

Dinna say owt about me pigeons

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Mark Cocker and
David Tipling

BIRDS AND PEOPLE
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Birds are everywhere. They span the globe from the most inhospitable regions of the Arctic and Antarctic, across oceans and seas, through desert, mountain and plain, forest and jungle, right into the domesticated landscapes of our cities, farms and back gardens. But they get further still – not content with their presence in the physical world, they have made their homes within us too. They populate our minds and imaginations, arouse our emotions, become intimately associated with particular times and places, and intervene continuously in our daily lives. They enter our language as figures of speech – we talk about craning our necks, larking about, swanning around – and sometimes as buried metaphors (jinx is the ancient Greek word for wryneck, thought to be an evil charm); we make verbs of gull, rook, snipe and crow; we enlist owls, swallows and storks in proverbial sayings; we identify our political leaders as hawks or doves; and we know just what we mean when we call someone a magpie, vulture, dodo or gannet. And once we have internalized these conceptions of birds, we project them back onto the world in the form of symbols – on national flags, stamps and coins; on our street and pub names (some 3,000 of the latter in Britain alone); in churches (eagles as lecterns) and bookshops (Penguins, Pelicans, Puffins); and on sports logos (the Toronto Blue Jays, Arizona Cardinals, Norwich Canaries). We brand and decorate all manner of commercial products with birds: wallpaper, mugs, dresses, T-shirts and ornaments. And throughout history many of the world's armies have marched under the standard of a bird (usually an eagle). Birds, in short, have deeply penetrated our lives, and *Birds and People*, Mark Cocker's magnificent and extraordinary book, is in that sense as much about us as about them.

There has been a surge of interest in recent years about the place of birds (and wildlife generally) in human culture. Changing configurations of professional collaboration have emerged, as in the "New Networks for Nature" alliance, in which Cocker himself has played a formative role, and new magazines such as *Earthlines* have been established. There have also been some important new genres of publication, including the series inspired and pioneered by Richard Mabey with his *Flora Britannica* (1996), continued by Cocker with *Birds Britannica* (2005) and most recently by Peter Marren with a volume on invertebrates, inevitably entitled *Bugs Britannica* (2010). These are produced in the format of large reference works – dense with text, taxonomically ordered and heavily illustrated; but they are also highly original works both of scholarship and the imagination, weaving together reportage, science, information and personal experiences in an exhilarating mix, all presented in demotic style as an inclusive and collaborative exercise.

Birds and People takes the process even further, certainly in the breadth and depth of its coverage, and is surely the *ne plus ultra* of the genre. It weighs in at 8 pounds (about the weight of a flamingo or two and a half ostrich eggs), has 592 pages of tightly set double-column text, containing over 430,000 words, and deals with almost all the families that comprise the world's 10,500 species of birds; it is also

beautifully illustrated by some 400 of David Tipling's remarkable photographs. The work has been eight years in the planning, we are told, some five years of intensive writing and has involved 650 contributors from eighty-one countries.

Cocker pays generous tribute to his colleagues in this enterprise, in particular Jonathan Elphick, a long-time research collaborator and a major natural history author in his own right, and John Fanshawe, who contributes a thoughtful envoi about the conservation issues that were the starting point for this volume and the role that organizations like BirdLife International can play in orchestrating a creative collaboration of this kind to support their lobbying of governments and political agencies. Cocker dedicates the volume to his worldwide network of contributors, whose miscellany of anecdotes, life stories and dubious reports must have taken some tactful editing but which include many gems, such as this quotation from a former pitman in Durham, "Say what tha likes about me or ma lass, but dinna say owt about me pigeons".

Tipling is given joint billing on the title page, a recognition of the fact that his photographs are far more than a publisher's seductive ornamentation. The best of these are in fact texts in themselves and an indication of how far nature photography has now progressed as an art. The winking spotted owl will charm readers and the threatening eagle owl may startle them, but the shots of the cockfight and the Papuan headmen in their finery tell revealing human stories as well as ornithological ones. Moreover, in the photos of wader flocks, which, as Cocker's lyrical caption has it, "assault the senses in the sensuous turmoil of their movements, in the rush of mixed colours and in the woodwind music of their collective flight", the camera is not just showing us something closer or sharper than we could see unaided, but something we would not see at all without the non-representational artistry of the photographer.

