West Wisconsin Eau Claire & Chippewa Falls Wood Carvers Guild

"Bringing Wood to Life" Newsletter

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From Block to Bird: Advanced Study in Realism with Dave Constantine

When experienced carvers step into a classroom, it's not because they need the basics—it's because they're chasing refinement. That was exactly the case when Des Sikorski-Nelson and Jean Henning enrolled in a recent carving course with master wildlife artist Dave Constantine of Mondovi, Wisconsin.

Dave Constantine has built a strong reputation in the regional carving community for his ability to teach realistic wildlife sculpture with a disciplined, methodical approach. Working from his studio-home in Mondovi, he offers small, focused classes that emphasize anatomy, proportion, feather layering, and surface realism. His work reflects a deep study of wildlife—particularly upland birds—and his teaching style mirrors that same attention to detail. Students don't just carve forms; they learn to understand the structure beneath the surface.

The pheasant class attended by Des and Jean consisted of nine two-hour sessions with a limited group of eight students. This small class size allowed for significant one-on-one instruction, where Dave could guide each participant through the subtle but critical steps that separate a good carving from a truly lifelike one.

The subject—the ring-neck pheasant—was chosen for good reason. It is one of the most recognizable and visually complex game birds in North America, with layered feather patterns, bold coloration, and a distinctive silhouette. Capturing that convincingly in wood requires not only technical skill but also artistic judgment.

Both Des and Jean approached the project with the benefit of their prior experience, but even so, the process demanded patience and persistence. Much of the carving was completed outside of class time, as they refined feather groups, adjusted proportions, and



A Fine Couple of Ring-Necks by Des and Jean



Dave Constantine teaches hyper-realistic Carving and Painting

worked toward a natural stance. Dave's instruction provided the framework, but the execution required hours of independent effort.

What makes this project particularly

compelling is the individuality of the final pieces. Dave encouraged each student to exercise creative license in pose, base design, and finishing. The result is two very different interpretations of the same subject.

Des's pheasant is set in a late autumn environment, standing alert among grasses and ground cover. The carving captures a sense of movement and awareness—the bird appears ready to step forward at any moment. The coloration is rich and layered, with careful attention paid to the transition between feather groups and the subtle iridescence that gives pheasants their characteristic depth.

Jean's piece presents a striking contrast, placing the bird in a winter setting. The snow-covered base introduces both visual and technical challenges, requiring balance in color and texture so the bird remains the focal point. The pheasant itself is solid and grounded, with a calm, composed posture that reflects a different moment in the life of the same species. The interplay between the muted winter tones and the bird's natural coloration creates a compelling visual tension.

Together, these carvings demonstrate not only the versatility of the subject but also the artistic voices of the carvers. They are excellent examples of what can be achieved when strong foundational skills are combined with high-level instruction.

This class is not the end of the journey. Both Des and Jean will continue their work with Dave, moving on to a one-third scale fox as their next project. That progression—from bird to mammal—will introduce new challenges in anatomy, fur texture, and expression, further expanding their skill set.

For our club, this is an encouraging reminder that growth in carving never really stops. Even our most accomplished members continue to seek out opportunities to learn, refine, and push their work forward. And when they do, they bring that knowledge back to share with the rest of us.



Sidebar: Study with Dave Constantine

Dave Constantine, based in Mondovi, Wisconsin, offers small-group instruction focused on realistic wildlife carving. His classes are intentionally limited in size, allowing for hands-on guidance and individualized attention throughout each project.

Students work through multi-session courses that combine in-class instruction with independent work at home. Projects emphasize accurate anatomy, detailed texturing, and realistic painting techniques, while still allowing room for personal interpretation in pose and presentation.

Classes are held at his studio-home in Mondovi, a small western Wisconsin community along the Buffalo River known for its strong ties to craftsmanship and rural artistry.

Dave is currently accepting students for upcoming sessions. His next project series includes a one-third scale fox, continuing his focus on lifelike wildlife subjects.

For more information or to inquire about classes, contact Dave directly at **715-590-3181**.





Spoons, Smiles, and Sharp Tools

Karen Henderson Leads Popular Spoon Carving Class

The May 2nd spoon carving class proved to be one of the most enjoyable and productive carving events of the season. Twelve members gathered to learn the art of carving functional kitchen utensils under the guidance of accomplished carver Karen Henderson. By the end of the session, students had completed both a butter knife and a traditional wooden spoon while gaining valuable knowledge about green wood carving techniques, tool selection, and finishing methods.

