



Seagulls

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/55-Seagulls>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we'll explore the delightful addition of seagulls to your coastal paintings, bringing a lively charm and interest to your work. Imagine yourself at your local beach, capturing the essence of the scene with a video camera to study back in your studio. This approach allows you to observe and replicate the natural beauty and behavior of seagulls in your art. We'll start by creating a quick beach background, setting the stage for our feathered friends. Together, we'll learn how to position seagulls in the distant sky, as well as flying and standing in the midground and foreground, enhancing the depth and realism of your painting. You'll discover techniques for grouping seagulls naturally, applying atmospheric perspective, and drawing their elegant shapes with accuracy. Additionally, I'll guide you on how to experiment with their placement without risk and adapt to different lighting conditions. Whether you follow my step-by-step process or use the resource photos to craft something uniquely yours, this lesson promises to enrich your painting skills and bring your coastal scenes to life. Enjoy the journey!



"Seagulls" 8 x 12" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

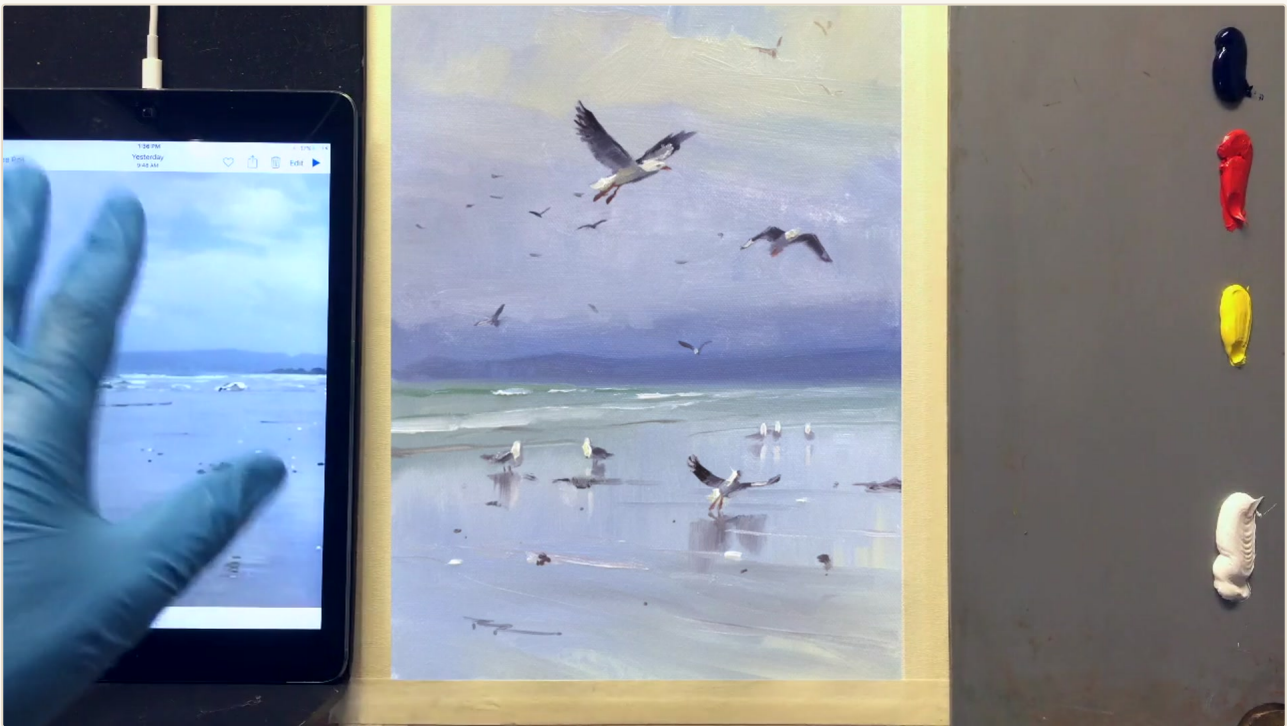
Materials

Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium or Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas (Giving it a light sanding first helps the paint stick better).
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Painting distant seagulls and reflections



Prepare the Canvas

Lightly sand the canvas with smooth sandpaper to create a smoother surface for painting. This will help the paint adhere better and create a more refined finish.

Set Up Your Materials

Arrange your palette with M. Graham's Oils and have Gamsol solvent and M. Graham's Walnut Alkyd Medium ready. These will be used to thin the paint and adjust its drying time.

