

# Fan-carved dove

Sally and David Nye share their fan-carved dove for readers to make in a weekend

This bird is made from one piece of wood. Yes, that's right... one piece! The technique is called fan-carving. It is the process of riving (splitting) long-fibred wood into individual blades and then turning and interlocking those blades to create a three-dimensional design.

## History and symbolism

The fan bird represents the Holy Spirit, the dove-of-peace. In early times, it was customary for people to surround themselves with items that had meaningful symbolism. The fan bird is one of these (see **photo a**).

In the homes, the bird was hung by a string so that it moved freely with the air currents. It appeared to come alive and symbolised the Holy Spirit, protection, health and happiness for the family.

By the 1900s, the fan bird seemed to be everywhere throughout Scandinavia and Europe. In fact, two distinguished ethnographers proclaimed it a "cultural phenomenon". However, as time passed, fewer local artisans made fan birds. In time, the 'pulpit bird' was even replaced by a solid wooden dove. Sadly, few fan-birds are made today – in some

countries they are only found in museums. Fan-carving is almost a lost folk art.

Regardless of style, all fan-carved items must have three basic cuts: the interlock, the hinge and rived wood (see illustration opposite).

## Blank removal

Score the width of the blank with a large knife/hatchet and mallet 25mm (1 in)

down. Place the hatchet blade parallel to the bark 19mm (3/4 in) in from the outer edge of the round (thickness of blank + bark) and give it a solid whack with a mallet. The force will cause the blank to 'pop out' as the fibres split along the score lines. Use the hatchet to remove the bark, thus shaping the blank. Repeat the process for more blanks.



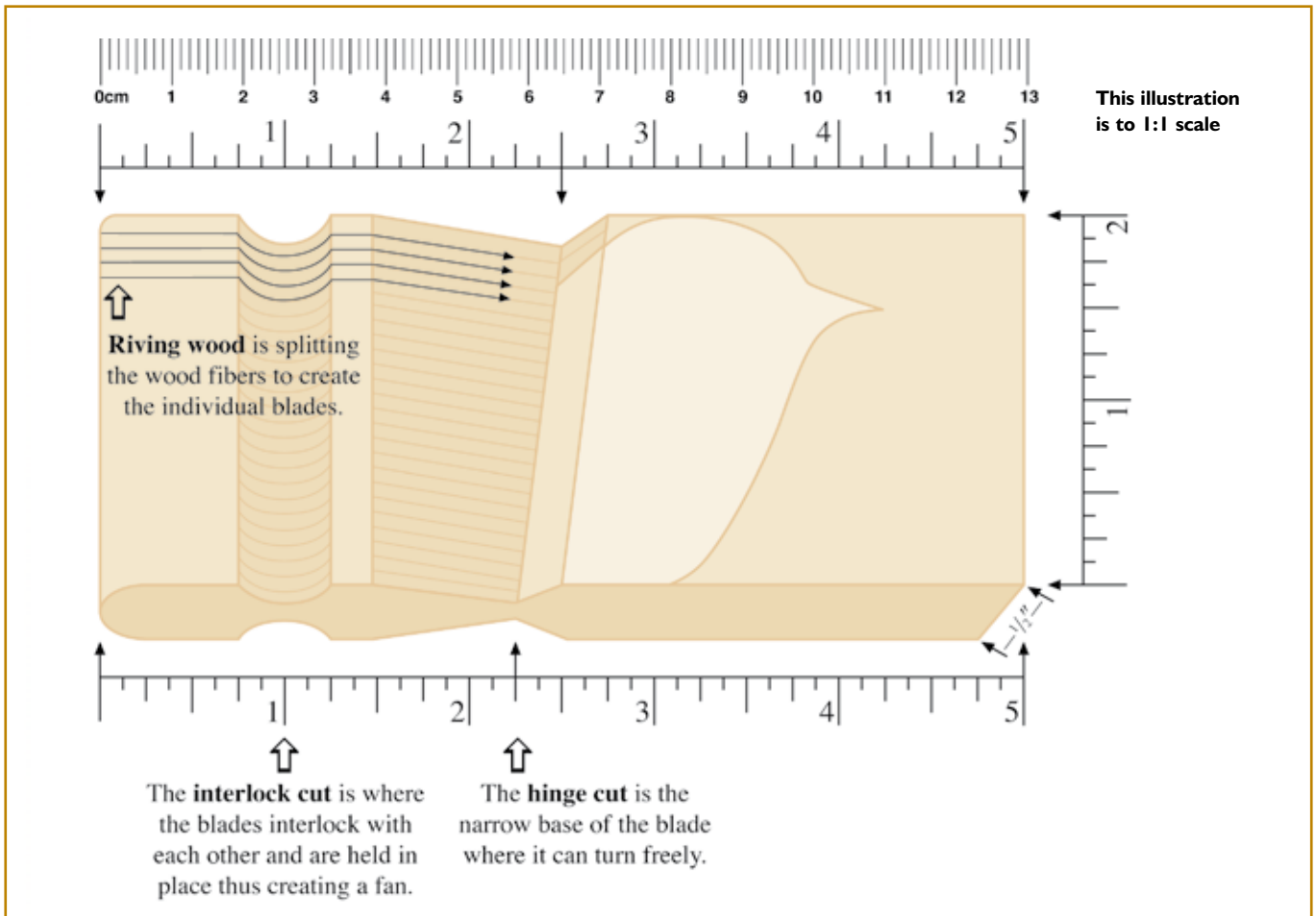
**a** The fan-carved dove, shown on the postage stamp of Sweden, was found in most churches in the 17th century. It hung in the pulpit directly over the minister's head, hence the name *pulpit bird*