Karen is well known in carving circles for her versatility. In addition to spoon carving, she is experienced in caricature carving and bark carving, and she has contributed projects to the popular carving book *12 Spoons, 2 Bowls, and a Knife: 15 Step-by-Step Handcarved Projects for the Kitchen*. The publication notes that Karen began carving in 1998 and especially enjoys sharing her knowledge with fellow carvers through teaching and demonstrations.

Students quickly discovered that spoon carving is quite different from traditional dry wood carving. Freshly cut “green” wood was used throughout the class. When asked why the wood had been frozen before class, Allyson Deering explained, “It is green wood and we want to carve it wet.” Karen had prepared numerous spoon blanks in advance, already band-sawed and ready for shaping.

Sarah Brower was impressed by the wide assortment of carving woods Karen brought to the class. “She has a wonderful array of woods to carve that have been frozen,” Sarah noted, mentioning unusual species such as buckthorn, lilac, and yew. Each wood offered different grain patterns, carving characteristics, and colors, giving students a chance to experiment with materials they may never have tried before.

The pace of the class was energetic and productive. Several participants completed two spoons during the session. Jan Jensen successfully finished both projects and remarked how satisfying it was to see a functional utensil emerge from a simple wood blank.

Jackie Rizzo praised both the instruction and the practical information shared during the event. “It is a



Class at the Paint Shack



Concentrating on the work



Some Finshed Items



Attention to Detail

good class and I highly recommend it," she said afterward. Jackie also appreciated the discussion on food-safe finishes, where students learned about oils commonly used on wooden utensils, including linseed oil and safflower oil.

An added bonus for attendees was the presence of tool supplier Bob Lawrence, who brought a large selection of carving tools especially suited for spoon carving. Hook knives, carving knives, and sharpening supplies were available, and many students took advantage of the opportunity to purchase tools tailored specifically to the craft. Karen also had Abranet sanding media available, which many found ideal for smoothing curved spoon surfaces.

Throughout the day, the classroom buzzed with conversation, shavings, and the satisfying rhythm of knives working through green wood. By the end of the class, tables were filled with beautifully shaped spoons and butter knives — each one unique and reflecting the personality of its maker.

Most importantly, the class reminded everyone that woodcarving is not only about creating objects, but also about sharing techniques, stories, and fellowship. Thanks to Karen Henderson's patient instruction and the enthusiasm of the participants, the spoon carving class was a memorable success.

Karve-In 10 at Westby

Karve-In 10: A Tradition of Learning, Friendship, and Community

For nearly a decade, members of the West Wisconsin Woodcarvers Guild have made the annual pilgrimage to Westby, Wisconsin, for one of the Midwest's most enjoyable carving gatherings—**Karve-In 10**. What began under the leadership of longtime organizer **John Sutton** continues today through the efforts of **Steve Michaels** and the Westby school system, which provides an outstanding venue and support for the event.

This year's gathering once again demonstrated why Karve-In 10 has become such an important stop on our carving calendar. Held in the spacious Westby High School gymnasium, the event brought together carvers from across Wisconsin and neighboring states for a weekend of carving, fellowship, tool vendors, demonstrations, and the sharing of ideas.

Our club maintained an information and recruiting table throughout the event. Representing the guild were **John Allen**, **Sarah Brower**, and **Virginia Meyer**, who greeted visitors, answered questions about our club, and shared information about upcoming activities.



Our Table at Westby's Karve-In 10



Collage of some Good Carvers

Their efforts helped showcase the many opportunities available through the West Wisconsin Woodcarvers Guild.

The value of Karve-In 10 extends far beyond simply spending a day carving. Events like this serve as an important bridge to the wider carving community. They allow us to meet new carvers, discover talented instructors, learn about emerging carving techniques, and stay informed about events taking place throughout the region. Many of the instructors and demonstrators who have taught classes for our club were first encountered at gatherings just like this one.

Recruitment is another major benefit. Throughout the day, numerous visitors stopped at our table to learn about the guild. Some were experienced carvers looking for a local club, while others were beginners seeking guidance and encouragement. Personal conversations at events like Karve-In 10 often lead to new memberships and lasting friendships.

The event also provides inspiration. Walking through the room, one could see everything from caricatures and wildlife carvings to relief work, woodburning, chip carving, and decorative projects. Every table offered something new to learn, reminding us that woodcarving is a lifelong journey of creativity and craftsmanship.

