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## Children's Books and Stamps: Studies in Design

### Charles "Chuck" Lewis Ripper

By Phyllis Van Orden

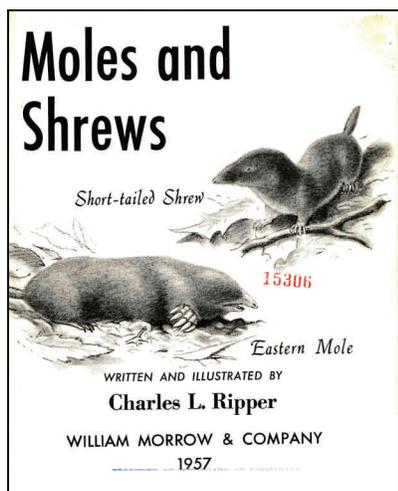
Charles Ripper, or "Chuck," as he is often cited in the professional literature, acclaimed as one of the leading nature and wildlife artists in the country, was born on 28 October 1929 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He reflects his life's passion, devoted to conservation and painting, by inscribing many of his books with the words: "That path of nature declared most interesting, is but the path most patiently observed."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he notes that, "if any of my books or drawings . . . open the eyes of just one more person to the world of nature, my efforts have not been wasted."<sup>2</sup>

Designs on postage stamps provide an interesting way for Ripper to communicate his love of nature to a wider audience. He believes that "stamps are something that everyone sees, though they don't think of them as paintings or know who created them."<sup>3</sup> He notes that the United States Postal Service has a policy for its postage stamps, that the artwork can't be more than five times the size of the stamp. "They found over the years if you make the painting too large and then reduce it down to

postage size, it melts together like yesterday's spaghetti."<sup>4</sup>

Chuck Ripper's dual interest in art and nature began as a child. He began taking classes at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh on Saturdays, which continued throughout his high school years. After graduation he enrolled in the Institute's two-year commercial art program. Before Ripper graduated from the Art Institute, one of his drawings was published in *Nature Magazine*, which led to his first commission. During his last week of school, he received a letter from an editor at William Morrow in New York saying he had a manuscript for a children's book and asked Ripper to send some samples of his artwork. Addison Webb, the author of the children's book, *Song of the Seasons*, had seen his drawing in *Nature Magazine*. Ripper received the commission and did the 61 drawings for the book from June to October; he had illustrated his first children's book before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

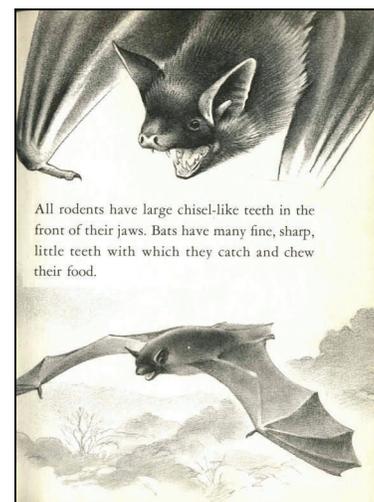
After completing a commission to do a pen-and-ink drawing for an annual report at Pitts-



**Title-page from Chuck Ripper's *Moles and Shrews*, a children's book published in 1957 by Morrow.**



**Chuck Ripper as pictured in *The Postal Service Guide to U. S. Stamps*, 28th Edition (2001), page 289.**



**Illustration in *Bats* (page 9), written and illustrated by Chuck Ripper and published in 1954 by Morrow.**

burgh's Carnegie Museum, he was offered a job there as a staff illustrator. In 1953, when he returned from service in the Korean War, where he worked as a topographic draftsman for the Army Corps of Engineers, he took his portfolio to several publishers in New York. An editor at Morrow Junior Books admired his drawings of bats and asked if he would like to do a children's book about them. He did. *Bats* was the first of eleven children's books by Ripper published by Morrow. They are printed in black-and-white, which is typical of that era. Although his first love remained painting, Ripper's written work expertly supplemented his drawings and paintings.

Ripper also served as art director for Standard Printing & Publishing Company in Huntington, West Virginia. This experience provided a solid base for his understanding of the processes involved in printing postage stamps.

When Standard went bankrupt, he next turned to full-time, free-lance wildlife illustration. He had already developed a reputation for being a fine craftsman; careful with details; seeking accuracy; and researching his subject through books, photographs, live specimens, and the study of skins, which is the technique he used for his hummingbird illustrations (Scott 2642-2646). As he observes,

Study skins are a great resource. . . . However, their color does tend to fade over time, so they don't give you the whole story. But you can count the feathers and make sure you've got all your anatomical details correct. For instance,

did you know that all songbirds have 12 feathers in their tails, but hummingbirds have only 10? That's one of the little sand traps that can bury you as you go along if you're not careful.<sup>5</sup>

Ripper's freelance work has appeared in numerous periodicals, including *National Geographic*; on the covers of many outdoor magazines; in nature identification books, such as the Peterson Field Guides; and his images are on every National Wildlife Federation conservation stamp sheet issued since 1959.

