

# LITTLE CRITTERS WITH CHARACTER

## Spindle Turning for FUN

By Linda Ferber



### About these critters:

I attended a Steve Pritchard demo in Georgia on making small critters. He turned a mouse, a pig and a cat. I was inspired by Steve's demo and decided to give it a try and quickly became hooked.

There have been many turners creating critters for fun and for craft shows. I recently read an article about honorary AAW member Ray Key in which he was reminiscing about his early turning days. Ray recalled that he turned everything from candlesticks to "mice with little leather tails and ears."

Inspired by the darn little critters that try to invade our house every fall, I decided to start with the mouse project.

When turning a small mouse, you can use a 2 1/2" x 2 1/2" x 2" blank, but you will quickly discover this project will be an excellent use for all your small scraps. This will build your spindle skills, use small scraps, and delight the new owner, so, a win-win!

You will discover there are many design options that will give these critters personality.

Make these in batches; I am sure you will not have any problem finding new homes for your critters.

### Tools you will need:

- Spindle roughing gouge (SRG)
- Spindle gouge or detail gouge
- Parting tool
- Japanese saw, or other small-toothed saw

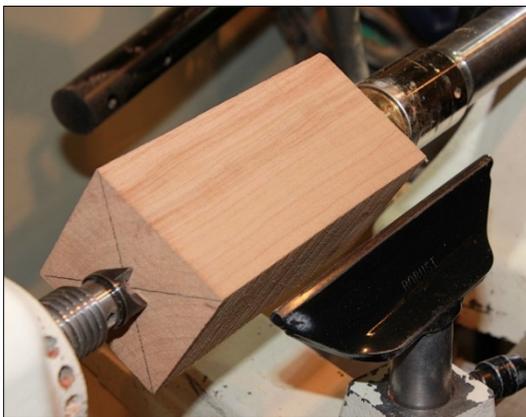
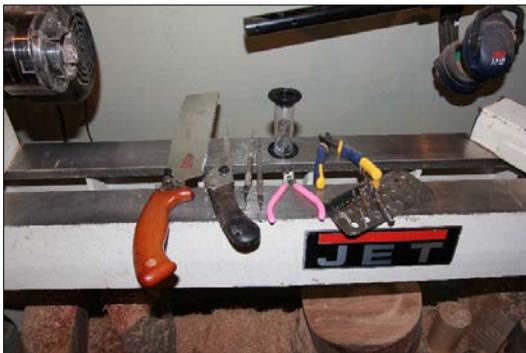


### Materials and supplies you will need:

- Wood: small scraps
- Leather scraps for ears
- Sharp scissors
- Wire or leather for tails
- Fabric puff paint for eyes
- Wire cutters
- Pliers
- Dental tool
- Basic drill with various sized drill bits
- Medium CA glue
- Drill press or turn a mandrel to sand on your lathe

### Optional supplies:

- Rare earth magnet
- Dr. Kirk's Scratch Free Woodturners Polishing Wax
- Renaissance Wax



### Making the mouse body:



You will notice that the body of the mouse looks very similar to an egg. In fact, you can start with that presumption. Prepare your blank by drawing lines from corner to corner on both ends. Use an awl or center finder to mark the center points on each end. Mount your blank on the lathe in traditional spindle set-up using a drive center in the head stock and a live center in the tail stock. Tighten your tail stock and position your tool rest for your tool to cut at the center line. Hand-turn the piece several times to make sure everything is going to clear. The first turning step is to use your SRG to turn the blank into a cylinder.

An egg is a complex shape; the bottom end is a half sphere with a gentle curve to the top. With a spindle gouge starting at the tail stock end of the blank, start turning the half sphere, and practice your tool control with each cut. This cut will be similar to turning a bead; start with the flute of the gouge pointing up and gradually ending up with the flute pointing to the side. You can use the eggs in your fridge as reference, but this mouse is egg-like in shape, but not an exact replica.

Once the half sphere is turned, take your parting tool and make a mark on the head stock end of your blank to mark where the end of your egg-shaped mouse will be. There are measurements of ratio of width to length for eggs, as well as the Golden Mean to use as guides. You will be able to judge as you go and make slight adjustments. It is better to start with extra length to allow room for parting off. From your two points, the height of the sphere to the nose of the egg, turn a gentle curve. With each cut you are practicing tool control and improving the curve. Reduce the ends of your turning to continue the shape as far as possible to the ends.

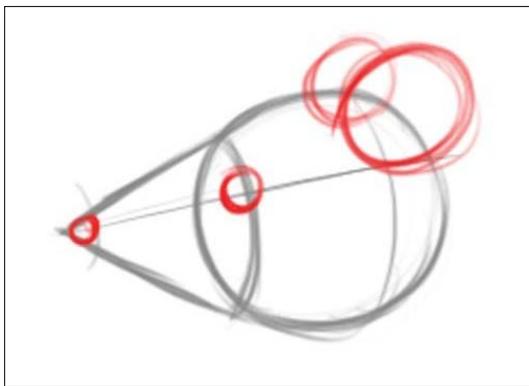
At this point, go through your sanding grits, smoothing out any tool marks and sanding scratches as you go. If I am not going to paint the mouse, I will apply Dr Kirk's Scratch Free Wax before it is parted off. Then the ends can be reduced even smaller. At about 1/8" I like to stop turning and use my Japanese saw to cut the work from the waste material.