For our guild, Karve-In 10 serves another important purpose. It has become a model for our own annual fall event. Observing how the organizers welcome attendees, arrange displays, manage vendors, and encourage participation gives us ideas we can adapt and improve upon for our own gathering. The success of Karve-In 10 demonstrates how a well-organized



carving event can strengthen both a club and the larger carving community.

As we look ahead to future events, we extend our thanks to Steve Michaels, the Westby school district, and all the volunteers who make Karve-In 10 possible. Their dedication has created a tradition that continues to enrich carvers year after year.

The West Wisconsin Woodcarvers Guild looks forward to returning again next year, renewing old friendships, making new connections, and celebrating the art of woodcarving with fellow enthusiasts from across the region.

Photos: Guild representatives John Allen, Sarah Brower, and Virginia Meyer staffing the West Wisconsin Woodcarvers Guild information table at Karve-In 10 in Westby, Wisconsin. The event remains one of the region's premier opportunities for networking, learning, recruiting, and promoting the art of woodcarving.

2026 Wisconsin River Woodcarvers Show



WWWCG Takes Home Ribbons at Wisconsin River Woodcarvers Show



West Wisconsin Woodcarvers Guild members made their presence known at the 22nd Annual Wisconsin River Woodcarvers Show and Sale in Stevens Point September 18–20. The annual event, held at the Holiday Inn Convention Center, brought together woodcarvers from throughout the region for a weekend of carving, competition, demonstrations, fellowship and shopping.

WWWCG members not only filled two tables with examples of their work and information about our guild, but several members also entered carvings in the competition. The tables were staffed throughout the weekend, giving visitors an opportunity to talk with our members, see the variety of carving being done by our group, and learn more about woodcarving.

And the ribbons showed that WWWCG members came prepared!

Ribbons for WWWCG Carvers

Carl McKeith entered a carved chain in the Intermediate competition and came away with a **First Place ribbon**. Carved

chains are an excellent example of the combination of planning, patience and precise knife work that goes into advanced carving. A chain may look simple when finished, but each link has to be carefully carved and separated without damaging the surrounding wood.



John Allen also entered his work in the **Intermediate class** rather than Novice. John has already earned more than six blue ribbons in the Novice category, so it was time to move up and test his work against more experienced competition.

Jan Jenson entered her chip carving in the **Advanced category** and was rewarded with blue ribbons for her work. Her six-sided box, pictured here, is a particularly good example of the precision involved in chip carving. The repeating geometric patterns and clean cuts give the box a distinctive appearance while demonstrating the control required to make chip carving look effortless.



Virginia Meyer entered a carved spoon in the Novice competition and earned **Second Place**. The spoon demonstrates another side of woodcarving—the ability to turn a practical object into something that is also pleasing to look at and enjoyable to use.

These awards are especially gratifying because they represent the work our members have been doing throughout the year. They also demonstrate the range of interests within WWWCG, from chip carving and useful wooden objects to more intricate carving projects.

More Than a Competition

While the ribbons were certainly a highlight, the Stevens Point weekend was about more than competition.

Our members spent considerable time at the guild tables talking with other carvers and visitors. Having two tables gave us room to display a variety of projects and show that woodcarving encompasses much more than one particular style.



For people who stopped to look, the tables provided an opportunity to see examples of different carving disciplines, talk with experienced carvers and find out what it takes to get started. That kind of personal contact is an important part of what WWWCG is trying to accomplish as we introduce more people to the hobby.

The Stevens Point show also provided an opportunity to see what other carving clubs and individual carvers are

doing. Shows like this give our members ideas, inspiration and an opportunity to visit with friends who share the same interest.

And there was plenty to see beyond the WWWCG tables.



SIDEBAR: Caricature Carving Comes to Stevens Point

The CCA: Where Woodcarving Meets Personality

One of the special attractions at this year's Stevens Point show was the **National Caricature Carving Competition of the Caricature Carvers of America (CCA)**. The competition was held **September 18–20** in conjunction with the Wisconsin River Woodcarvers Show and Sale.

So, what exactly is *caricature carving*?

Rather than trying to make a figure look exactly like a real person, a caricature carver looks for the **character** in the subject and deliberately exaggerates it. A large nose, oversized ears, a prominent chin, a distinctive hat or an unusual posture can become the feature that gives a carving its personality. The goal is not photographic accuracy—it is to create a recognizable and often humorous character.