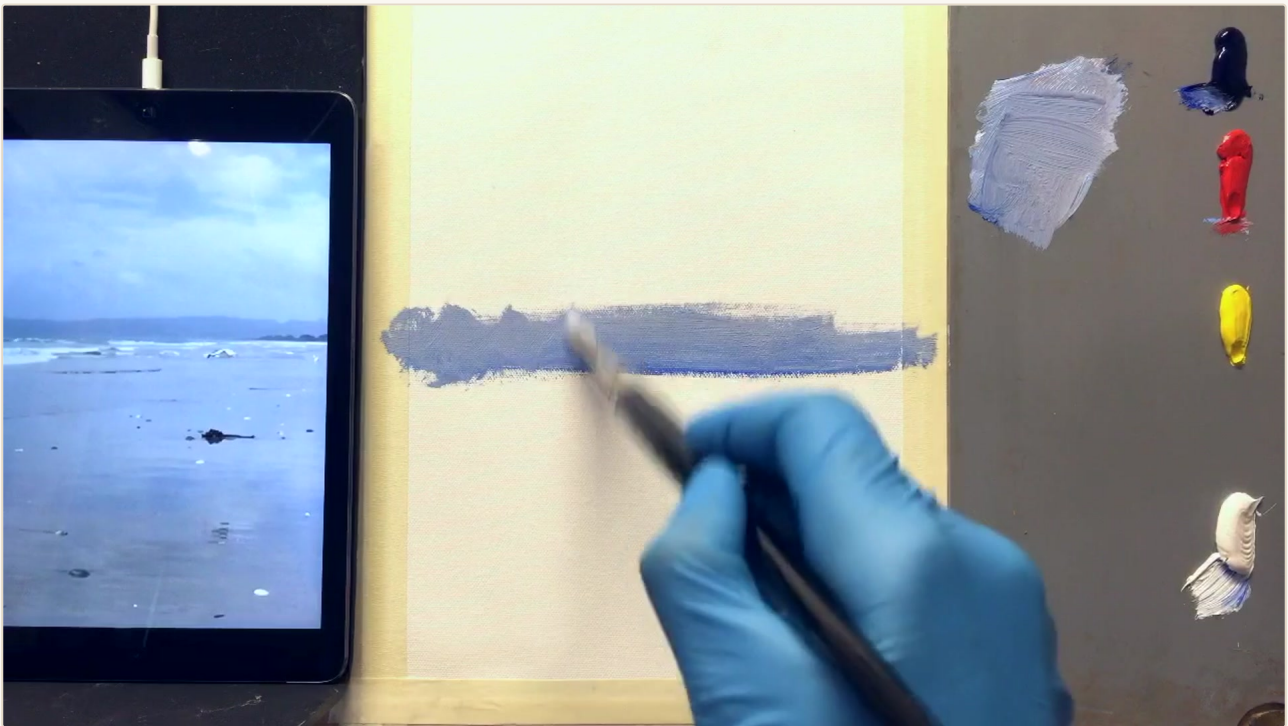
Block in the Background

Use a long flat bristle brush by Rosemary & Co. to block in the background. Paint a quick beach scene as a base for the seagulls. This will provide context and allow you to practice adding reflections.

PRO TIP

Paint the background first to give context and depth before adding the seagulls on top.

2 Blocking in the background



Mix Distant Hills Color

Combine blue, red, and white to create a slightly purplish mixture for the distant hills. Add walnut oil to thin the paint, ensuring the background remains subtle and doesn't interfere with the seagulls.

Paint Closer Hills

Create a slightly darker mixture of blue and red for the hills that are a bit closer. Apply this mixture with a soft edge to ensure the hills recede into the background.

Block in the Sky

Add more white to the previous mixture and begin blocking in the sky. Let the paint thin out towards the top to create depth and contrast with the sharp-edged seagulls.

Add Warm Sunlight

Dip into yellow and red to create a warmer light and apply it thicker for warm sunlight hitting the clouds. Lighten and warm the color further as you move to the right for variation.

Paint Break in the Clouds

Use a mixture of white and blue for a slightly lighter, cool tone. Paint a small shape at the top to suggest a break in the clouds, revealing the sky.

PRO TIP

Thin the background paint with walnut oil to ensure it doesn't interfere with the seagulls.

3 Painting the ocean and foreground



Mix Ocean Color

Use white, blue, and a tiny touch of yellow to create a light grey-green mixture for the ocean. This combination will give a subtle, natural look. For more vibrant colors, consider using phthalo blue instead of ultramarine blue, but be aware that phthalo blue is harder to control.

Soften Ocean Edge

Paint back into the ocean area with a mix of white, blue, and a tiny touch of red to soften the edge. This will create a smooth transition in the water.

Paint Foreground

Use mainly vertical strokes in the foreground to describe the reflective quality of the surface. Add more blue and red to make the area darker, working up into the lighter blue mixture.

Reflect Warmer Clouds

At the bottom, reflect the warmer clouds by using vertical strokes with the color from the palette. This will add depth and warmth to the painting.