**b** It is interesting to note that some European styles of the fan bird are made from two or more pieces of wood. If we look at the example above, you will notice the two-piece construction of this bird: one piece is for the wings whilst the other piece is for the body and tail



PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS BY SALLY AND DAVID NYE



### Moisture content

For adequate moisture content, place the blanks in water and simmer over heat for 90 minutes. When cool, they are ready to carve. Store in plastic bags and refrigerate if used within two weeks. For longer periods, place blanks in the freezer but thaw before carving.

### Tools you will need

- Hatchet
- Mallet
- Flexcut Pelican knife or similar
- Flexcut 3in Drawknife or similar
- Small vice
- Ruler
- Pencil
- Glove (optional)
- Thumb guard tape (optional)
- Needle nose pliers
- 22 gauge wire
- Thread
- Finishing sealer spray such as Bulls Eye Shellac

### Alternative tools

- No. 1 25mm chisel
- No. 9 12mm gouge
- No. 11 6mm gouge

### Wood specifications



Wood that is straight-grained and long-fibred is used for fan-carving. These characteristics are important because the strong fibre must hold on at the base of the blade when it is turned and interlocked with the next blade.

We use white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) in the USA. In Europe, fir (*Pinus sylvestris*), spruce (*Picea abies*) and willow (*Salix spp*) are preferred. Pine (*Pinus spp*) and aspen (*Populus spp*) are favoured in Scandinavia. Try similar wood in your area or the kind used for making baskets.

The blank dimensions used are 125 x 50 x 12mm (5 x 2 x 1/2in): 125mm dimension (length of blank) is vertical; 50mm dimension (width of blank) is along the circumference; 12mm dimension (thickness of blank) is the outer edge.

**Tip:** For a bi-colour effect, such as our dove, use a blank with half sapwood and half heartwood.



**1** Once your blanks have been adequately prepared for moisture content (see section on page 15), you are ready to begin carving your own fan-tail dove. Start the process by shaping one end of your blank so that it is rounded – this will become the tip of the feathers



**2** Measure 25mm (1in) from the rounded end. Draw a line across the 50mm (2in) dimension on both sides of the blank, where the feathers interlock. Use a pelican knife or a No.9 12mm gouge to carve the C-shaped interlock on each side of the blank. Leave  $\frac{1}{3}$  for the centre



**3** Draw two lines on both sides of the blank. The first: a straight line 3mm ( $\frac{1}{8}$ in) below the interlock cuts. The second: a diagonal line 63mm ( $2\frac{1}{2}$ in) from the rounded top on one edge and 55mm ( $2\frac{1}{4}$ in) on the other



**4** Use a knife or a No.1 25mm chisel to make a V-cut along the bottom line on both sides of the blank. It is a long taper as well as a diagonal. Note – do not cut above the first line drawn, just below the interlock

## Tips & Techniques

- When carving both the interlock and the hinge cuts, pay attention that they are aligned on each side of the blank.
- It is not necessary to finish the project in one sitting. If called away, wet the blank, place it in a plastic bag and refrigerate until ready to carve again.