Caricatures can range from simple, whimsical figures carved from a small block of basswood to highly detailed scenes containing several characters, animals and props. They can be funny, serious, imaginative or even a little strange. **That's part of the fun.**

The CCA competition in Stevens Point demonstrated just how broad the field has become. The 2026 competition included **17 categories**, ranging from single human figures and animals to Santas, miniatures, reliefs, ornaments, bottle stoppers and group carvings. There was even an **“Ugly Cowboy”** category and a Wisconsin-themed **“Cheeseheads & Characters”** category.

The competition emphasized four areas in judging: **originality and creativity, carving execution, degree of difficulty, and final presentation.**

Interested in Trying Caricature?

Several WWWCG members already carve caricatures, and the Stevens Point competition was a great opportunity to see what is being done at a very high level. But you don't have to start by trying to carve a complicated scene.



A small piece of basswood and a carving knife are enough to get started. Caricature carving is particularly well suited to learning the basic cuts because the style encourages the carver to **remove wood boldly rather than worrying about making every surface perfectly smooth or realistic**.



Stenman Low Relief Workshop: Four Days of Carving, Learning and Creating

For more than 30 years, the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild has been fortunate to welcome **Fred and Elaine Stenman** to our area to teach their distinctive approach to low relief carving. That tradition continued August 27–30, when nine WWWCG members spent four full days learning from the Stenmans at the Chippewa Falls Senior Center.

The Stenmans' classes are popular for good reason. Their goal is not simply to demonstrate a technique and send students home with something half-finished. **The objective is to have each student complete a finished project by the end of the class.** That makes for four busy —but very satisfying—days.

A Different Kind of Relief Carving

Fred and Elaine have developed their own distinctive style of low relief carving over more than four decades. Their finished pieces combine **shallow relief carving, woodburning and painting** to create scenes with considerable depth and detail. Their subjects often include wildlife, cabins, barns, water scenes and other rural settings.



The process begins with the wood itself. Students work with basswood boards, often leaving the natural bark around the edge to create a frame. The main subjects are carved in shallow relief, while much of the background detail is drawn and then woodburned. Thin acrylic paints and stains are used to add color and depth.

That combination produces a finished piece that looks considerably more detailed than might be expected from a relatively shallow carving.

The Stenmans Bring More Than Instruction

One of the advantages of having Fred and Elaine teach at the Guild is that students don't have to arrive with a complete collection of specialized equipment.

The Stenmans provide the tools needed for the class and bring wood for students to purchase. They also have patterns and are willing to help students with **artistic decisions and patterns** as a project develops. That artistic guidance is an important part of their teaching.

Fred and Elaine work as a team. Elaine's background and experience as a carver are central to the carving process, while Fred is well known for his artistic ability and for developing the drawn and woodburned details that complete their designs. Their website describes how this division of talents developed as they created their own style.

That combination of carving instruction and artistic guidance gives students something more than a pattern to follow. They learn how to look at a piece of wood and think about how the grain, knots and shape of the board can become part of the finished scene.

Four Days to a Finished Project

Nine students participated in this year's four-day workshop. From the first cuts to the final details, the class provided plenty of hands-on work.

Low relief carving requires careful control. Because the carving is relatively shallow, the carver has to create the illusion of depth without removing large amounts of wood. Backgrounds, foregrounds and individual elements must work together, and small changes in depth can make a significant difference in the finished appearance.

The woodburning and painting add another dimension. Woodburned lines help define the details, while the paint is used to develop shading and depth rather than simply covering the wood with solid color. That combination is a signature feature of the Stenmans' approach.

And, of course, four days of carving together provides something that can't be learned from a book or video: **the opportunity to ask a question, try a technique, get immediate feedback and then try it again.**

A WWWCG Tradition

The Guild's relationship with Fred and Elaine Stenman goes back to the **mid-1990s**. For more than three decades, they have returned to work with our members and share their knowledge.

That longevity says something about the value of these workshops. Generations of Guild members have had the opportunity to learn the Stenman method, and some have returned to take additional classes and tackle more ambitious projects.

For those who attended this year's workshop, August 27–30 was another chapter in that long-running tradition.

Nine carvers came to the Chippewa Falls Senior Center with four days ahead of them. They left with new skills, new ideas and—most importantly—a completed carving they could take home and call their own.