Add Waves and Details

Use a crisp brush with blue and a little yellow to create waves, making very straight lines. For foreground ripples, use a neutral grey and a dark purpley grey for details on the wet sand. Add a slightly lighter grey for some ripples in the foreground sand and dot in a few little shells.

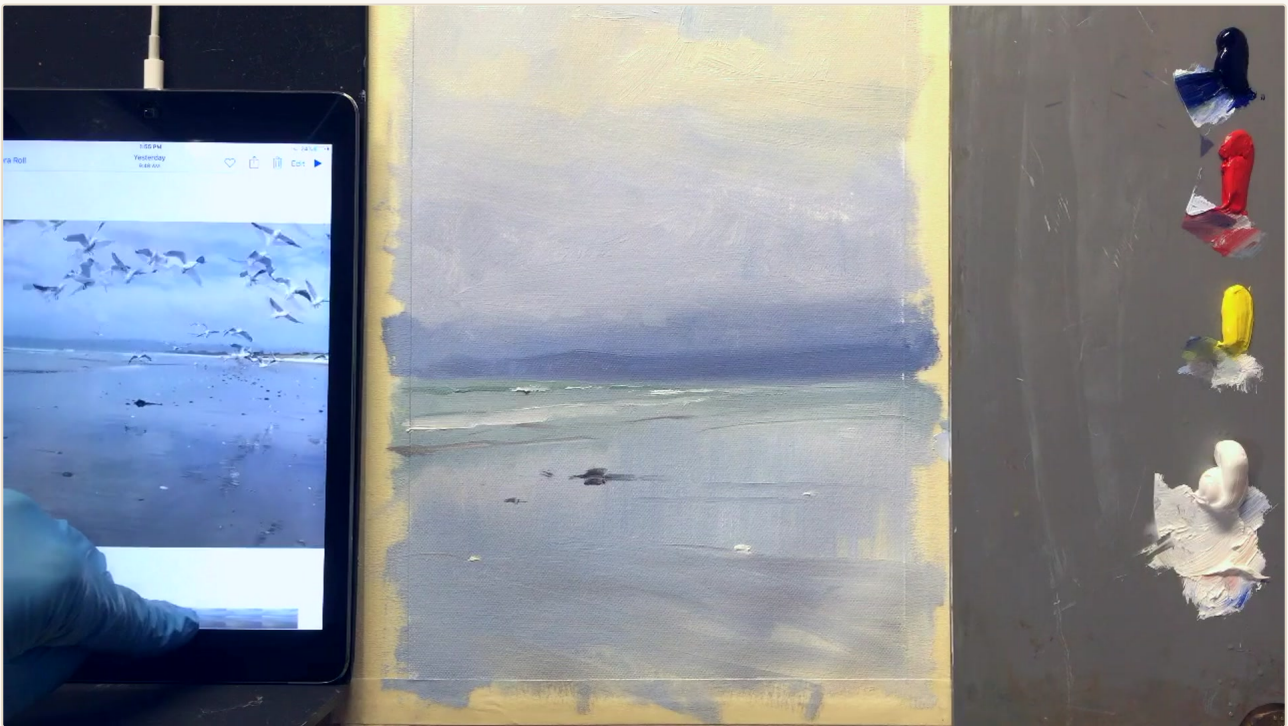
Paint Distant Foam

Use white with a little yellow for the waves, applying it right on the end of the brush. As the foam gets further away, add more blue to reflect atmospheric perspective.

PRO TIP

Use vertical strokes to enhance the reflective quality of water surfaces.

4 Painting seagulls in the distance



Select Seagull Shapes

Pause the video and choose the seagull shapes you want to paint. Focus on finding interesting and varied shapes to create a natural look.

Mix a Mid-Value Purpley Grey

Prepare a mid-value purpley grey color for the distant seagulls. This color will help them blend naturally into the atmospheric background.

Avoid Pattern Making

Place your seagulls using the concept of a scalene triangle, where no side is the same length. This helps avoid creating patterns, making your painting look more natural.

Randomize Seagull Placement

Rotate the scalene triangle to ensure no seagulls line up horizontally or vertically. This creates a more random and natural placement of the birds.