His work appeals to both naturalists and stamp collectors. Roger Tory Peterson, editor of the Peterson Field Guide series, wrote

[I was] well aware of the extremely demanding work that has gone into this . . . guide. . . . [the] work of two veteran naturalists, [including Chuck] Ripper, a professional biological illustrator, well known for his wildlife and botanical paintings.<sup>6</sup>

Stamp collectors have also expressed their appreciation of his work through their votes in *Linn's* annual contest (see pages 19-20 for illustrations). Receiving approval were:

- American Wildlife (Scott 2286-2335) in 1987 as "best design" and "favorite stamps";
- Coral Reefs (Scott 1827-1830) in 1980 shared both "most popular" and "best design" with other stamps;
- Preservation of Wildlife (Scott 1921-1924) in 1981 shared "most popular" and "best design" with others;
- Bobcat (Scott 2482) in 1990 as "best design of definitives."

One suspects that Ripper, an avid fly fisherman, was disappointed in the 1991 poll of

"least necessary" for his Fishing Flies (Scott 2545-2548). The subject was one he had initiated in a conversation in 1986 with Senior Assistant Postmaster General Mitchell H. Gordon, who shared Ripper's hobby. They met at the first-day ceremony



United States Sc2642-2646



**Sc2205-2209**



**Sc2445-2549**

for the Fish booklet stamps (Scott 2205-2209) designed by Ripper. Ripper followed up this discussion with a formal proposal, which included some supplementary information: a newspaper article about the growing popularity of fly fishing, a Royal Coachman fly he had designed, and two sets of color sketches for a se-tenant block of four stamps that differed only in the color of the background. The Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) preferred the second, a sepia view of the scenery where each of the flies would be used. The sepia background avoided the cold effect that black and white would create and the clash between background and the colors of the flies if he had used full-color backgrounds. He also created the picture used on the booklet cover.

Ripper's Louisiana World Exposition stamp of 1984 (Scott 2086), takes one to bayou country with myriad birds and reptiles on land or in the air, while underwater one sees two gold shiners (minnows), a chain pickerel, and a Louisiana crayfish. Although the fair went bankrupt, the USPS sold about \$26 mil-

lion worth of the stamp.

The attention to detail found in Ripper's drawings for the Peterson Guide book exemplifies the standards one expects of him. This accuracy is important for identification whether in a book

or on a stamp. For the Wildlife series the Postal Service checked the anatomical accuracy and proper locale of his pencil sketches with expert sources, such as the Smithsonian and *National Geographic* magazines. Later these same experts checked his final work for color. One anticipates, based on Ripper's large collection of photographs and his care for all details, that the experts had an easy job. One example of how he approaches his assignment is seen in the two bobcat stamps (2482, \$2.00 and 2332 from the American Wildlife pane). In addition to consulting stacks of photographs and drawings, Ripper notes that

they have a state game farm at French Creek, West Virginia, about an hour and a half, two hours from where we live, where they take orphaned animals that people have taken home and then found they couldn't really care for them, and they have bobcats there. We stop every time we're driving by and I look and sketch and take pictures.<sup>6</sup>

No wonder that viewing his drawings is such a satisfying experience both for their color, their accuracy,



**Louisiana World Exposition (Sc2086)**



**Best Design Among Definitions, 1990 (Sc2482)**



**Another Bobcat (Sc2332)**



**American Wildlife series (Scott 2286-2335) : “Best Design” and “Favorite Stamps” (1987)**

and the artist’s respect for his subjects. If you enjoy nature and nature paintings, you

are sure to find a few of your favorites among the many stamps of Charles “Chuck” Ripper.



**Sc1827-1830: “Most Popular” and “Best Design” in Linn’s 1980 annual contest**

## Other U.S. Stamps

Designed

by Chuck Ripper



**Kitten & Puppy for  
Christmas, 1982  
(Sc2025)**



**Honeybee (coil) &  
Pheasant (booklet)  
(Sc2281 & 2283)**



**Owl & Grosbeak (booklet  
stamps, Sc2284-2285)**

## Endnotes

1. *Something About the Author*, Volume 3 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1972), page 175.
2. Ibid.
3. United States Postal Service, *The Postal Service Guide to U.S. Stamps*. 28<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: HarperResource, 2001), page 290.
4. Susan Hahn, "The Wildlife Artist," in *Huntington Quarterly*, Issue 48 (Summer 2003), at [http://www.huntingtonquarterly.com/issue48/chuck\\_ripper.html](http://www.huntingtonquarterly.com/issue48/chuck_ripper.html), accessed on 10 March 2006.
5. George Amick, *Linn's U. S. Stamp Yearbook, 1992* (Sidney, Ohio: Linn's Stamp News, 1993), pages 108-09.
6. Theodore F. Niehaus, *A Field Guide to Pacific States Wildflowers: Washington, Oregon, California and Adjacent Areas*. The Peterson Field Guide Series (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), Editor's Note, page 123.
7. George Amick, *Linn's U. S. Stamp Yearbook, 1990* (Sidney, Ohio: Linn's Stamp News, 1991), pages 204-05.



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