



Birds Are Inspirational

AFA 2006 Convention Keynote Address

David Waugh, Loro Parque Fundacion

Given that the theme of the AFA Convention 2006 is “The beauty of birds”, I decided to make this keynote address about the inspirational effects that birds have on us humans, because it is indeed their beauty which inspires us. Exactly what constitutes the beauty of birds, and in which ways we are inspired, are points for substantial discussion. But I can state at the outset that birds transmit something which unites us – it brings us together and labels us as “bird-lovers”. I might want to be recognised as a professional ornithologist, but as sure as eggs are eggs, I *do* want to be known as a lover of birds. And so, we are united by an enchantment with birds, and in this sense we have a collective experience. But of course, it is also a personal experience. Each one of us has his or her life’s journey with birds, and I ask your indulgence to include in this presentation some parts of my journey with these feathered friends.

Apart from a rash of distractions in my teens, I cannot ever remember being without an interest in birds. They always caught my eye – I always wanted to track down the hidden bird making the sound in the nearby bush. But there are certain events which left an indelible impression on my mind, especially one from an early age. The delightful House Martin (*Delichon urbica*) is the ecological equivalent in the Old World of the New World Cliff Swallow (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*). When I was six, I found a young House Martin resting on the sidewalk, which did not attempt to fly away at my approach. It had probably flown from the nest a tad early, but no doubt would soon have taken flight again. Of course, I did not know that, but fully expected to be able to help it if I could get it back to my nearby house. Running home, I was fascinated by the sporadic appearance from between the feathers of scuttling parasites called louse flies. I lacked the squeamishness about them that I developed in later life when I was studying several species of swallows.



A House Martin. The species that gave David Waugh an abrupt awakening to the beauty of birds. Photo by Colin Bates

Rushing excitedly into the house, there was my mother at the kitchen sink with my two-year old sister clinging to her apron. I opened my hand to let the bird fly, seeing at the same time my mother shaking her head against it but, too late, the bird fluttered down to the kitchen floor and my sister, with nothing more than a reflex action, saw the movement, stepped out, and in that instant the bird’s life was gone. This itself was a crashing blow, but it was nothing compared to the silent and tearful rage of my mother, who intensely mourned the careless loss of one of God’s beautiful creatures. Despite the many more young birds that I found in my childhood, I was never again so careless. Moreover,

that painful event triggered something inside - it made me more aware of the beauty of birds and the fragility of life. The experiences I have had with birds ever since have been overwhelmingly uplifting. For me, birds are always “there”, like a second shadow, and they accompany my life because of their beauty. And each of us bird-lovers in all likelihood shares the same sentiment.

At this point we verge on the age-old questions of what people find inspiring and why. I think it wise to side-step entering into such extensive and philosophical territory in the space of this presentation. However, there are two aspects worth mentioning. The first is that while we bird-lovers find birds inspirational, we know that a whole lot of people out there in the big wide world do not feel what we feel – they do not perceive birds in the same way – they do not carry birds as a second shadow. That’s not to say that they are totally impervious to the presence of birds in their surroundings: in their daily lives people have always noticed, and hopefully will continue to notice birds. But it is true to say that the level of consciousness that people have of birds is a gradation, from those folks who notice them a lot, to those who would virtually need a bird to fly into their face to notice it. We should be concerned about the people for whom birds are virtually invisible, and this is something to which I will return at the end of the presentation.

Let’s turn this discussion on its head and explore the other aspect. Where does that imperceptible barrier lie between a person who is easily conscious of birds in his or her surroundings, and a bird-lover who derives continual inspiration from birds? Can we adequately describe the traits of the latter which set us apart? There are many – too many to include here – but, getting out of bed every two hours through the night to feed baby birds comes to mind, or doing a full day’s work in the aviaries before leaving home to have another full working day in the office, or getting up at 4.00 in the morning to go and watch birds in the middle of a bug-infested swamp. This is normal behaviour – to us. To those folks on the other side of that invisible barrier, it is anything but. We know that we are inspired, but they see that we are, to use a polite word – obsessed! I have a sneaking feeling they could be right.

