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 four 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 if you do crafts shows, you need a good price range of items as customers will part with a $20 bill much faster than a 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 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.)

I begin shaping the acorn body with a 3/8” spindle gouge from the perch pencil line, taking it towards the top slightly. Then I 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 extremity 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

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.

Use a 3/8” drill bit to drill out the interior of the acorn birdhouse.
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 plys 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.
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 birdhouses, 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 the miniatures is exactly the same as for the larger acorn birdhouses. 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 the 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 you do manage to blow it up but have wasted very little.

The holes for the birdhouse entry and the perch should be appropriate 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 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 (rrosand@pdprolog.net), a frequent contributor to American Woodturner. Bob, who lives in Bloomsburg, PA, is completing his second year on the AAW board.