

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

Editor's Note. The address of the Birds of Northumberland County website has been changed to <http://www.willowbeach-fieldnaturalists.org/Northumberland-County>. This is part of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists' website, but the URL above will take you directly to the Birds of Northumberland County. Please note that the URL is case sensitive. From Clive Goodwin.

ZOOLOGY

The Unfeathered Bird

By Katrine van Grouw. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540. 289 pages, 49.95 USD, Cloth.

Illustrations of birds have long provided some of the most enduring, popular and informative natural history books. Artists and naturalists, such as John James Audubon and Roger Tory Peterson, popularized ornithological artwork as a means of providing the reader with a resource which he or she could use to identify the birds that they themselves encountered. *The Unfeathered Bird* is a unique book incorporating beautiful artwork, biological fact and historical anecdotes. But Katrina van Grouw (a former curator of the ornithological collections at the Natural History Museum in London, England) has provided the reader with a uniquely memorable collection of illustrations accompanied by accessible text, which should be considered one of the finest combinations of art and science available.

The Unfeathered Bird's first line denounces that "This book is not an anatomy of birds". When Von Grouw began this project twenty-five years ago, she intended it to be a book for artists, before realizing the far-reaching appeal of a book of this nature. Containing no biochemistry, Latin, scientific jargon and little in the way of physiology, the book does provide a comprehensive tour of the external anatomy of this remarkable group of organisms, drawing from the artist's extensive ornithological knowledge in providing a text that is deliberately concise, flowing, and accessible. The book is divided into two main sections: the shorter part 1 is 'Generic', introducing anatomical features common to all groups of birds, whilst the much longer part 2 is 'Specific', guiding the reader through individual groups, relating their evolution and behaviour to their physical structure and appearance.

The 385 sketches and paintings, depicting 200 species from all over the worlds (including many never illustrated before), are unrivalled in their texture and accuracy. During the twenty-five years that it took to produce this work, van Grouw and her husband pre-

pared specimens of birds, all of which died from natural causes and were donated by the finder, and arranged them in life-like poses. During this preparation, birds were stripped of their feathers, skin and often flesh, resulting in hauntingly beautiful and astoundingly detailed images. For the first time on the printed page, true-to-life-size images, sometimes capturing an individual engaging in natural behaviour unique to each species, are provided to best demonstrate the most obvious adaptations to their particular environment. Some of my favourite sketches included the three barn swallows perched on a wire (seemingly more precariously than if their feathers were present!), and the double-page spread of finches, clearly showing a range of bill shapes in European species and the consequences of adaptive radiation in Darwin's Galapagos finches.

The up-to-date, scientifically rigorous text succeeds in its objective of omitting the impenetrable jargon that is found in many anatomical or ornithological works. Instead it clearly provides the general reader with lively dialogue outlining the theoretical reasons for the structural and behavioural differences between the many groups of birds that are illustrated. In grouping together bird groups by convergent evolution in the 'Specific' section (e.g., placing swifts next to swallows or storks next to cranes), the author has deliberately highlighted the ever-changing debate and discovery that is the field of taxonomy. Van Grouw also integrates insightful historical anecdotes, enlightening the reader further on the routes of discovery that ornithologists have taken in furthering our understanding of these unique organisms.

The Unfeathered Bird, the culmination of a lifetime of work by the author, is a rare gem that would be equally at home on an artist's coffee table as it is on a biologist's bookshelf. One can simply browse the fascinating and sometimes macabre illustrations or engage in

the highly readable but mentally stimulating text, and can certainly do both. *The Unfeathered Bird* is a landmark piece that successfully bridges art, science and history, in a beautiful and accessible package that will no doubt be treasured by anyone whose path it crosses.

MATTHEW ILES

27 Barber Avenue, Apartment B, Guelph, ON, Canada,
N1H 5E6