

[*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.”

Chilton reveals that all nine of the supposed Labrador Duck eggs in the world have been misidentified. DNA analysis shows that eight were Mallard or domestic duck eggs and one was that of a Red-breasted Merganser! The finest Labrador Duck specimen extant is a male in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto; the other two Canadian specimens are in the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa and the Redpath Museum at McGill University. Chilton visited all 26 specimens in the United States, and in Europe he visited specimens in nine countries: six each in England and Germany, three in France, two each in the Netherlands, Austria and the Czech Republic, and one each in Belgium, Ireland and Russia.

What are the weaknesses of this book? It is too subjective, sometimes too detailed, occasionally salacious, and at times repetitive, with overly long digressions away from Labrador Ducks. Chilton consistently refers to “stuffed” specimens whereas an ornithologist should speak of “mounted” specimens. The book also lacks an index and a bibliography.

Chilton has chosen to deal only with the extinction of this single species, passing up an opportunity to use it as a wake-up call to help prevent additional extinctions. The other issue that might well have been empha-

sized is the parlous state of finances of some of the major museums he visited; environmentalists need to know that inadequate operating budgets threaten the function, and sometimes the long-term existence, of these centres of knowledge and culture in many parts of the world.

Time will prove whether Chilton’s confidence in having visited every Labrador Duck specimen in the world is justified. It is a measure of his obsession and his dedication that if someone unearths a specimen new to him, he will pay from his pocket a \$10,000 reward!

Chilton has saved his best chapter for the end—the exciting detective episode involving the final (55th) Labrador Duck specimen. Except for a brief note in *The Auk* in 1952, the carefully hidden details of this mysterious specimen have long remained a secret. Chilton reveals many of the devious twists and turns relating to the eight people who had possession of the specimen after it had resided for 100 years in an unnamed country house in Kent, England. I won’t spoil his climax; I suggest you read this story for yourself.

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### **What Originally Prevented, and What Later Permitted, the Great Northern Expansion of White-tailed Deer?**

By D. Strickland. 2009. Occasional Papers from Oxtongue Lake Number 1. The Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario. 40 pages, 4.95 CAD Paper.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, White-tailed Deer spread north throughout the eastern United States to Quebec’s Anticosti Island and have maintained exceedingly high numbers for more than 70 years. Those deer, in fact, have had a drastic impact on the island’s vegetation, eliminating most browse species in addition to converting former Balsam Fir forests to White Spruce. Over-browsing by deer on Anticosti has been so severe that both Black Bear and Rock Ptarmigan have been eliminated through competitive exclusion. Thus, Anticosti is much poorer deer habitat than either northern Minnesota or Algonquin Park in Ontario, yet the island is still overrun with White-tailed Deer while the other areas are not. In addition, winter weather is more severe on Anticosti than in either the rest of Quebec or in Minnesota. Anticosti, though, is predator-free, while Wolves and other carnivores are common on the mainland. This and other evidence led the author to conclude that predation, not habitat, controls the distribution and abundance of White-tailed Deer.

The author then develops what he calls the suitable alternative prey hypothesis to explain the past and present distribution of White-tailed Deer. In the scientific literature, this is more commonly known as predator-mediated or apparent competition, though the author uses neither term. According to the author, the range

of the Moose historically extended further south than it does today. By subsisting on Moose, Wolves took the smaller and more vulnerable deer to very low levels or local extinction. As European settlement eliminated Moose from the southern part of that animal’s range and at the same time the settlers controlled Wolves, White-tailed Deer expanded northward. Similarly, the reason White-tailed Deer have now just about been eliminated from Algonquin Park and northern Minnesota is that Wolves survive by preying on Moose, and this allows the predator to keep the more vulnerable deer from recovering.

While this might be a new idea to some, predator-mediated competition or exclusion is not that rare. According to Dr. Tom Bergerud and others, Moose-fuelled Wolves today are in the process of exterminating Woodland and Mountain caribou across the length and breadth of Canada, while Elk-fuelled Wolves have recently been instrumental in eliminating Caribou from Banff National Park and are doing the same in Jasper National Park. Similarly, Wolves are in the process of wiping out Elk from parts of Yellowstone National Park. Since at least the 1950s, 600 to 700 food-limited Elk have wintered in thermal areas along the Firehole, Gibbon, and Madison rivers in the west-central portion of Yellowstone. This herd is isolated during winter