**5** Using your knife or chisel, the next step in the process is to carve equal portions from each side so that you leave a base of 3mm ( $\frac{1}{8}$ in). The hinge is where the feathers turn



**6** To rive the feathers, secure the blank in a vice with the longer tapered side (63mm) away from you. Begin riving on that side and work toward yourself. The 3in drawknife is ideal. Hold it with the flat-back side facing you. To determine the thickness of the feather, tilt the drawknife so you can see the cutting edge



**7** Stand the knife straight up and just push down. Keep the flat back of the drawknife 'snug' to the solid piece being rived. To insure you achieve a uniform feather, do not allow a gap to come between the knife and the wood. The hinge will serve as a stop cut



**8** Always strive for thin feathers, even if some fall off. They will hardly be noticed after the feathers are interlocked, so try not to worry. The first few rived feathers are sacrificial. They are at the back of the bird's head and will be cut off later in the process

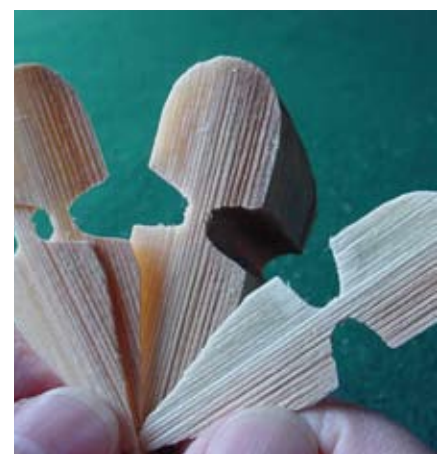


**9-11** **Photo 9:** After the feathers are rived, use a knife or No.11 6mm gouge to trim the interlock and the hinge so they are narrower. They were left wider during the riving process so the wood would not wobble. The interlock centre should now be about 3mm (1/16in), the hinge about 1.5mm (1/16in). **Photo 10:** Next, trim the lower part of the short taper. This area needs to be airspace so the feathers can freely turn and interlock. Make a nice flat plane. **Photo 11:** Next, draw the dove onto the blank



**12** Carve the bird's body. As you shape the bird's head, the sacrificial feathers are cut off

**13** Flex the feathers to loosen the fibres at the hinge so they will easily turn when interlocked



**14** With the bird's beak facing you, take the first feather and turn it to the left side of the head

**15** Next, turn the second feather to the right side of the head before moving on to the third feather

**16** Turn the third feather to the left and interlock it with the first feather. Continue alternating and interlocking the feathers to build the two wings. Save an uneven number of feathers for the tail



**17** To form the tail, the very last feather will serve as the centre/anchor feather



**18** Take the second feather to the right of the anchor feather and interlock it



**19** Take the next (third) feather to the left and interlock it to that side of the anchor feather. Continue alternating and interlocking the feathers until the tail is complete. To achieve the desired appearance, you can take some feathers from the wings and place them into the tail, or vice versa



**20** To hang up your bird, make an eyelet from 20-gauge wire with needle-nose pliers. Thread it with a string and then just push the eyelet among the wing feathers just behind the head



**21** To give your dove character and personality, shape the wings by pulling them up alongside the head. The wings can be adjusted upward or more flat at the hinge point to gain the style you like



**22** After the bird has dried for a few days, spray it with a preservative such as Bulls Eye shellac

*The Legend of the Fan Bird*

*During the Medieval era, families lived in one-room log houses that were covered with clay inside out. There was just one window covered with a dried animal stomach during the winter and a small smoky stone fireplace.*

*One family in northern Russia lived in such a house with a young boy who was very ill. He lay on his bed where he was covered with furs. People came from neighbouring villages to try to help him regain his health, but all efforts were in vain.*

*It was the end of winter, and his father was sitting by the fireplace making baskets. Tired of lying in a stuffy house, the ill boy asked, "Dad, is summer coming soon?"*

*His father replied, "Soon, son, very soon. Just a little more and summer will be here."*

*Then his father got an idea. He thought, "I will make a bird from this piece of wood. I will make it look like a real bird with two wings and a tail. Maybe my son will think summer has come and the birds have returned. That would make him very happy."*

*The father said, "I will make summer for you."*

*He made a bird and hung it from the ceiling near the fireplace where his son could see it. The draught of the hot air streams from the fire caused the bird to spin. Its wings began to move and suddenly it became alive. Thus, the bird assumed magical powers and became known as the 'Holy Ghost', safekeeper of children and symbol of family happiness.*

*The son was filled with joy and his health improved. The people from the neighbouring villages returned to ask how the boy was healed. When they heard the story about the bird, they asked the father to make a bird for their home to safeguard and protect their family.*