For example, are birders (or bird-watchers – we argue amongst ourselves about the term) obsessed? Let me dwell for some moments on this fringe of society. What is the image that non-birders have of birders? Bill Oddie, British birder-cum-celebrity, described it to a tee, as retired colonels or older unmarried ladies in tweed suits, with long woolly stockings, curly walking sticks, and binoculars that look like opera glasses.

Or younger to middle-aged men, living in windswept places as sensitive loners. So, quaint and cranky, or rugged and mysterious, but united by the magic of birds. Given that it takes one to know one, the reality is far from the image. Yes, there are many birders who are affable, generous, witty and delightful company, but they’re no fun! Conversely, birders have been described as tense, competitive, selfish, shifty, dishonest, distrusting, arrogant, pedantic and unsentimental, with jealousy as the emotion they know best. Oddie gives the reason why. They are collectors. They collect their sightings of birds and transcribe them into lists – life-lists, state-lists, garden-lists, airport-lists. This indeed is fertile territory for competitiveness and jealousy. And it is *always* fraught with tension, because a seriously rare bird can be seen by another birder and then fly away never to be seen by you *ever in your lifetime*.



Bird-watchers caricatured by Paige and Larry Koosed. www.koosed.com

Nit-picking is another trait of birders. Oddie takes a playful swipe at the so-called bird books written by people who really know nothing about birds. Their ignorance allows them to indulge a level of sentimentality which is simply not borne out by the facts. He cites “Jonathan Livingston Seagull” as a book title with such imprecision that no self-respecting birder would have written it. “Jonathan Livingston Second-winter lesser Black-backed Gull maybe, but just seagull is a cop-out. And anyway, gulls are quarrelsome, spend most of their time scrabbling around on landfills, and

pollute drinking water on reservoirs – hardly the model to get all mystic about the wondrous power of flight of birds.

And birders have their own lexicon. As a birder you don't "see" a bird, you "have" it, as in "I had a sapsucker in the woods". And birders also abbreviate, so that for example an Icterine Warbler (*Hippolais icterina*) becomes an "lcky", and if you have just seen one you have, in fact, just had an lcky. And if somebody saw one and you didn't, then you have been "gripped-off", which is an entirely unpleasant experience whichever way you look at it. What did I previously say about the image we bird-lovers have in the eyes of ordinary people!? However, one of those birder words is special because it encapsulates the very essence of the bird in question. The multiple intangibles of a bird are immediately made tangible with this word. It means the recognisable characteristics of the bird in outline and the way the bird moves. Publishers of ornithological texts accept the use of this word. The word is "jizz" – birders speak about the jizz of a bird.

Where did this word come from? Perhaps it is a corruption of the catchy acronym G.I.S.S. (meaning General Impression of Shape and Size) coined early in World War 2 for aircraft crews to report the approach of enemy aircraft. It is even said that Roger Tory Peterson's system for field identification was adapted to airplane recognition in the US towards the end of the war, and that Life magazine ran an ID section on this matter based on Peterson's field guide. But, just to muddy the waters, it seems that jizz first appeared in British ornithologist T.A. Coward's 1922 book, in which he mentions a West Coast Irishman applying the word to birds and other animals.

This word is part of the make-up of birders. I have described some of their singularities somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but these apparent peculiarities are purely a reflection of the passion that these people have for birds. For them, birds are simply inspirational.

No less so for aviculturists – people equally enraptured by their subjects. People who similarly might be viewed as obsessed by the folk on the other side of that indiscernible line between bird-lover and other. I feel less sure of my ground in attempting to lampoon aviculturists. Prudently I will leave the squabble between aviculturist and bird breeder to those much more in the know. But there are many intriguing characteristics of, and instantly recognised by bird-keepers, perhaps best called bird-addicts. These quirks, or perfectly normal behaviours depending on your point of view, are a manifestation of the joy we derive from the birds in our care – because of their beauty.

