

The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology

By Tim Birkhead. 2008. Greystone Books, 2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201, Vancouver, British Columbia. 433 pages. 45 CAD. Cloth.

When I was in my teens, I collected plants. On my bike I used to scour the deserted roads of wartime Yorkshire in search of new finds. I was abetted in this lunacy by my parents, who had unearthed a vast 1888 tome, detailing every published report of every plant species in West Yorkshire from, it seemed, the beginning of time. One day I came across a very rare cinquefoil near a neighbouring village, and eagerly checked its status in this catalogue. To my astonishment the species had been recorded for this same location by the great botanist, John Ray, in 1670. It was still there! The effect was magical – I was no longer just an isolated kid with a weird hobby, but part of a proud tradition that went back almost 300 years!

It turns out that Ray did far more than publish a plant catalogue, noteworthy though that achievement was for its time. Unknown to me – and likely to most of the readers of this review – he went on to produce two books that laid the foundations for modern ornithology, and in this totally fascinating book Tim Birkhead argues Ray was the most influential ornithologist ever.

Historians have an image of dry-as-dust recitations of dates and names, but in essence science is about ideas. It is the history of the ideas that have influenced ornithology that Birkhead explores here, and at times there's more of the element of a detective story than a dull recitation to his account. He doesn't hesitate to use colloquialisms to make his point; you'll find the odd sentence without a verb, but his meaning is clear and his account is consistently lucid.

Nine broad topics, each the subject of a full chapter and together covering much of ornithological thought, form the body of the book. These range from the egg and its development to reproduction and longevity. For each, Birkhead looks at key questions: in the case of the egg, what was the origin of the new life, why do birds lay hard-shelled eggs, and how did the new life develop? He uses Ray as a starting point, as one of the first to ask the questions, capturing well the difficulty he and his contemporaries had in dealing with the com-

plicated problems they presented, and then traces the work that eventually led to the answers. Many of the issues discussed were not resolved until well into the last century, and indeed the answers to some of the questions preoccupied the ornithological community for much of the 1900s.

Such topics, then, will be familiar to ornithologists and others interested in the field. But Birkhead provides broader insights, giving interesting and valuable additional context to the subjects he discusses. While one might be familiar with the work of, say, David Lack, here Lack's work is presented as part of an expanded framework, showing its historical foundations and some of the issues that arose at the time he was active.

The opening and closing chapters bracket the rest of the book with an account of Ray's work and life. Together they form an excellent basis and fitting conclusion for the body of ideas in between.

The book's references, together with notes on the text, are gathered into 20 pages of notes at the back, together with an 18-page bibliography and a short glossary. There is an extensive and [as far as I could see] accurate index, plus an assortment of picture credits, biographical information and information on the type also gathered at the rear.

The illustrations deserve a special comment, as they are mainly reproductions of work by early artists, some occupying double pages – and some of these for no apparent reason! Apart from a few photos, only one painting by David Quinn was able to evade the seeming embargo on work later than the early 1900s. This approach seemed rather contrived, but nevertheless most of the plates were relevant and fit the historic theme, while providing an opportunity to see work that would be unfamiliar to many readers.

This is a wonderful book that discusses difficult concepts in a clear and readable way, and offers an insightful view of the history of ornithology. Highly recommended.

CLIVE E. GOODWIN

1 Queen Street, Suite 405, Cobourg, Ontario K9A 1M8
Canada

Central Park in the Dark – More Mysteries of Urban Wildlife

By Marie Winn. 2008. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 18 West 18th Street, New York, New York 10011 USA. 304 pages. 25 USD. Cloth.

I'm not normally a fan of this type of book, but Winn's newest was indeed a pleasure to read. The chapters are laid out almost like a series of adventures, albeit tame ones compared with the sword and sorcery genre which I do follow. Unlike books in the

latter category, Winn's book does not include a map on the endpapers, ergo, the biggest drawback of this book is that Winn either assumes that the only people who will read this book frequent Central Park, and don't need a map, or somehow that all the geographic names she mentions really aren't important (then why mention them?). A map would allow the reader to keep track of where Winn, and her shifting bands

of co-adventurers are meandering somehow, understanding their locale, and their movements, would add so much to this book.

