith to the whole world. He uses his woodworking skills to get the job done, one little bird at a time. Since 1982, Frank has carved more than 1,100 wooden birds. "I call them comfort birds because they're so smooth and soft, and they fit just right in your hand so that it's comforting just to hold them and rub them," Frank explained.

According to the woodworker, these small birds have a two-fold mission: to raise money for those in need and to provide enjoyment. To that end, the birds have flown all across America and even to Russia and Korea. Comfort birds are often given to those in need, such as the ill, blind, homeless, or elderly, or people in disaster areas such as the Hurricane Katrina flood zone, as a token of support and an act of kindness. When gently rubbed, the birds can bring comfort to those struggling with both physical and emotional pain. For many, the small birds serve as tangible reminders that someone loves and cares about them.

Frank and his wife, Millie, who are members of the White Hall Baptist Church near Danville, Pa., have dozens of stories of the ways their birds have given hope and comfort. In 2001, Millie gave a comfort bird to one of her doctors. On a recent visit she asked if he still had the bird. He confirmed that he did. "Then he went on to tell me that his wife died not long ago of cancer. He said that before she died she would rub the bird all day long for comfort. Now it sits on his television set as a reminder," said Millie.

Frank started woodworking as a hobby in 1980. After taking a couple of classes at a nearby college, he began creating Santa figures and beautifully detailed birds of all kinds. After suffering an illness, however, Frank could no longer create detailed carvings. He found another outlet for his creativity. "A member of the carving club was making very small painted birds for Christmas tree ornaments. The birds were simple and easy to do. I saw them and got the idea for the comfort birds," said Frank.



At first Frank and his wife gave the birds away as they visited hospitals and nursing homes. Now Frank also sells them for others to give away and to raise money for missionary work and disaster relief. After the earthquake in Haiti, he raised more than \$1,000 from the sale of comfort birds for a Haitian earthquake relief fund. "I gave a comfort bird to a former childhood neighbor who was in the hospital. After her death, her sister found the bird among her things sent home from the hospital. The sister was so overwhelmed by it that she sent me a \$100 check for my project," Frank said.

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It takes Frank about two hours to transform a block of wood into a sanded and varnished bird, and no two birds turn out exactly alike. So far, he has made birds from twenty-seven types of hardwood, including cherry, mahogany, walnut, sumac, red cedar, maple, and eucalyptus. "I like to use wood with unique grain," Frank said. "Those make the best-looking birds."

Frank plans to make the little birds as long as he's able, and he has plenty of birds ready to sell to those who would like to share a token of love and concern. For carvers who prefer to make their own comfort birds, Frank shares his pattern and process in the following how-to segment.

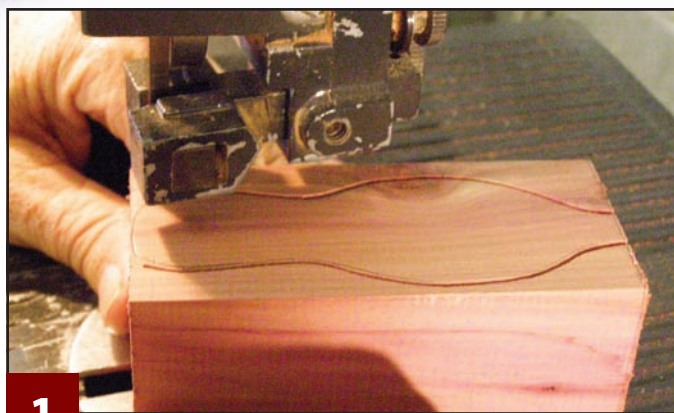
Making a Comfort Bird



Smooth lines and a polished finish make these little birds a joy to hold

By Frank Foust

Sized to fit in your palm and sanded silky smooth, these birds make a perfect gift or fund-raising project. Create the birds from any hardwood—I choose mine for the beauty of the grain. I hope you'll make several birds and share them with anyone who needs a bit of comfort.



1

Cut away the excess wood. Create templates by transferring the patterns to thin cardboard and cutting around the outline of the patterns. Trace the templates onto the blank and cut the top view of the bird with a band saw. Tape the waste in place, rotate the blank 90°, and cut the side view.