To say more about their intoxicating effect on us, let me focus more on the birds rather than on the people. Logically, for anything to have an impact on us it must have a presence, which one or more of our senses can detect. With birds this is not an issue – birds have PRESENCE in capital letters. They assail our sense with their daily lives. Above all they have unrivalled visibility – we encounter them virtually everywhere, including of course in the place where we most expect to see them – the air.

Birds are masters of flight and masters of the air – a dimension from which the other vertebrate classes are largely excluded. When you go from home to the

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office, or make a journey anywhere, birds will be out there on fence-posts, telegraph-wires, tree-tops and flying overhead. You can even keep a count of them on your journey – bird-lovers do that kind of thing, even when behind the wheel of several tons of metal moving at speed! In contrast, how many mammals, reptiles or amphibians will you see? Probably none, but if you're fortunate maybe a couple of squirrels and a jack-rabbit will put in an appearance. The point I'm making is that birds, with their colour vision, have a mode of life which makes them so obvious to us that we can contemplate them, and be inspired by them.

When did you last hear somebody say, "hey kids, let's go to the park and feed the lizards", or "honey, go out to the yard and change the feeder for the salamanders", or "darn, the fox has been in the frog-house again"? Mammals are doggedly low profile. They like to skulk around at night and sniff fragrant little packages left for them by other mammals. Of course, there are many mammals of stunning appearance and behaviour, but they are not in-your face like birds are. We need to go to places like the African plains to really appreciate mammals, and even there our attention will rapidly wander to the birds. It's not the magnificent Black Rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) we're looking at – it's the Yellow-billed Oxpecker (*Buphagus africanus*) digging into the rhino's ear that grabs our attention. Or perhaps it is the cackling band of vultures a short distance away, squabbling over entrails of a recently deceased mammal – not beautiful I admit, but spell-binding none-the-less. Let's face it – how many feet deep in decomposing mammal remains would the African plains be after a week with no vultures! Good for the flycatchers no doubt.

And boy, those vultures can really fly, scarcely visible as dots circling high over the plains, covering dozens of miles without a single flap of the wings, with terrifically keen eyesight. The instant the next meal turns belly-up, down drop the vultures like stones, using visual cues to home in on the banquet. New World vultures also have acute vision, but we know that sense of smell is important for them in locating food; particularly where it lies hidden from sight in dense forest, The Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) is the guy doing most of the sniffing. When he goes down, the King Vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*) heavyweights follow. To test this mechanism, David Houston of Glasgow University bought an indecent quantity of dead chickens in Venezuela and dispersed them around the forest floor, both covered and exposed, and in various states of decomposition. It turns out that your average New World vulture has gourmet tendencies. Too fresh is ignored, even if it can be seen. Too far gone is also left alone. However, there is a level of putrefaction which



Author, David Waugh, banding seabirds in the English Channel. Photo by David Waugh

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is deemed just right. Sounds a bit like “Goldilocks and the three bears”. What the locals in Venezuela thought about David is not hard to imagine, but never mind – he was inspired by birds.

This is an appropriate point to digress briefly to declare that birds are least likely to exhilarate us through our sense of smell. In general we do not associate birds with odours, certainly not the kind to rival Chanel number 5. I mentioned that Turkey Vultures have a keen sense of smell, but anybody who has worked with vultures will tell you that after handling them you do not go straight to the sushi bar. I wonder how many other kinds of birds leave a stink on you. The bizarre Hoatzin (*Opisthocomus hoazin*) of South America might – its local name is “Stinky Turkey”, but I understand that this is because its meat has an unpleasant smell. However, it’s probably only by getting into the midst of a large sea-bird colony that one can really get to appreciate the stench that certain birds can produce. It lacks easy description – you have to be there to become one of the enlightened. When I lived on the small island of Jersey in the English Channel, every June I would go to the nearby island of Alderney to band nestling Gannets (*Morus bassanus*) and other sea-birds in a sizeable colony on an off-shore rock.