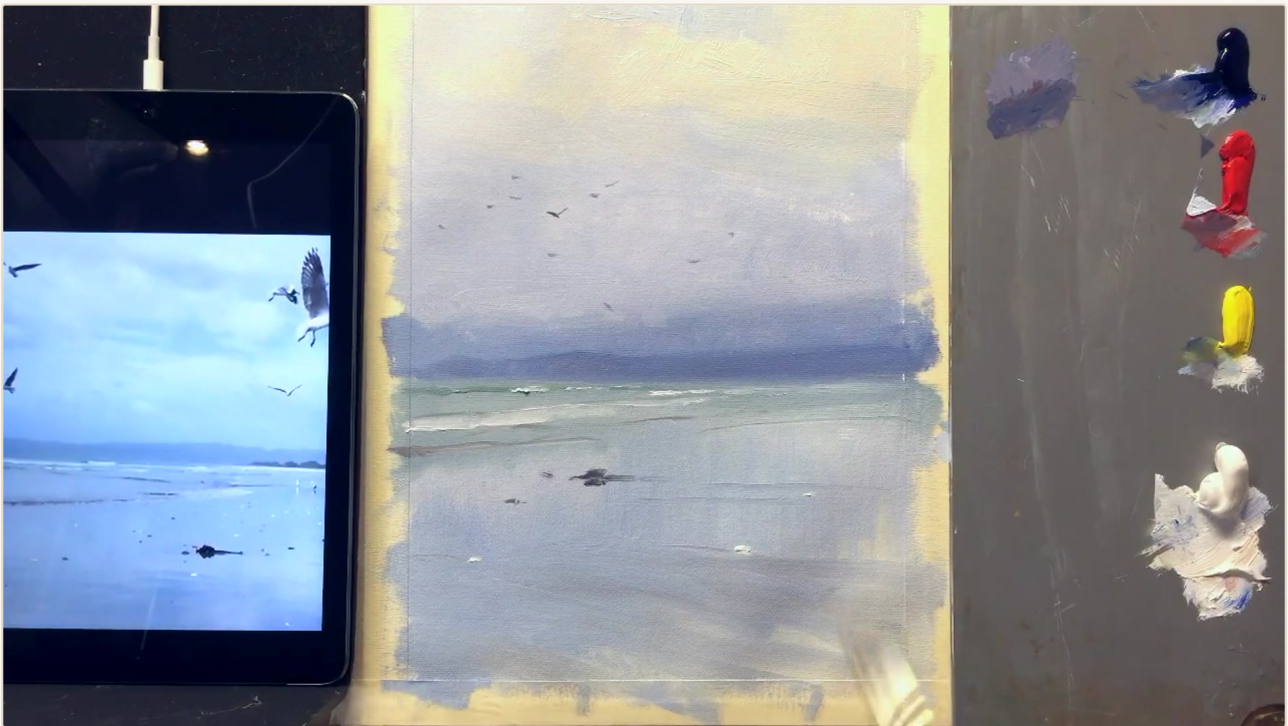
Adjust Seagull Size and Color

As the seagulls get closer, make them slightly larger and darker. This will create a sense of depth and distance in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use the concept of a scalene triangle to avoid pattern making in your seagull placement.

5 Seagull shapes and placement



Observe Seagull Shapes

Notice the different silhouettes of seagulls as they come closer. Pay attention to the variations in wing shapes and sizes to avoid making them all look the same.

Paint Varied Wing Shapes

Use a very fine rigger brush, number zero, to paint the seagull shapes. For one seagull, try a shape with one thick wing and one thin wing. For another, paint two wings that are very similar. Use one stroke, reload the brush, then make another stroke.

Adjust and Refine

If a stroke doesn't look right, simply wipe it off and repaint the background. Make small adjustments by painting in with the background color if needed.

Aim for Minimal Brush Strokes

Try to paint each seagull with just two or three brush strokes. Consider the amount of paint on your brush, the size of the brush, and how to use it to create the desired shape. Adjust the angle and pressure of the brush stroke as you paint.

