

Spreading their wings as dusk falls

On our collective fascination with birds

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Mark Avery

REMARKABLE BIRDS

240pp. Thames and Hudson. £24.95 (US \$39.95).
978 0 500 51853 3

Simon Barnes

THE MEANING OF BIRDS

324pp. Head of Zeus. £16.99.
978 1 78497 070 3

What is it about birds? There seems to be a never-ending stream of books about them. Books about how to identify birds and where to find them; popular scientific accounts of their behaviour, distribution and migrations; celebrations of their physical beauty and songs; explorations of their cultural histories in art, literature and music; studies of their symbolic roles in myth and folklore; political appeals for their protection and conservation; and books about books about birds. The great naturalist and the founder of modern ornithology, John Ray, gave this severe warning in 1691 about literary overproduction, which should be on the desk of every publisher:

In all ages wherein learning hath flourished, complaint hath been made of the itch of writing and the multitude of worthless books, wherewith importunate scribblers hath pestered the world. Mark Avery and Simon Barnes, however, manage to escape these strictures on mere book-making. They find new ways of treating the familiar themes mentioned above, and through these they also ask the deeper questions about the source of the fascination birds have for us and why, in the end, this matters.

Avery begins by reminding us about the sheer ubiquity of birds. They are found throughout the world from pole to pole and in every habitat from oceans, mountains, rainforests and gardens through to our city centres. “Almost every human who has ever lived”, he says, “has probably seen or heard a bird almost every day.” A remarkable thought in itself, and not something that could be said about mammals, fish, or flowers. Barnes starts with their power of flight, the capacity in birds we envy above all, and a standard motif in our dreams, myths and imaginings. He mentions the magnificent church at Blythburgh in Suffolk on the Blyth estuary, which is teeming with birds in most seasons. If you enter the church and gaze upwards, there in the vaulted roof is a flight of twelve angels. And how did the craftsmen mark their special status, somewhere between men and gods? They gave them wings. Barnes goes on to identify the wings as those of marsh harriers, a common raptor in the area; this is at best speculative, but birders can’t stop themselves playing these games.

The two books share a great deal in their range and their sympathies, but they are structured in quite different ways, which in turn play to the strengths of their authors. Avery was trained as a scientist, and worked for the RSPB for some twenty-five years, latterly in the key role of Conservation Director. He is now a campaigning author, blogger and environmental activist, who has written important books on the extinction of the passenger pigeon and on grouse shooting. *Remarkable Birds* is in a more relaxed mode and gives a species-by-species account of sixty-seven especially interesting and charismatic birds. Each profile is short, but full of intriguing and up-to-date information about the species in question, beautifully illustrated with prints and drawings drawn largely from the British Library collections.

What is distinctive about Avery’s aviary is, first, that it is unbounded in time and space, so we get birds of paradise, hummingbirds, emperor penguins, quetzals and so on, along with local favourites such as the nightingale, peregrine and cuckoo; and we also get famous extinct species such as the moa, great auk and dodo to provide a historical dimension and a conservationist angle. On top of that, Avery

that the secretary bird has the longest legs of any bird of prey (did you even know it was a bird of prey?), what devastating feats it can perform with them (stomping snakes), and one striking functional disadvantage of their length (it has to crouch to drink since its neck only reaches half-way down the legs). He is perhaps less strong on some of the folklore and mythology, where one suspects his own information is more second-hand (*pace* Wikipedia, Aesop not Aristotle was the source of the goldcrest and eagle legend). The book as a whole, however, is packed with all manner of interesting facts, expertly presented and all tending to enlarge and enrich our appreciation of the wonderful variety of the world’s 10,000 bird species.

In *The Meaning of Birds*, Simon Barnes covers many of the themes present in Avery’s volume, but proceeds topic by topic, using different species to illustrate the topics rather than vice versa. He too has an eye for the telling detail, for example the tiny projecting nose-

different professional interests as a sports journalist and a naturalist: the crossbill heard flying over Greenwich Park while Barnes was covering the equestrian events at the 2012 Olympics; the cedar waxwing and bald eagle at the Ryder Cup in Michigan in 2004; the bananaquits when he was in Barbados for the Test cricket. Occasionally, perhaps, the newshound gets a little carried away by the prospect of some sensational copy, as when he reports the records of a gamekeeper’s carnage on a Scottish estate in the nineteenth century, claimed to include not only large numbers of golden eagles, common buzzards and hen harriers (all only too likely), but also 371 rough-legged buzzards, six gyrfalcons and seven red-footed falcons (highly improbable, the first two are very rare in Britain and the third is a Mediterranean species). More seriously, he has particularly important points to make about the way birds define places and are in turn defined by them, about the deep human responses to birdsong and the avian capacity for flight, and about our special fascination with raptors. These latter, he explains, are, paradoxically, indicators of a healthy ecology – the predators don’t control the numbers of prey species; it’s the other way round.

Both Barnes and Avery are committed conservationists and have shaped their books accordingly. Their narratives are consistently entertaining and eye-opening, but they all point, in the end, to the need to value better, and therefore protect, this remarkable class of creatures from the many threats they face in the modern world. In 2013, twenty-five conservation bodies in Britain collaborated to produce a comprehensive “State of Nature” report (updated in 2016), recording in meticulous detail the changes in status of some 3,400 species in Britain, including mammals, plants, fungi, butterflies, dragonflies and, of course, birds. It was a sober, scientific compilation, but the results were startling. Over the past fifty years, 60 per cent of all wildlife species had declined, many of them sharply, to the point where a number of much-loved breeding birds are at risk of becoming extinct: skylarks are down nationally by 61 per cent, cuckoos and curlews by 62 per cent, lapwing by 64 per cent, corn bunting by 90 per cent, grey partridge by 91 per cent and turtle dove by 96 per cent (so now almost gone); and the figures for flowers, butterflies, moths and other insects are as bad or worse. The dimensions of this crisis have still not impinged on the general consciousness, however, and are scarcely even mentioned by mainstream political parties.

Is it already too late? Simon Barnes’s book is published by Head of Zeus, an imprint established in 2012. The name is a tribute to the Greek goddess Athene, who was said to have sprung fully formed from the head of her father Zeus. Athene (Minerva is the Roman equivalent) was the goddess of wisdom, and the publishing company takes as its colophon an image of her sacred symbol, the little owl. Hegel warned that understanding always comes after the event and with hindsight: “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only as dusk falls”.



Arctic tern from *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon

divides his book into eight major sections, dealing with aspects such as song, flight, love life, endangered species and symbolic relationships; this enables him to make some general points about these themes and slant the pen portraits accordingly. That gives the whole book a more coherent and satisfying feel than some other collections with a similar gallery of exhibits.

Avery is at his strongest when explaining what is now known about the behaviour and ecology of each species and their often astonishing adaptations—did you know, for example,

cone and nictating eyelids that enable peregrines to breathe easily and see clearly in their headlong 200-mph stoops; and statistics relating to gliding efficiency in ski-jumpers, flying squirrels and wandering albatrosses (guess who wins hands down). He also has a very attractive range of reference, with apt quotations from, among others, Woody Allen, Douglas Adams, James Joyce, Bob Dylan, Ginger Rogers and Sigmund Freud. There are many personal anecdotes as well, which often involve intersections between Barnes’s