

ZOOLOGY

Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds

By Bernd Brunner. 2017. Translated by Jane Billingham from the 2015 German edition. Greystone Books. 292 pages, 39.95 CAD, Cloth.

This is a book of trivia ostensibly about the fantastical creatures we know as birds, but mostly about some of the fanatical humans who have wondered about, observed, tracked, caged, killed, and protected them over the centuries.

The 19 chapters are arranged somewhat chronologically, starting with the early Greeks and Romans, through the Medieval Period and the Age of Enlight-

enment to modern times. It also roughly traces the evolution of bird knowledge from the hypothesis (for example) that birds lacked kidneys and that any excess fluid in their system was directed to the formation of feathers, not urine (put forward by Aristotle), to the rudimentary beginnings of rigorous observation that laid the groundwork for scientific understanding of the lives of birds. There are fewer character sketches from

the late 20th century or this century; perhaps because modern scientists are not quirky enough? Or, more likely, they are still alive and it is more difficult to write about their eccentricities!

However, there are really no linkages between chapters and most chapters are quite short, so one can pick up the book and read a chapter, or even part of a chapter, at random because some of the character sketches are only a paragraph or two long. I did find the two longest chapters quite repetitive, with too many similar examples: Chapter 8, "In the company of birds", mostly chronicles numerous people who associated with individual birds, sometimes for decades, or who owned hundreds or thousands of birds in aviaries, while Chapter 11, "To kill or not to kill", became a litany of slaughter. While the author does include some well-known bird devotees such as Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon, he dug deep into the archives to introduce many lesser-known amateurs and professionals. How-

ever, the "selected bibliography and source of quotes" at the back of the book would have been a more useful starting point for those wishing to read more about these individuals if it had been arranged by chapter and had page numbers for the quotes.

The illustrations, which are liberally scattered throughout and take up almost a third of the book, are predominantly exquisite colour reproductions from the 18th and 19th centuries. They are well chosen to illustrate the birds or activities written about in each chapter. However, I would have preferred the captions to be with the illustrations, rather than in a list at the back of the book. Also at the back of the book are separate indices for birds and people.

Ultimately this is a book about people passionately pursuing their hobby of interacting with birds in many and varied ways.

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