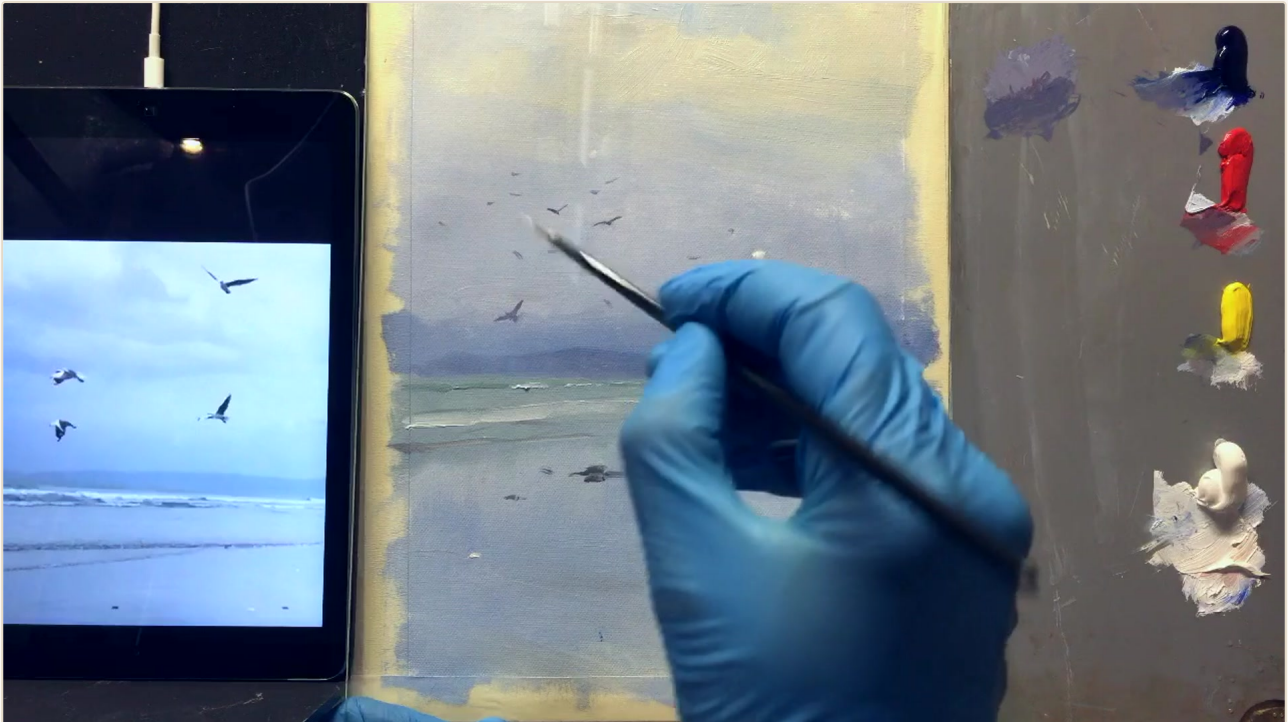
Use Rotated Scalene Triangle for Placement

Apply the rotated scalene triangle idea for placing the seagulls. Ensure the shapes and angles are varied to create a dynamic composition.

PRO TIP

Aim to paint each seagull with just two or three brush strokes by adjusting the angle and pressure of your brush.

6 Painting closer seagulls



Test Seagull Placement

Use a sheet of glass or plastic to test the placement of seagulls on your painting. This allows you to experiment with their positions without committing to the canvas. Once satisfied with a position, proceed to paint it on the canvas.

Paint Distant Seagulls

For distant seagulls, use a small dab of white paint to suggest their presence. Keep the details minimal to maintain the illusion of distance.

Enhance Closer Seagulls

As seagulls get closer, increase the contrast to show more detail. Make the darks darker and the lights lighter to accurately depict their form and enhance their visibility.

PRO TIP

Use a sheet of glass or plastic to test seagull placement before painting them on the canvas.

7 Detailing seagull shapes



Outline the Seagull Shape

Draw a box around the seagull shape to help assess the angles against verticals and horizontals. This will allow you to see the negative spaces between the background and the shape, ensuring accuracy in the positive shape.

Paint the Seagull's Body

Use a synthetic flat brush with a crisp edge to paint the seagull. Start with a dark purple gray, mixing red and blue, and apply it with as few brush strokes as possible. Focus on the angles between the wings and the triangular shape they form.

Add Shadow and Light

Mix a slightly lighter gray for the body in shadow and apply it with one or two strokes. Then, mix a fair amount of white with a touch of yellow to warm it up, considering the sun's angle on the body.

