

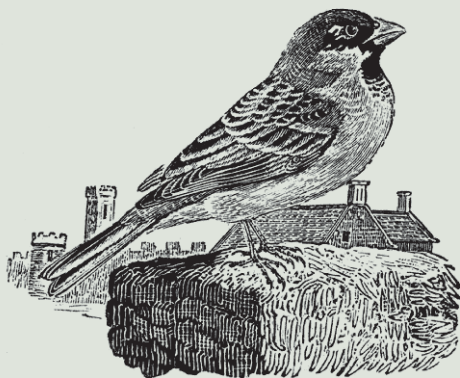


An Indifference of Birds

Richard Smyth

Human history—from a bird's eye view

History isn't so much about the passage of time as the study of change—how did we get from then to now, from there to here? To write the history of birds and people, you can look at how they've changed us, or you can look at how we've changed them. This book seeks to do the second thing; this is a book about our place in *their* history.



“It's not like anything else that I know of, not like how other people are writing about birds right now”—Stephen Rutt

“Fresh and compelling... has the mood-music soundtrack that blights so much nature writing turned to mute”—John Bevis

“A marvelously unsettling book... carries us into the strange and humbling timescales and lives of birds, revealing our own history in a startling new light”—David George Haskell

“A formidable piece of work. Extremely well written, with a dazzling lexicon and a roadrunner pace that can turn on a sixpence”—Tim Dee

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Prologue

Think of it as a murmuration.

Picture a cloud of starlings making Möbius shapes against a petrol-blue sky as the landscape beneath—a reedbed, a market town, the ruin of a pier, a stand of sycamores—is subsumed by dusk. The cloud furls and unfurls, puckers, pleats, is stretched and scrunched, inverting, infolding, impossibly elastic. The only constant here is change. The only thing you can predict is that in a half-second's time it won't look the same as it did a half-second ago.

Now imagine it's not five or ten thousand birds but many more than that. More than the multiple-million flocks of red-billed quelea whose wingbeats roar like breaking waves over the plains of sub-Saharan Africa. More than the boom-time mass-migrations of passenger pigeons that were said to darken the skies of the US in the nineteenth century.

Imagine billions of birds. Pan out and imagine the shifting shapes made by every bird on earth, a vast swirl of jabbering biomass, amorphous as magnetic flux or the currents of the oceans. Now run it at x1000 speed, and watch: watch as the shapes warp and dwindle, divide and subdivide; watch as the swarming cloud-particles—each a sparrow, or a gull, or a parakeet, or a thrush, or a falcon, or an auk, or a swallow, or a motmot, or an eagle, or a dove—come together and fall apart.

The only constant here is change. This is the world in which we live; this is the world we share with the birds.

There are other patterns, of course. The history of life on earth is the history of the interplay of these patterns. Slow ripples of geological motion, tides of climate change, flows and contraflows of other orders and genera, insects, reptiles, fish, microbes, mammals—and us. Roll back the film perhaps two, three million years, and pause: *there* we are, the hominids, the

first humans, fanning out of east Africa, straightening up, looking out. And the birds are there, too. Watching. The birds were always there.

Birds were old when we were young. The first birds were theropods, hollow-boned dinosaurs, skinny, plumed and meat-eating, leaping in half-flight through the gingko forests of the mid Jurassic, one hundred and sixty-odd million years ago. The biggest mammals back then could curl up comfortably in a stegosaur footprint.

Where today, in the corrugated high forests of Liaoning province, north-east China, Pacific swifts zip through the upper air and the strangled rasps of black-naped orioles sound in the canopy, *Anchiornis huxleyi*, jackdaw-sized, blunt-snouted, feather-legged, would have hunted, fought, mated, reared young, and died, long before the Himalayas rose from the flatlands to the south. Where today beetle-black grackles crowd the power-lines of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, *Austinornis lentus*—a first pheasant or junglefowl—pecked and scraped a living in the steamy maritime climate of ancient Texas. And back when ‘Europe’ was a marshy archipelago, knee-deep in the turbid waters of the Sea of Tethys, what’s now the limestone lakeland of south-east Germany was the fenland home of *Archaeopteryx*, the *Ürvogel*, the ‘first bird’—*Archaeo-ptyryx*, the ancient feather.

The upright ape *Sahelanthropus* was aeons in the future. Waddling *Australopithecus*, heavy-jawed *Paranthropus*, *Homo habilis*, the ‘handy man’, wide-roaming *Homo heidelbergensis*, our enigmatic close cousin *Homo neanderthalensis*: all of these, every variety of human primate, were separated from the first birds by an unimaginable leap in time. From a human point of view, birds have always been here. No human was ever born into a birdless world. Picture again that great murmuration of all the birds of earth, milling in their many trillions across the shifting continents, across a hundred millennia. Our history, human history, is a late intrusion, a last-minute spanner in the birds’ workings.