A Hooded Pitohui. Discovered in 1989 by Jack Dumbacher, it was the first of several poisonous bird species to be found in New Guinea. Photo by Jack Dumbacher

These were some of the most memorable days of my life, but after several hours of squelching through semi-liquid guano you can imagine how fragrant I smelt. With unpredictable sea conditions, one time we were delayed leaving the rock, and I had to rush for the plane with no time to shower and change. These were little island-hopper planes with confined cabin space for a journey of 30 minutes. As I boarded with my delightful bouquet, I weighed up whether to boldly announce that the stench was mine and apologize upfront, or keep quiet and hope that nobody would pass out. In the end I opted to keep quiet, staring fixedly at the back of seat ahead of me, for what seemed like the longest 30 minutes of my life, and I suspect of everybody else’s!

Although young Shags (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) in the nest will try to squirt liquid faeces on you, I don’t think that birds use smell *per se* as a defense. How fantastic though the finding by John Dumbacher in 1989 in New Guinea of the Hooded Pitohui (*Pitohui dichrous*), the first poisonous bird to be discovered. John caught one in a net and, licking his hand after getting scratched, he found his mouth going numb for several hours. He said it was a sensation like touching a 9-volt battery, which I confess I don’t habitually do, but I’ll take his word for it. After investigations it was revealed that a complex alkaloid toxin, homobatrachotoxin, was concentrated in the feathers and skin of the bird. It is similar to the potent toxin of poison dart frogs. Since then, three poisonous species of *Pitohui* have been discovered, as well as another poisonous New Guinea passerine bird called the Blue-capped Ifrita (*Ifrita kowaldi*). The local people, who otherwise have a broad menu of forest bird species, call the *Ifrita* the “bitter bird” and the *Pitohui* the “rubbish bird”, these being the names in pidgin English. It is rumoured that somebody might have slipped some *Pitohui* onto the plate of Prince Charles when he was due to open the new parliament of Papua new Guinea. For instead of saying “I am the Queen’s eldest son”, he lapsed into pidgin instead and said “mi numba wan pikinin bilong missas Kwin”.

Let me return to the subject of the visibility of birds, particularly due to their mastery of flight. This single characteristic gave humankind the universal dream of free flight – the certain sensation of soaring through the air, arms out-stretched. Flight means space, light, thought, imagination – and early in human culture the bird came to signify the soul. In the koran, the Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) is the messenger bird between heaven and Earth, and when Mohammed went to heaven he found the Tree of Life surrounded by other trees with countless brightly-colored singing birds – the souls of the faithful. So too are the bible,

the torah and diverse oriental religious texts scattered with references to birds. The fabled Phoenix rising from the ashes symbolised death and re-birth. In ancient Greek legend, Icarus and his father Daedulus made wings from wax and feathers, but the exuberant Icarus flew too high, the sun melted his wings, and he fell to his death in the ocean. In Native American mythic tradition, stories abound of the Wakinyan Tunka, the Great Thunderbird – representation of the eagle, who from high altitude attacked the enemies of his human friends. And innumerable flying-machines have been dreamt-up and attempted by humans over the centuries.