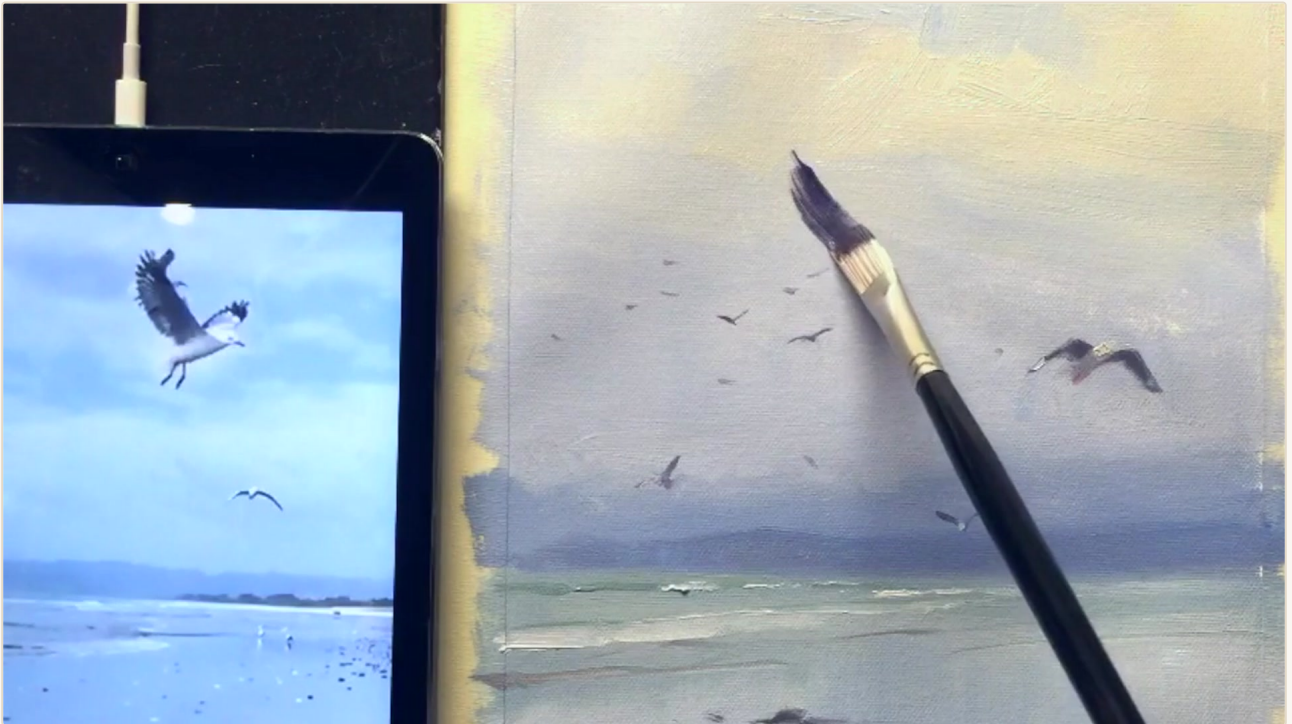
Detail the Legs and Wings

Add a little red to the gray mixture to paint the legs, using the tip of a rig-a-brush. Add a light patch on the wing, adjusting as needed by carving back with the brush.

PRO TIP

Use a box to assess angles and negative spaces for more accurate shape drawing.

8 Painting seagulls standing on the beach



Paint the Wings

Use a long brush stroke to paint the wing, twisting the brush as you move down. Repeat for the other wing to capture the dynamic shape.

Add the Body

Mix a mid-blueey gray for the body, considering the shadow cast by the wing. Add warmth to the back of the body with reflected light from the beach.

Highlight the Feathers

Apply chunky white and yellow paint to the top of the wings, adding a touch of yellow to warm it up. Pay attention to the angle of the sun across the body.

Detail the Beak and Legs

Mix a red greyed down for the beak, adjusting size as needed. Paint the legs as if they are landing gear. Optionally, add a light grey eye for subtle detail.

