



Reprinted with permission.  
American Association of Woodturners

# Ornaments

## Tiny gifts to treasure

By Bob Rosand



I've made a career out of turning Christmas tree ornaments. I've probably turned close to 6,000 ornaments—the ones with a hollow globe and the segmented icicle—over the last 10 to 15 years. I've also turned a couple thousand of my "regular" birdhouse ornaments—the ones with multiple parts. These are all good sellers, but when you do crafts shows, you need a good price range of items as customers will part with a \$20 bill much faster than fifty or a Ben Franklin.

The birdhouse ornaments and my standard ornaments represent the higher end of my ornaments, so I realized I needed something to fill in that \$20 to \$25 gap. What I came up with is an acorn birdhouse ornament. It is far less complicated than my "regular" birdhouse ornament, has fewer parts, is easier to make, and sells well.

## Getting started

Most turners have the required lathe tools for the acorn ornament. You'll need a small skew, a spindle gouge, a round-nosed scraper, a small square-nosed scraper, and a roughing-out gouge. The body of the acorn is made with square straight-grained stock about 4" long and 1 1/4" square. Walnut, oak, maple, and cherry are all good choices for the acorn body.

While the stock is square, I drill a 1/4" hole about 1/2" deep for the entry to the birdhouse and a 1/16" or smaller hole below that for the birdhouse perch. I place the 1/4" entry hole lower than I want it on the finished product. This allows me to reverse chuck, glue the piece in place, and part it off where I think the entry hole should be.

Although you can certainly use contrasting domestic woods, I turn the cap from scrap burl pieces about 2" square and 1 1/2" high. I make the perch from odds and ends of ebony.



Turn the body of the acorn birdhouse, leaving sufficient material at the base for hollowing. Note the pencil line at the opening for the perch; it should be untouched.

## Turn the acorn body

The easiest method I have found for turning the body is to chuck it in a Talon chuck with spigot jaws. I like the Talon because of its small size and the spigot jaws hold extremely well. (If you don't have a Talon chuck, or don't want to spend the money on one, no problem. Fasten a waste block to a small faceplate, then true the waste block and drill a 1" hole about 1" deep. Turn a 1" tenon on the body of the acorn body stock and glue it into the waste block. It's a little more time-consuming, but just as effective.)

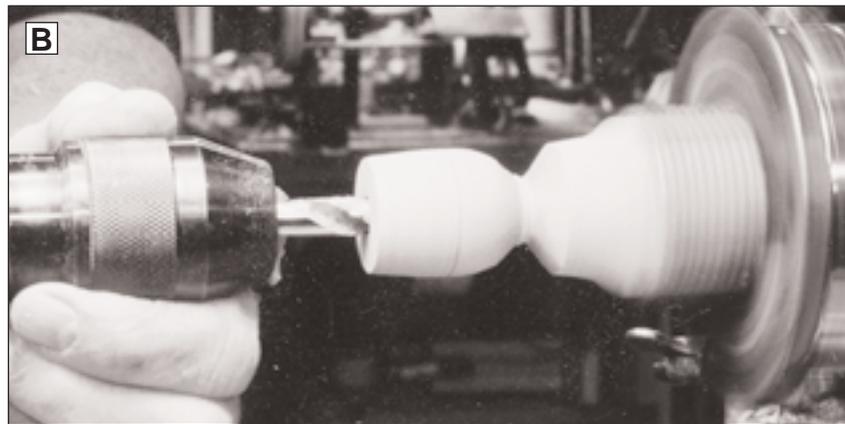
Place the stock for the body of the acorn in the chuck and use a roughing-out gouge to turn it to a cylinder. Then smooth that cylinder with a small skew (Photo A). Stop the lathe and make a pencil line at the hole where the perch will be. I don't turn away any more wood from this point. Here's why: When I turn the perch and glue it in place later, I want it to stick straight out and

not angle up or down. This is an issue with the 1/4" entry hole since nothing is being glued to it. Although a small detail, this will either make or break the look of the ornament.