I was speaking about the Turkey Vulture, and I must say that I love to watch their leisurely and effortless progress, gently rolling from side to side as they quarter the air. But we have to look elsewhere for the real extroverts of flight – and where better to start than with the hummingbirds. They represent an extreme and wonderful case. Amongst birds, their habitual ability to fly vertically and backwards, by rotating the entire wing, is unique. On the edge of a forest clearing, I remember watching a tiny Reddish Hermit (*Phaethornis ruber*) which, with a weight of 1.8 g, vies with the Bee hummingbird of Cuba as the world's smallest bird. Due to the noise of other birds and insects I could not hear the hum of its wings, but instead first noticed its presence by the delicate ripples in the understorey plants fanned by its wings. These could have been beating up to 80 times per second. I know there is a whole sub-culture related to hummingbirds and feeders in back-yards, but there is nothing like the thrill of suddenly being closely eye-balled by a hummer in a tropical forest. They come to inspect bright colors, especially red, so on your next trip to the tropics leave that green camouflage shirt at home and take the bright red one. And I swear to you that the first time you see in flight a Sword-billed Hummingbird (*Ensifera ensifera*) from the Andes, you will think it's a long-tailed passerine flying backwards



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at high speed. One of nature's true wonders is the migration over huge distances of some of the temperate species – nothing more than tiny balls of energy. I put them in the same category of marvel as the migrating Monarch Butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*).

Various species of their close relatives, the swifts, are also long-distance migrants. In Europe you really know that summer has arrived when bands of blackish, sickle-winged, screaming Common Swifts (*Apus apus*) scorch through the streets at reckless speed. These same swifts may fly hundreds of miles from their breeding areas to avoid cold, rainy weather, and this species was one of the first to be studied by radar, which has revealed huge numbers of them ascending at nightfall to great heights in the sky. Most of the tropical swiftlets live a very different lifestyle, but still have remarkable flying abilities. I studied swiftlets in southeast Asia, which regularly involved entering caves with 50,000 or more pairs of these birds tending their nests glued with saliva to the cave walls. In the darkness there was a blizzard of swiftlets but, by using their clicking echolocation, the swiftlets avoided each other and me, Mr Clumsy. The clicking and whirring of the wings were hushed, as was another sporadic and faint

rustling noise which coincided with every spasm of the ground. Because the "ground" was in reality a wall-to-wall carpet of cockroaches living on the rich bounty of droppings from the birds. It was a weird experience, and I never even had a single cockroach on my shoe, let alone climb up my leg!

I also studied swallows, which can be confused by non-birding folk with swifts, but we know them to be quite different, and masters of flight in a different way, their agility, Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) can turn on a dime, and it's their forked tail which affords them such remarkable dexterity. They skim low over field and plain, snapping up the largest flies from the available "insect soup". In general, for any given species of swallow you can predict the average size of fly in the diet, and the average height to catch it, using an index of wing area and tail shape.

If you up-size a swallow and make it mean, then you get a frigatebird. These are large seabirds of astonishing agility, again related to their long pointed wings and deeply forked tail. Most of the time they seem to hang motionless in the air, but suddenly there will be a burst



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of action, the frigatebird mercilessly harassing and effortlessly out-maneuvering another seabird such as a booby, until the tormented bird disgorges its last meal for the frigatebird to scoop up as it falls. This thieving behavior is called kleptoparasitism. Apparently flying fish are the principal food of frigatebirds, which catch them 6 feet or more above the surface of the ocean. This I would truly love to see.

Kites also have forked tails for impressive maneuverability. As birds of prey, they are on the search for live prey or carrion, the latter being favored by the Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*), a common species in Africa, Europe and Asia. It's not too fussy about what it eats, and in the Indian subcontinent it is called the Pariah Kite, ostensibly for its attentions to human corpses left out on roof-tops as part of religious ceremony. The troops of the British armed forces were previously stationed in Yemen. Carrying the midday meal in the open air from the kitchen tent to the eating tent was a risky affair, because a Black Kite could deftly remove the interesting part of the meal from the plate. This behavior earned the bird a very unflattering name, which I will divulge only on request.