Like any good naturalist, Winn keeps notes, not only of what she saw, but where and when. Most of this information is transferred to the book, though uncharacteristically, the years of the observations are not. Some will find this a weak point, I didn't. After all, in the short time span (a few years) of her observations, there will not be much change from year to year. Additionally, this book is a non-fiction, natural history-based storybook, not a formal repository of scientific data, so I personally don't see any disadvantage of not recording the specific years here.

Readers of this book may come out with the idea that it is largely about the owls of Central Park – the wintering Long-eareds, the single Great Horned, the waxing and waning Eastern Screech-owls. I don't think so; this book is largely about the adventures of Winn and her colleagues to search for, monitor, and sometimes rescue these owls. As with many adventures, finding the target is only the satisfying end – the stories Winn tells are about the people and the interactions both among themselves and with their quarry. The owls give them purpose, but the stories are about the Central Park naturalists.

Many naturalists can point to one field trip, or one incident that turned them on to a particular field of natural history. "Bug Night" turned Winn and her colleagues into moth-ers (rhymes with "authors"). Read-

ers will reflect on their own personal moment when they became more than just a birder or amateur astronomer (or even a non-naturalist), and expanded their scope of interests to include bees, orchids or slime moulds. And this is part of the power of Winn's book – we share in the past adventures of the Central Park naturalists, including those pivotal life-moments, and simultaneously recall similar adventures of our own.

Much has been written about this book already, and invariably, the slug sex episode is brought up. In truth, it's a very small (but obviously charismatic) part of the book – I think included simply to describe something other than moths and owls, and as a bit of suspenseful comic relief. What really is confusing is that two-thirds of the one so-named chapter deals with cicadas and the wasp that feeds on them (the cicada killer) further proof that all the sliming, entwining, hermaphroditic gastropod encounters were just a segue between insects and birds.

Winn's book, as I see it, provides us with two important messages. One is that even in the depths of the largest cities like New York, there can be many natural wonders to experience. Second, the night is open to us to explore, sometimes through a telescope, sometimes through binoculars and sometimes through a jeweller's loupe. All we need now is a field guide to nocturnal nature.

RANDY LAUFF

Department of Biology, St. Francis Xavier University,
Antigonish, Nova Scotia B2G 2W5 Canada

Ecology and Conservation of the Birds of the Salton Sink: An Endangered Ecosystem

Edited by W. David Shuford and Kathy C. Molina. 2004. Cooper Ornithological Society. c/o Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, 439 Calle San Pablo, Camarillo, California, USA. 17.00 USD Paper.

The Salton Sea has long fascinated me. I have never seen it but it exists in my mind as a murky, sweaty spot where water melds with sky in the hazy distance, where rusted structures and dead trees perch along its salt-encrusted shore, where anarchic communities like Slab City show us our future. A quick Internet scan reveals it to be a handy metaphor, a swirl of contradictions and agrochemicals, much beloved and reviled, a birding hotspot, a vital migratory stopover on the Pacific flyway, and home of a National Wildlife Refuge named after Sonny Bono. The ecology and conservation of its biota, it seems, are a major part of its intrigue.

The Salton Sea sits in the Salton Sink, a basin whose complex history is integral to this work, which is number 27 in the *Studies in Avian Biology* series of the Cooper Ornithological Society. It is a compendium of 16 scholarly papers forming the proceedings of two symposia on the subject held in California in 1997 and 2000. The papers cover several themes: the biogeophysical history of the region, the extreme human im-

pacts upon it, the history of ornithology, the ecology and populations of the many bird species found there historically and now, and a conservation-oriented prescription for the future. The first two themes arise in practically every paper, for one can hardly discuss any aspect of the present ecosystem without reflecting on its colourful past.

Situated in the northwest-southeast valley system extending from the San Bernardino Mountains to the Gulf of California, therefore straddling the U.S.-Mexico border, the Salton Sink sits below sea level and contends with Death Valley as the hottest place in North America. At the northern end of the Colorado River Delta Region, the sink historically and prehistorically contained an ephemeral lake periodically filled by the flooding Colorado River. In more recent times dams and diversions have stifled the Colorado's flow. One last flood event in 1905 created the lake that is now the Salton Sea. However, instead of drying up as it had formerly done, it is replenished by runoff from irrigated agricultural fields. Whether in spite of, or because of this contribution, the Salton Sea is now 25 per cent more saline than the Pacific Ocean. But this is a simplistic summary. The editors' introductory paper, as