But in the end the book is driven by the text, which represents an extraordinary feat of comprehension, disciplined passion and literary skill. Cocker has sifted through a mass of printed and anecdotal material and subjected it to serious critical scrutiny. Compilations of folklore have a habit of lazily reproducing all the misunderstandings and fallacies of their predecessors, but Cocker and Elphick have worried away at many of these traditional stories to find the source of such pieces of popular wisdom as the "wise owl", the nightjar as "goatsucker" (a very widespread and persistent myth), the true identity of Herodotus' "crocodile bird" (supposedly a tooth pick for its dangerous hosts), the ill omen attached to the albatross (a misreading of Coleridge), the symbolism of the resplendent quetzal and



A headdress displaying the breast shield of a Superb Bird of paradise, Papua New Guinea

the "sacredness" of the sacred ibis.

Birds and People is not a book about identification, taxonomy or bird behaviour, but it draws on the best modern work in science where that is relevant to the main theme. We get a very balanced and tactful assessment of the controversy over the continued existence of the ivory-billed woodpecker, and excellent summaries of such things as the biometrics and kinetics of the hummingbird family, the physiology of the bar-tailed godwit's marathon migrations and the cognitive capacities of the corvids. And there are also some exemplary essays on particular species, like the long essay of some 8,500 words on the red junglefowl, also known as the domestic chicken, which is the most numerous species of bird on the planet and also, as the text makes clear, the most abused.

Cocker adds to this research from his own extensive first-hand experience in the field. He makes only one personal appearance in the photographs, as far as I can see, a cameo Alfred Hitchcock moment when he is seen warily interposing his tripod between himself and a menacing male Southern Cassowary, "the most dangerous bird on earth", which has a reputation for inflicting disembowelment and other mortal injuries on its enemies (the reported human fatalities are calmly assessed from a safer distance in the text). But the author's personal presence is strongly felt throughout the volume. He has clearly witnessed for himself in the Papuan jungles the birds of paradise,

whose extravagant plumages and courtship behaviour he describes so very exactly and vividly. There is of course a paradox and a risk in such a privileged encounter, as the great nineteenth-century naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace observed in *The Malay Archipelago*, which chronicled some of the same phenomena. The observer's personal pleasure has to be balanced against the intrusion and interference it encourages from others, which may in the end destroy what is so valued and admired. There are countless other occasions too where Cocker's keen eye and ear are in evidence, and one senses the observer in the field, notebook in hand, drafting his first impressions for later use. This gives many of the individual entries a fresh and authentic force of a kind lacking in most other large-scale enterprises of this kind.

There are just a few regrets. The book examines 144 of the world's families of birds plus two extinct families (the elephant birds of Madagascar and the moas of New Zealand). *Appendix 3* lists the fifty-nine families that are not covered because of their "limited cultural profiles", and these between them comprise just 602 of the world's 10,500 species. That was a perfectly sensible decision on both editorial and practical grounds, whatever one's wistful regrets about the absence of such appealing birds as the shoebill, plains wanderer, rock-jumper and Australian fairy wren. But it would have been interesting to have some speculation why these particular species and families have failed to acquire general significance, if only to explain at some deeper level why the birds that *are* treated have become encoded in our cultures.

The bibliography is excellent and very full (the omission of Aristotle is a slip that can easily be corrected), but the other reference items at the end of the volume are a little more patchy. The short Glossary in *Appendix 1* was perhaps not strictly necessary since most technical terms are explained on first appearance. The Biographical Details in *Appendix 2* could usefully have been fuller, however: the notes are interesting and well-turned, but if Aelian, John Ray and H. D. Thoreau qualify, then what about E. A. Armstrong, J. J. Audubon and Alexander Wilson?

The index, too, is spare in its coverage of general topics for those who might want to follow through a theme such as domestication, costume/adornment, flight, shooting, song or music (none of which appear as headwords). These are of course tiny blemishes when measured against the qualities of the book as a whole, but one wishes the publisher could have done more to ensure that the authors' prodigious labours were given the finishing touches they deserve.

Most encyclopedic works aspire no higher in their prose than the pedestrian virtues of the *Highway Code* or a decent Operating Manual – clear and functional but drained of all life and creativity. But Mark Cocker soars above all this, borne aloft by a style familiar to readers of the exquisite miniatures in his *Guardian* "Nature Notes" and his earlier books such as *Crow Country*; and here, remarkably, that quality of the writing is sustained throughout the whole length of this gigantic enterprise. The publication of *Birds and People* is a major literary event as well as an ornithological one.