Such disparagement would never be shown to the more noble birds of prey, including the falcons. Admired by us for their turn of speed and rapid dispatch of their quarry, falcons have had a long history of close association with humans through the practice of falconry. Probably the most appreciated is the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), the size of a crow, with a 40 inch wing-span, feeding almost exclusively on birds and the fastest creature on the planet. It's hunting method is to soar to a great height and then "stoop" on its flying prey, which means a free fall at speeds around 200 m.p.h. If that wasn't inspiring enough, as soon as it was discovered that the Peregrine Falcon has cones in its nostrils to regulate breathing at high speed, these were mimicked in fighter jets.

I was also going to speak of the flight of albatrosses, but instead I will use another member of that family to wander briefly to another subject - age. In their appearance, what do birds tell us about how old they are? The black and white photo, taken in 1951, shows the late Professor George Dunnet of Aberdeen University holding Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) adult female number 57, which he has just banded. Thirty years later, the color photo shows the ravages of time in the appearance of Prof. Dunnet, but what about the bird? This is Fulmar female 57 again, but she appears identical to what she did thirty years before, and she is now more than sixty. Maybe it's the fish diet which helps!



A pair of Edward's Fig Parrots, the author's favorite parrot species. Photo by Loro Parque Fundación

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Fulmars are strong flyers, and of course no bird could fly without feathers, these being unique to birds and among the most complex structural elements found in vertebrates. As well as for flight and insulation, they are also used for communication, as adornments and patterns of color. Add to these the myriad shapes, sizes, colors and functions of beaks, the length of legs, type of feet, and bare skin color. The combination of these attributes, and the displays the birds use to exaggerate them, provide yet more inspiration for us.

For sheer flamboyance, we must turn to the Birds of Paradise, found principally in New Guinea. Of the 43 species, the *Paradisaea* are especially remarkable for their nuptial plumages and elaborate courtship displays. In all but one species, the males display in a communal "lek" to which females attend and choose which males to mate with. Please pay attention – do not confuse this description with the local discotheque! The exception is the Blue Bird of Paradise (*Paradisaea rudolphi*), which is solitary and displays from an open perch. Here he hangs upside down, flashes electric blue feathers and makes a metallic humming noise perhaps best described as the landing of the aliens. Not all Birds of Paradise are showy. The Brown Sicklebill (*Epimachus meyeri*) is decidedly drab, but it gets a mention from me because of the amazing

call of the male, which made many troops light on the trigger during the last war. The bird is almost impossible to see and the call is indistinguishable from the sound of a machine gun.

Not quite so audacious are the parrots, naturally of great interest to me. They don't possess elongated, showy plumes, but they make up for it with stunning colors, intelligence and sheer joy of life. From the large macaws to the diminutive pygmy parrots, this group offers something for everyone, and we all have our favorites, mine being Edward's Fig Parrot (*Psittaculirostris edwardsii*), for an indefinable reason which I shall call its jizz. As with all birds, the colors are caused either by reflection and diffraction of light – the blue, green, violet and iridescent effects, or pigment, giving the reds, yellows, browns and black. Recently, Kevin MacGraw at Arizona State University discovered that all red parrots use the same set of molecules to color themselves, and it is a unique pigment found nowhere else in the living world.

But do we see what the parrots see? If you watched a wildlife series with, say, the red light source of your television removed (or if you were red-green "color-blind") and you then came up



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with conclusions about color variation in the natural world, would anyone believe you? Probably not, but that is what we humans are doing every time we think we are seeing the color world of animals. Bird color vision differs from that of humans in two main ways. First, birds can see ultraviolet light. It appears that UV vision is a general property of diurnal birds. Second, they have four-, not three-dimensional color vision. So the other sex, other species, the world look different to birds than they do to us. This is a subject with deep implications, and still wide open for investigation.

Can you imagine seeing UV reflectance from the pheasants, those ground-dwelling birds with color, adornments and attitude. The species with long sweeping tails, and the tragopans with their fabulous extensible wattles. The Indian Red jungle Fowl (*Gallus gallus*) is a family member and, as we all know, the ancestor of the domestic fowl. Have you ever looked closely at a rooster – I mean *real* close? The colors it sports in its tail are beautiful. Are chickens inspirational? Perhaps they should be – at least there are some inspired answers from public figures to that perennial question “why did the chicken cross the road?”. These are the answers from:

Pat Buchanan: To steal a job from a decent, hard-working American.

