

[*Pica sericea*] species status. The last paper I read had DNA evidence supporting four species—European Magpie (*Pica pica*), Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*), Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), and the Korean Magpie.

With the publication of this volume of the *Handbook*, the editors need only to maintain their amazing standard for two more volumes, due by 2011.

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Corvus: A Life with Birds

By Esther Woolfson. 2008. Granta Publications, 12 Addison Avenue, London W11 UK. 337 pages, 17.95 CAD Paper.

In the British countryside, rooks are renowned for their intelligence. They are a member of the corvid family, smaller than crows, and are colonial nesters. Some rookeries have been in existence for centuries, each generation repairing and improving the winter damage, spending the summer raiding crops and outwitting all efforts by farmers to keep them away.

Corvus is not just an account of the life of a rook Woolfson took into her home in Aberdeen. The first chapters of the book describe her other avian lodgers—an irascible cockatiel and a depressive parrot, and, in the garden, a dovecot full of doves. Her relationships with the birds are never anthropomorphic. But it is “Chicken”, the rook, who is the star of the household with her intelligent problem-solving and interaction with people. Chicken had free run of the house, but her clipped wings were no impediment. She climbed stairs, sat on chairs, and perched on the top of cupboards. With the cupboard door ajar, she would set a booby trap: she would balance a pencil across the opening and, when the door was shut, the pencil landed on a human head. There were delighted cries from the trickster. Woolfson has read extensively both in the scientific journals and accounts in literature, so her speculations on bird brain capability ring true.

Among birds, the members of the corvid family have the largest brains in relation to body size. They

will use tools to obtain food, and they can recognize themselves in a mirror. “Self-recognition” is rare in animals and only dolphins, elephants, apes, and humans have the capacity to do so. Woolfson is careful always to question her conclusions about bird intelligence, but the evidence makes one wonder what other word can explain some of the incidents described. There are episodes of (in human terms, for lack of an alternative) anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, pleasure in greeting, regret at parting. Single words are clearly understood by the rook, and she in turn has a range of calls in reaction to events. Her memory was impressive. An interesting behaviour is her reaction to different music composers. Benjamin Britten’s music always caused a dramatic exit from the room with loud squawks; Schubert and Bach seemed to soothe. The latter part of the book discusses the intelligence and behaviour of birds, the depth of their emotional responses, and the degree to which these may be the result of problem solving by the brain as opposed to intuitive or innate solutions. The quality of the writing is exceptional and at times poetic. This was a pleasure to read. The revelations are fascinating.

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The Curse of the Labrador Duck

By Glen Chilton. 2009. Harper Collins, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. 288 pages, 29.99 CAD Paper.

This is a bizarre, irreverent, idiosyncratic, but entertaining travelogue. Glen Chilton’s travels come close to rivaling those of fanatical birders such as Phoebe Snetsinger and Richard Koeppl, birders who have written about the nearly 8500 and 7080 bird species they encountered, respectively, in expensive worldwide trips. Like them, Glen Chilton travelled extensively. Unlike them, he wasn’t looking for live birds. He flew 72 000 miles, went 5461 miles on trains, 1168 miles on buses, and 3466 miles in automobiles, all to view *dead ducks*. He visited 55 specimens of one extinct species, the Labrador Duck, last seen alive about 1875. He also visited the most plausible Labrador Duck nesting site, identified as such by John James Audubon on 28 July 1833, at Blanc Sablon, Labrador.

Prior to writing *The Curse of the Labrador Duck*, Chilton was first author of the species accounts for the White-crowned Sparrow (1995) and Labrador Duck (1997) in the landmark *Birds of North America* series.

This book is an entirely different kind of birding book. Chilton’s pursuit of Labrador Duck specimens follows the pattern of a detective story, though a detective story told with charm and full of humour. Truth about the Labrador Duck *is* stranger than fiction, as he tells us about museum goals and procedures and we meet the dedicated collection curators. Some of the latter were extremely cooperative; others he describes as “grumpy.”