This prevents any grain tear-out, and any saw marks can be sanded out in the next step.



Select which side of the new mouse body you want positioned on the top to take advantage of interesting grain patterns. This will help give your mouse personality. View all the sides of the new mouse body for options to select which features in the wood grain will be the top or side. Select an area that will become the bottom base for the mouse. At this point you also have a decision to make on how your mouse will stand. Will he/she be lying down or will its nose be in the air?

For a medium sized mouse, I like the mouse to be sitting up with her nose in the air. With this in mind, select the area to be sanded flat to become the mouse base. There are several ways you can do this. If you have a belt sander, that is a good option, but if you don't have one, a drill press will work. I use a sanding pad with Velcro sanding discs attached. My drill press has a dust collector hose nearby but I still wear a dust mask. If you don't have a belt sander, you can turn a wooden mandrel with a sanding pad attached. This will enable you to do the sanding on your lathe. Always wear a dust mask and run the dust collector. While I am sanding the base, I check to see if there is touch-up sanding needed on the nose or on the back end of the mouse.



### Preparing the ears:

I use leather scraps to make the mouse ears. At many craft stores you will be able to purchase a bag of leather scraps, but this is not your only source. At the second-hand stores, you can buy reasonably priced purses or leather coats. I needed a pink ear so with a little searching, I was able to find a hot pink purse that I ended up cutting apart. A word of caution in buying a purse—you will not know what the inside of the “leather” or synthetic material will look like, but worth the risk to expand your color options. Select colors that will coordinate with or accent the colors of the mouse body. The pattern for the ears needs to include a little tab at the base of the ear to be used for securely gluing the ear onto the mouse body. The ears are one of the defining traits of a mouse. Draw a circle with a small tab on cardboard (See example). A cereal box works well and holds up to multiple uses. I like for the ears to be oversized, giving the mouse a caricature look with an expressive face.

There are several materials available at the hobby stores that work well for the tails. Leather and suede strips that are intended for necklaces or pendants are sold in small packages and come in various colors from the basic black and brown to white. A variety package is a good option. Wires provide an opportunity to shape the tail with a nice curve and there are many to select from. They vary in width and from plain to fabric-coated.



### **Drilling:**

You will need to drill three holes into the mouse body—two for the ears and one for the tail. Drill a hole on the back of the base for the tail. This hole should be slightly larger than the diameter of the materials you are using for the tail—large enough to insert the leather strip but small enough to eliminate slop. I measure the tail material using a plastic or metal drill bit gauge to select the best size drill bit to use. I recommend drilling the hole to a depth of about 1/4", filling it with medium CA glue, and inserting the tail. I don't use accelerator for gluing the mouse and always wipe and clean up around the glued area. I usually will hold the material in place for a few seconds to make sure it doesn't come apart.

The positioning of the ears and eyes give the mouse personality. You have your mouse body turned, you have your ears prepared, your next decision is the placement of the eyes and ears. The nose, eyes and ears form a triangle. Mice have big round hairless ears and big eyes in comparison to the head size (see sketch from Wikipedia on drawing a mouse head.)

I like to place the ears at a slight angle to give additional personality to the mouse. I think it makes them look quizzical.



The leather tab on the ears should be pinched together to give the ear a folded look. I measure the width of the pinched tab with a plastic or metal drill bit gauge to get a good fit. After I have drilled the holes to a depth of 1/4" and poured CA glue into the hole, I hold the ear in a pinched position and use a dental tool to push the leather into the hole. You will need the ear far enough into the hole so the ear maintains its pinched position. Make sure the hole is deep enough to hold the ear. You don't want mice to lose their ears or tail so make sure there is enough glue to hold it in place!

### **Painting the eyes:**

I have been using a fabric 3D paint for the eyes, using enough paint so the eyes are three-dimensional. I always paint the eyes last, to avoid the risk of smearing the paint.

The next step is to apply a finish. I like to use Renaissance wax. It's easy to apply, buffs up nicely, and gives a nice feel to the finished product.  
Optional magnet on the base:  
On the smaller mice, I like to have the option of attaching the mouse to a fridge or a lamp. I buy rare earth magnets in the small size (Rare-Earth Disc Magnets, 0.25" Diameter x 0.1" Thick). Measure the drill bit size with that plastic or metal drill bit gauge and drill a hole a little deeper than the depth of the magnet. I do this step after the ears, eyes and tail have been attached and the glue is dry. Fill the drilled hole with CA glue and insert the rare earth magnet leaving the mouse upside down for the glue to dry.

Mouse and critter construction can be done as a production project. In addition to the mice, I have made pigs and owls. Who knows what critter will be next? I find that the more attention I pay to the details, the more satisfaction I have with the end product.

-Linda Ferber, St. Paul, MN  
I am on the board of my local chapter, The Minnesota Woodturners Association. I have been involved in woodturning since I purchased my first lathe at my father's tool auction in 1999. I enjoy the process of creating and making wood projects with my hands.

*Photos courtesy of Bruce Garber, St. Paul, MN*

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