L.A. Police Department: Give us ten minutes with the chicken and we'll find out.

Buddha: If you ask this question, you deny your own chicken nature.

Darth Vader: It can cross, but it cannot escape its destiny. Join me on the dark side of the road! Do not underestimate the power of the road!

Einstein: Whether the chicken crossed the road or the road moved beneath the chicken depends upon your frame of reference.

Ernest Hemingway: To die. In the rain.

Captain James T. Kirk: To boldly go where no chicken has gone before!


A more regal member of the pheasant family, the fabulous Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*), appears frequently in ancient eastern imagery, often associated with Indian royalty as this image shows. This species was even judged worthy of appearance in the Kama Sutra, Kama being the God of love in Hindu myth. I guess the take home message is that you too can easily feed the peacock while attending to other household chores. Perhaps not so strange, parrots are also mentioned in the Kama Sutra but, like mynah birds, are considered notoriously indiscrete.

Sound of course is the other major channel for communication by birds, and the sounds they emit, above

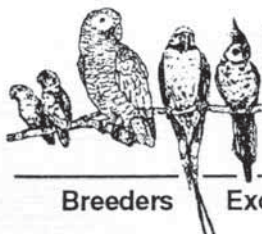


The Nightingale is a small brown bird with towering song. Photo by Ben van den Broek.

all their songs, are a constant source of inspiration to us. The calls of birds include the weird and wonderful, but it is the songsters which have been lauded in poetry and literature throughout the ages. Of all North American birds, the Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottus*) is by far the most famed for its vocal imitations. Besides its own rapturous song, the Mockingbird's repertoire is astounding, including diverse non-bird elements like dogs barking and modems. The common and scientific names leave you in no doubt: to mock is to mimic; *Mimus*, the mimic; *polyglottus*, the polyglot. The Mockingbird Song is your traditional song, known throughout the world from the several pop versions, none of which I will attempt to sing here, least of all the rendering by Eminem.



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Another inspiring songster is the European Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*), eulogized in the 1820's by the poets Shelley and Wordsworth, the latter including this species in no less than 28 of his poems. And William Shakespeare, who has over 600 references to birds in his works, decided that he too needed to write a poem to the Skylark. "Hark! Hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings" makes the recurring allusion to the Skylark's song-flight, ascending into the air until virtually imperceptible, all the while pouring forth its song without seeming to take a breath. The volume is something to marvel at, and if you released a balloon with a radio playing at full blast tied to it, the sound would be dissipated far quicker than the song of a little bird weighing only 40g (1.4 ounces).

The Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) weighs even less, about 24 g, but this small, secretive, dull brown passerine bird has an electrifying song. In the Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare wrote, "...I think the Nightingale, if she could sing by day, When every goose is cackling, would be thought No better musician than the wren!"

Nightingales do also sing during the day, but in the stillness of the night they are explosive – they have your undivided attention. In 1819, John Keats wrote "Ode to a Nightingale", which includes this stanza: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die, To cease upon the midnight with no pain, While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad, In such an ecstasy"

Lyrical verse indeed, but all too prophetic. Two years later Keats died at the age of 25. But in his short lifetime he truly had found birds inspirational.

I would like to talk to you about the wonders of nest architecture, about eggs, strange behaviours and many other things, but my time is up. I will finish by returning to the matter of the people who do not seem to notice birds. It is often said that if all the birds disappeared, then everybody would sit up and notice. Increasingly I worry that this might not be the case, especially for young people growing up in cities. Respect for birds and nature comes from acquiring knowledge about them. And the best stimulus for people to learn is to be inspired by the subject. We are the converted, but I am sure that we can all help to open the eyes of others. ■

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