I begin shaping the acorn body with a 3/8" spindle gouge. From the perch pencil line, take towards the top slightly. Then begin to turn what will be the bottom of the acorn body. Be careful not to remove too much material from this base, because you will need to hollow the interior. Once you have the shape where you want it, use a 3/8" or 1/2" drill to open the interior (Photo B) followed by a round-nosed scraper.

I don't worry about extreme thinness here; I just want to lessen the weight of the ornament so that it doesn't weigh down the branch of a tree.

Once the hollowing is complete, I return to the bottom of the acorn and continue refining that, before parting it from the lathe. You will probably notice



Use a 3/8" drill bit to drill out the interior of the acorn birdhouse.

ably  
e  
ur-  
15

e  
if  
od  
ill

n  
t.

that no sanding has taken place prior to parting the acorn body from the lathe. That is because you'll reverse the turning and friction-fit it to the waste material already in the chuck (Photo C).

Using a small skew laid flat, peel down, making a tenon that the acorn body fits on to. The fit only needs to be snug, because you'll adhere it with super glue. Now, complete your final shaping, sanding, and parting from the lathe (Photo D).

### Cap on the house

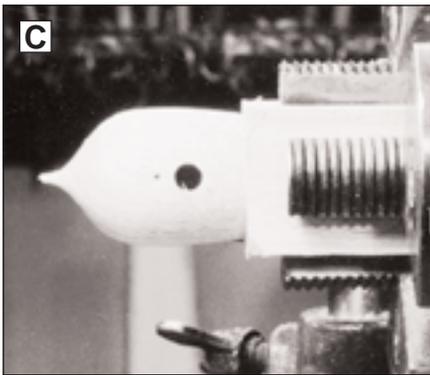
As mentioned earlier, I turn my acorn caps from scrap pieces of

burl about 2" in diameter and about 1½" in length. I then glue the burl scrap to a waste block held in my chuck. The waste blocks are always pieces of oak, maple, or cherry. I never use plywood, even though it may be tempting, as the plies are notorious for separating while you are turning, resulting in a destroyed piece.

Next, fit the acorn body to the cap (Photo E). True up the sides and the face of the burl cap in the lathe. The stock closest to the tailstock will be the underside of the cap. Undercut this a bit—just for aesthetics—and then use

a set of vernier calipers to measure the diameter of the top of the acorn body. Using a spindle gouge, remove some of the interior of the cap to reduce the weight. Then cut a rabbet for the body to fit into with a square-nosed scraper.

Once the pieces fit properly (Photo F), I refine the shape of the acorn cap (Photos G and H). Part it from the lathe, reverse it, and friction-fit it to a waste block (Photo I). This friction-fitting allows you to refine the shape a bit more, sand it, and drill a hole for a screw-eye hook for hanging.



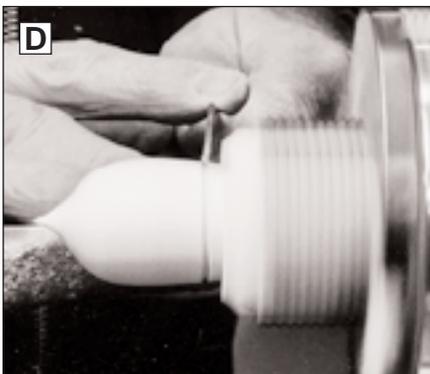
After the body is turned, hollowed and friction-fit on waste block, it's ready for final turning and sanding.



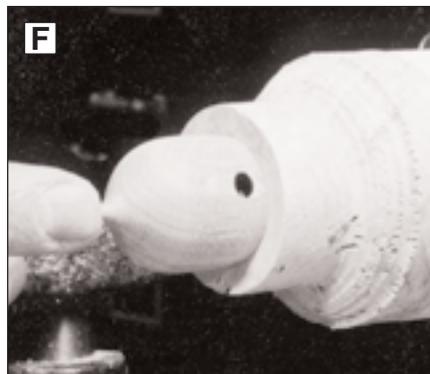
Prior to refining the rest of the birdhouse cap, check the fit of the cap to the body of the birdhouse ornament.