We remain small in the scale of ornithological time but from where we stand we can see that, where we go, where we do our human things, the pattern buckles. Things change—and while, of course, things have always changed, and always will

change, these changes, the warpings and vanishings in our human airspace, they're *ours*. They're not just drift. They're consequences.

Where we act, the birds respond. Birds have never been a lumpen resource for us to plunder. They're not a mineral seam or an oilfield. The world of birds is a dynamic thing: it watches and reacts to everything we do. We and the birds are knotted in an unfathomable symbiosis.

From within the confines of a human lifetime, we really only ever see a snapshot of all this, the world lit by a momentary flashbulb burst. It can seem, sometimes, that everything is still. There have always been blackbirds in the yard. There have always been kittiwakes on the cliffs. There have always been swallows in springtime.

"When I see our ravens I have a feeling, almost, that this island is not mine, but theirs", wrote the naturalist R. M. Lockley in 1939, from his remote home on the Pembrokeshire island of Skokholm. "They have been here from time immemorial. They are, so to speak, indestructible, for they are believed to pair for life, and when one of the pair dies, a young bird immediately steps in to fill the gap. The ravens have been there though all the gaps in the occupation of the island by man, and will probably continue long after man has finished with Skokholm."

Time immemorial: time that we can't remember. But human memories are short. Perhaps the Skokholm rabbit farmers of the fourteenth century did hear the *gronk* of the raven from the mudstone cliffs. Perhaps the raven did cast its shadow, thick-bodied, long-fingered, over the settlements of Iron Age islanders. We don't know. *Can* we know?

There are ravens' nests on the crystalline rockfaces of western Greenland. There, too, at the stony edges of the icefield, are other nests—ancient nests. Littered with harebones, caked in centuries' worth of excrement, the nests of Greenland's gyrfalcons are among the oldest bird settlements ever found. By sampling the thick and long-accreting layers of falcon guano, scientists have dated the origins of some nests here to perhaps 2,700 years ago. This means that gyrfalcons have nested on these sites, these exact sites, for just about as long as a city called Rome has stood on the seven hills. A gyrfalcon, pale,

dark-speckled and heavy-shouldered, glaring peregrine-like out at the slate-grey Atlantic, settled herself here to lay two or three eggs of tarnished gold at about the same time as Assyria was laying siege to Tyre, and Hoshea, his kingdom's last king, came to the throne of Israel. They were there then, and they are there now: hunting hare and ptarmigan, and crying *kya, kya, kya* from the cold cliff-sides.

But 700 BCE is really not so long ago. Even the six-thousand-year occupancy of a penguin colony on Adelaide Island, Antarctica—evidenced by a metres-deep penguin midden of guano, nest-stones, eggshells and dead chicks—doesn't mean much, on the scale of bird-time, though it was founded before Thebes, before Hebron, before Athens. Change is still what birds are all about.

When I was born, in 1978, there were still cornfields on the English mainland where the ratcheting call of the corn-crake could be regularly heard. There aren't now. There were no red kites in Britain, outside of a few wooded cwms in mid-Wales. Now they're everywhere: winnowing their tails in motorway up-drafts, lurching into heavy flight from country-lane roadkill, squabbling with urban magpies for takeaway leftovers. There are parakeets stripping bare bird-feeders in London back gardens and cranes dancing in the Norfolk fenlands. The world is different; *we're* different, and so are the birds.

There's a famous and much-loved poem by Ted Hughes, about swifts. It tends to do the rounds on Twitter every June. *They've made it again*, it goes, *Which means the globe's still working*. It's a poem that looks at the world against a short scale. If the globe's really still working, there'll come a time when spring arrives without the swifts; there'll come a time, sooner or later, when the swifts go somewhere else, or stay where they are, in Congo or Rwanda, or perhaps when there simply aren't any swifts, here or anywhere. The world has been without swifts before.

History isn't so much about the passage of time as the study of change. How did we get from then to now, from there to here? To write the history of birds and people, you can look at how they've changed us—how their faces stare out in daubed red ochre from our cave-art, how their songs echo through the pages of our poetry, how we've dressed ourselves in their bones

and feathers, taught ourselves to read the code of their microbiology—or you can look at how we’ve changed them. This book seeks to do the second thing. This is a book about our place in their history.

No nightingale ever wrote an ode about John Keats and no snowy heron or Carolina parakeet ever painted a portrait of John James Audubon, but we’ve shaped the history of birds—even the culture of birds—in a thousand other ways. Often without meaning to, we’ve disturbed the currents of their perpetual motion. We’ve drawn them to us and we’ve driven them away; our movements in the world, sometimes deft, sometimes fumbling, have kicked up opportunities, hazards, vectors of change, reasons for fear or flight.

Robert Burns saw a headlouse busy in the bonnet of a lady in church, and wrote of what a fine thing it would be had humankind the power *to see ourselves as others see us*. This book is about humanity, about us, as we must look to the birds; it’s the story of human history, from a bird’s eye view.

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