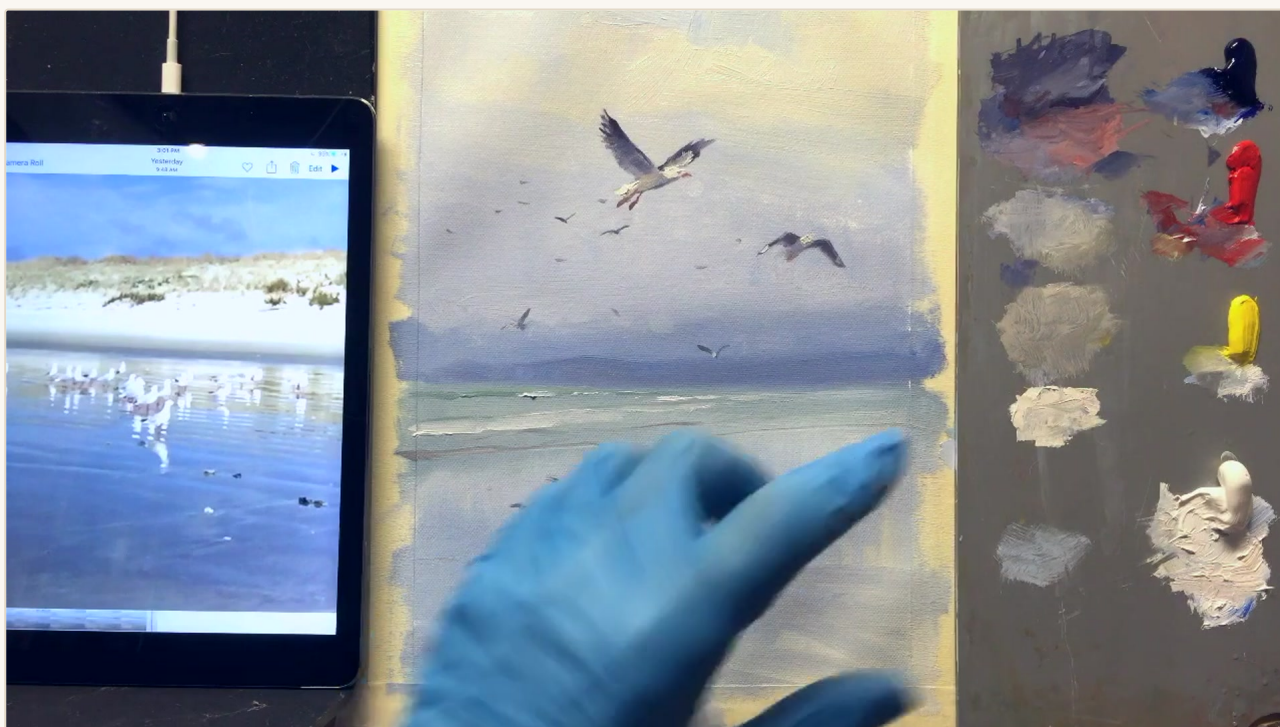
Finish with Wing Tips

Add a few larger feathers at the wing tips to complete the seagull's appearance.

PRO TIP

Use reflected light to add warmth to the back of the seagull's body.

9 Reflections and perspective



Choose the Right Light Angle

Select seagulls that match the light conditions in your scene. Avoid using seagulls from different lighting angles, as this will affect the realism of your painting.

Paint the Seagull's Body

Start with a dark stroke for the seagull's back. Use a mid-grey for the belly or underbelly in shadow. Add white and yellow to highlight the top, ensuring the colors blend smoothly.

Create Reflections

Drag the colors downward to form a soft reflection, curving and fading it into the shadow. Ensure the reflection is elegant and elongated.

Add Legs

Carefully place the legs, ensuring they are not too far forward. Use small strokes to depict them accurately.

Paint Additional Seagulls

Add another seagull with a single flick for the back, a half-tone grey for the shadow body, and white on top. Include reflections with downstrokes and add legs.

Group Seagulls with Perspective

Place a grouping of seagulls further down the beach using a slightly lighter grey. This creates atmospheric perspective, making them appear further back. Ensure they are smaller and include spaced reflections to avoid the appearance of tiny legs.

PRO TIP

Ensure reflections are spaced away from the body to avoid the appearance of tiny legs.

10 Foreground seagull and reflections



Paint the Foreground Seagull

Start by painting the dark areas first, then add a mid-value grey for the shadow on the body. This establishes the form and depth of the seagull.

Add Reflection and Highlights

Extend the shadow and mid-value grey into the reflection on the sand. Apply lighter tones on top of the seagull to highlight areas where the sun hits, especially warming up the tail with yellow and white.

Detail the Legs and Reflection

Paint the legs of the seagull and their reflection on the wet sand. Ensure the reflection is slightly distorted to mimic the wet surface.

Flatten the Reflections

Add small swishes through the wet surface of the sand to flatten the reflections, making them appear as reflections rather than separate objects.

PRO TIP

When painting distant seagulls against a bright warm light, adjust their color to be warmer and lighter to match the atmospheric perspective.

11 Tips on atmospheric perspective and sizing



Position Seagulls with Perspective

Draw a line from the base of the seagull to a point on the horizon and another from the top of its head to the horizon. This helps determine the correct size of the seagull as it moves further down the beach.

Adjust Seagull Sizes

Transfer the height of one seagull to another location to maintain the correct perspective size. This ensures that the seagulls appear proportionate to their distance from the horizon.

Use Visual Measurement

Measure by eye the size of the seagull and compare it to its distance from the horizon. This simpler method helps ensure the seagulls are sized correctly in relation to each other.

Verify with a Photograph

If using a photograph, check the distances and sizes of the seagulls against each other to ensure accuracy. This helps maintain the correct proportions and perspective in your painting.

PRO TIP

Draw lines from the seagull to the horizon to determine its size based on distance.

12 Reflected light on seagulls



Understand Reflected Light

Recognize that the white bodies of seagulls can capture reflected light from the ground. This means their undersides can change color based on the surface they are flying over.

Determine the Ground Color

Identify the color of the ground beneath the seagulls. If they are flying over grass, expect a green tint on their undersides. If over a sandy beach, anticipate a yellow or brown hue.

Consider Light Intensity and Proximity

Assess the strength of the sunlight and the seagulls' proximity to the ground. Stronger sunlight and closer proximity will intensify the reflected color on their undersides.

PRO TIP

Adjust the color on the seagulls' undersides based on the ground color and light conditions to create realistic reflections.

13 Examples of seagull paintings



Study Seagull Portraits

Observe the recent studio painting where seagulls are the main focus. Notice the larger size and chunky style that emphasizes their presence.

Incorporate Seagulls for Interest

Review paintings where seagulls are used as small elements. Understand how they add sparks of interest and life to the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use seagulls as focal points or subtle elements to enhance the painting's interest.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your seagull painting journey by preparing your canvas and palette with care. Begin by laying down a serene beach scene as a backdrop, setting the stage for your seagulls. Use a combination of colors to create depth and atmosphere, ensuring the background supports rather than competes with the main subjects.