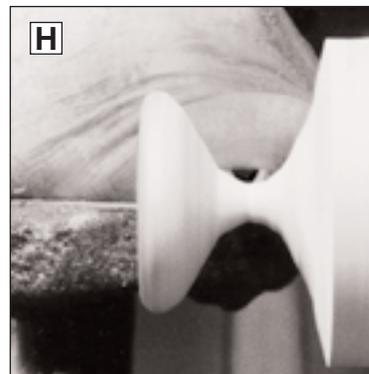
Once the fit to the cap is snug, use a spindle gouge to refine the shape of the acorn cap.



Using the parting tool, cut off the birdhouse body to the appropriate length.



Once the fit to the cap is snug, refine cap shape with the spindle gouge. Entry and perch holes are already drilled.



Prior to parting it from the lathe, refine the shape of the acorn cap with a spindle gouge.

Once complete, you can glue the cap to the body of the acorn birdhouse. If you get a little tired of sanding, you might consider using a Sorby texturing tool to texture the roof of your birdhouse (Photo J). I have done this with great success. It is no replacement for clean cutting and a sharp tool, but if you do it properly, you don't have to pick up a piece of sandpaper.

### The perch

All that remains is to turn the perch. Ebony is a perfect species. With the perch held in the chuck, use a small round skew to "peel"

down to about a 1/16" diameter (Photos K and L). I also turn a small spherical shape at the base of the perch. This is more for aesthetics than anything, but the little globe section also keeps the perch from going too far into the body of the acorn as well as giving me a bit more of a glue area. Using a small parting tool and a set of vernier calipers, turn a tenon to fit into the hole you drilled into the acorn body, and part off the perch. Cyanoacrylate glue holds the perch in place.

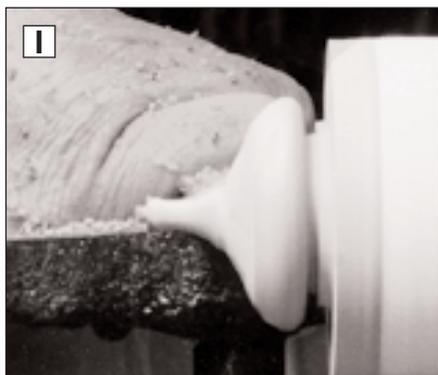
For finish, spray the acorn birdhouse with a satin or semi-gloss lacquer.

### Now, try something smaller

Once you become accomplished at turning the bird houses, consider a variation or two. One variation that I have found to be a good seller is an acorn you can fashion into a necklace or earrings. Except for size, the process for turning these miniatures is exactly the same as for the larger acorn birdhouse. For the body stock, I start out with 1/2" stock about 1 1/2" long and cap stock about 1" square 3/4" long that can be glued to a waste block for turning. This is a great way to use up those small, precious pieces of wood that you can't bear to throw away, and if you do manage to blow it up, you have wasted very little.

The holes for the birdhouse entry and the perch should be proportionate to the size of the finished piece. The birdhouse entry hole should be something less than 1/8" and the perch hole about 1/32". My only caution here would be to pay attention to proportion. It's very easy to turn a perch that's simply too large for the finished piece or to drill an entry hole that is either too large or too small or to make a cap that just doesn't look like it belongs.

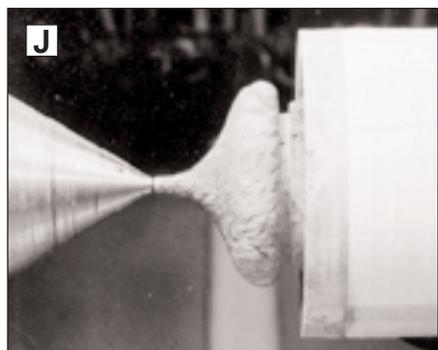
Bob Rosand (rosand@pdprolog.net) is a frequent contributor to *American Woodturner*. Bob, who lives in Bloomsburg, PA, is completing his first year on the AAW board.



At this point, the cap has been parted from the lathe, reversed and friction-fit to the waste block, allowing final shaping and drilling of a screw eye hole for hanging.



Use a small round skew to refine the ebony perch.



Complete the cap held in place with the tail center.



Turn a globe at one end of the perch to help insert this small piece.