BIRD: CARVING THE PROJECT



2

Rough out the bird. Remove the sharp edges and rough shape the bird with a sanding drum equipped with 60-grit sandpaper. I use a 1½" (38mm)-diameter drum attached to a radial arm saw, but you can use a rotary-power carver. Shape the neck with a 1" (25mm)-diameter cushioned sanding drum.



3

Finish shaping the bird. Use a carving knife to shape the beak. Use a rotary-power carver and your bit of choice to add any desired details and to remove any remaining ridges. Make sure the bird is smooth and flowing with no hard lines or sharp angles.

BIRD: FINISHING THE PROJECT



4

Sand the bird. Sand the bird by hand with 150-grit sandpaper. Then, buff the bird with synthetic steel wool until the carving is perfectly smooth. Don't rush the process. Creating a smooth surface is a vital step.



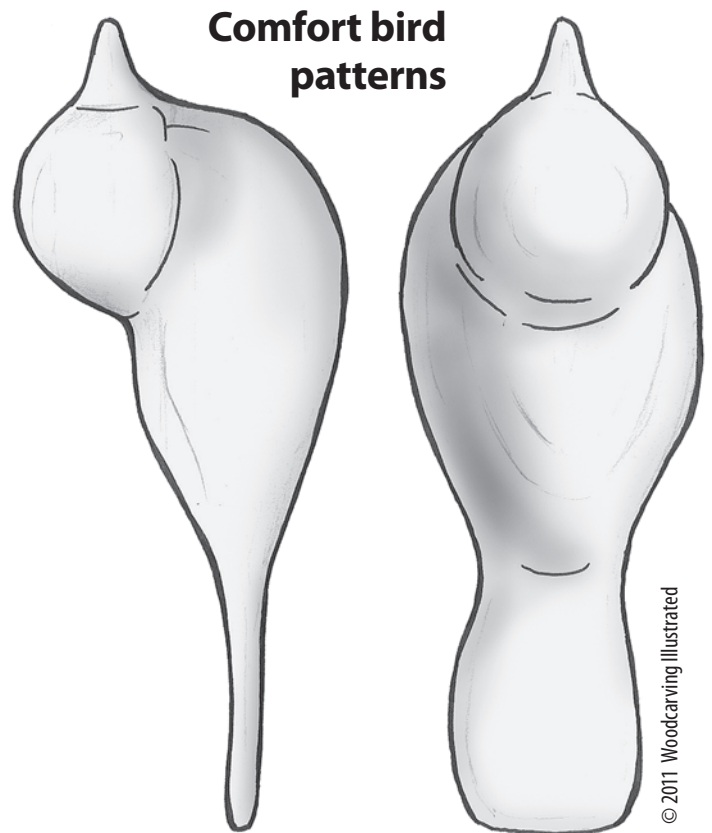
5

Apply polyurethane. Insert a darning needle into the bottom of the bird to give you something to hold. Then, apply a light coat of polyurethane to the carving and allow the finish to dry thoroughly. Buff the carving with synthetic steel wool, apply another coat of finish, and let the finish dry thoroughly.



6

Finish the bird. Rub the second coat of polyurethane with powdered pumice mixed with oil. Remove the oil and pumice, and then apply paste wax. Use a soft cloth to buff the wax to a high gloss.



Comfort bird patterns

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materials & tools

MATERIALS:

- Hardwood: 2" x 2" x 4¼" (51mm x 51mm x 108mm)
- Tape
- Sandpaper: 150-grit
- Scouring pad, such as Scotch-Brite
- Polyurethane: clear
- Pumice stone: 4F
- All-purpose household oil
- Paste wax

TOOLS:

- Radial arm saw (optional)
- Band saw
- Knife
- Drum sander: 1½" (38mm)-diameter 60-grit
- Cushioned sanding drum: 1" (25mm)-diameter
- Rotary-power carver with small diamond bit
- Darning needle
- Small paintbrush
- Soft cloths

The author used these products for the project. Substitute your choice of brands, tools, and materials as desired.



An experienced woodworker, Frank Foust has built projects ranging from children's furniture to his own home. As a volunteer, he's helped repair and rebuild churches in the United States and Central America. Frank sells handcarved comfort birds for \$10 each.

Please contact him via e-mail for orders or information at mrcarver@windstream.net.