As you move forward, focus on the ocean and foreground, capturing the reflective qualities of water with vertical strokes. Introduce seagulls into your scene, using strategic placement and varied shapes to create a natural and dynamic composition. Pay attention to the details of each bird, using minimal brush strokes to convey their form and movement.

Finally, refine your painting by adding reflections and adjusting colors to match the light conditions. Use atmospheric perspective to enhance the sense of distance and realism. Whether your seagulls are the stars of the show or subtle accents, they should add life and interest to your composition.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Paint the background first to give context and depth before adding seagulls.
- Thin the background paint with walnut oil to ensure it doesn't interfere with the seagulls.
- Use vertical strokes to enhance the reflective quality of water surfaces.
- Use the concept of a scalene triangle to avoid pattern making in your seagull placement.
- Aim to paint each seagull with just two or three brush strokes by adjusting the angle and pressure of your brush.
- Use a sheet of glass or plastic to test seagull placement before painting them on the canvas.
- Ensure reflections are spaced away from the body to avoid the appearance of tiny legs.
- Adjust the color on the seagulls' undersides based on the ground color and light conditions to create realistic reflections.



"Seagulls" 8 x 12" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.

Student Critiques

Club members painted their own versions of this scene and I critiqued each one. Their paintings — and my feedback — are a wonderful way to see this lesson's ideas in action.

"A Day at Sea" by Cheryl Gober



"A Day at Sea" Oil on Canvas by Cheryl Gober

Some great work in here Cheryl, especially your buddy on the rail who's really outstanding (punny) compared to his fellows. Beautifully subtle modelling of form there. The other seagulls are a step down in terms of drawing which is a shame because I can see you've slaved over them. You are right - 'who knew they were so tricky!'. It'll only take a few more of these and you'll have it nailed. It'd be worth your while to do lots of little pencil sketches of them to really get your head around their complex forms. You struck a home run with your buddy already so you know you can do it again. If it were me painting this I'd want to zoom in on him and have him standing on the life preserver. Great subject!

"Gulls at East Freemantle, WA" by Mark Price



"Gulls at East Freemantle, WA" Oil on Canvas by Mark Price

Nice composition Mark and strong colour use. Would like to see a little more colour variation in the water (some green shifts?) and particularly an overall slight colour change from top to bottom, which would give it more depth. Good seagulls but it shows you the importance of getting a photo without frontal light because it gives them no interesting shadows to work with and flattens the form. I would be looking for a way to separate the birds, like with shadow on the bird behind or colour change on the back of the front bird. Their feet need looking at too - they're too small at the moment. A few tweaks and you're there.

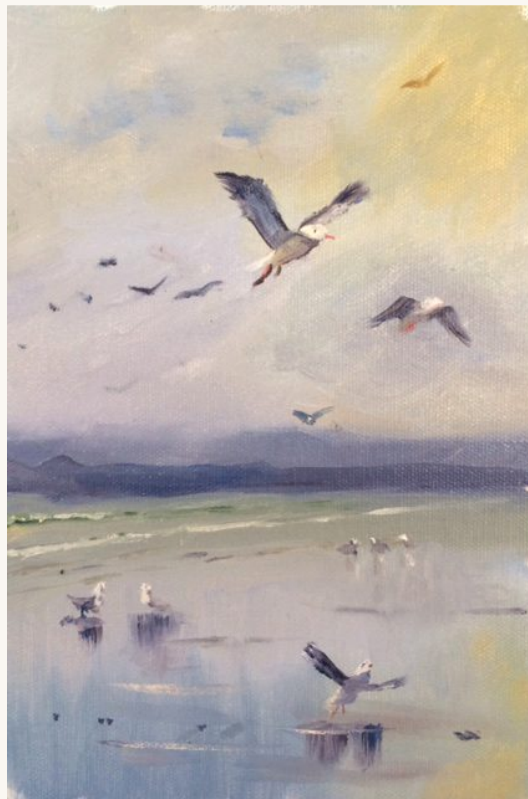
"Sailing the Skies" by Mairo Piroue



"Sailing the Skies" 8x11" Oil on Paper by Mairo Piroue

Great feeling to this one Mairo with beautiful bird shapes. Did you crop the photo a little hard or is that gull on the ground just living on the edge? Beware the slanted horizon, although I have seen a slanted aspect used well in other aerial flying images giving a sense of movement and freedom from the ground. I would suggest that if that's your intention, to make it even more slanted so that it becomes a feature, and to not have anyone standing on the ground because they'd look like they were about to fall over. Anyway that's an aside. You've done a great job!

“Workshop 58” by Siobhan



"Workshop 58" Oil on Canvas by Siobhan

A solid study Siobhan. From a wee distance away this looks amazing. Just the bird shapes need a little tweaking. Nearly there though!