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Wondering about Birds

Wonder is the first of all the passions.
Descartes

Shingle Street, 15 September 2006

I am watching swallows. They are passing just above me, as they move down the coast in the early stages of their long migration south. A familiar scene, common birds, but utterly absorbing. The swallows are wonderful to watch in flight, driving vigorously forward with quick thrusts from those swept-back wings, then spending some of their forward momentum with sudden swooping and looping excursions or sideways dartings after flying insects. So acrobatic—I feel like applauding and holding up little placards: 10 for tariff of difficulty, 10 for execution, and 10 for artistic impression. Gold medal! How far do they actually fly, I wonder, for each aeronautical mile forward on the journey? One of them comes straight along the line of the seawall towards me, skimming just above the ground, really fast, and then at the last moment he rolls, banks, and veers away. He is close enough for me to take in the steely blue sheen of his back and the blood-red face and throat (surprisingly difficult to see at any distance). I think it is a "he," by the way, from the long tail streamers—the females' tails are just a bit shorter. Did you know you can sex adult swallows in flight this way?

I can see them literally feathering the air, making continual smooth adjustments to vary their speed, direction, and angle of flight. I think of the images of swallows tumbling through the air in Leonardo da Vinci's sketches for his treatises on flight and of the lines by Andrew Young:

> The swallows twisting here and there
> Round unseen corners of the air

Is this why birds inspire such a sense of wonder? This freedom of the air, the buoyancy, the perfect ease of movement? The name "swallow" itself comes from an old Germanic word meaning "cleft stick," a reference to the forked

1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Swallows in Flight* (Codex *On the Flight of Birds*, Biblioteca Reale, Turin, ca. 1505)

tail, which gives it this perfect feather-tip control, and Leonardo took a special interest in the aerodynamics of fork-tailed birds like the swallow and the kite.

I may be wrong in my impression of their speed. Swallows feed closer to the ground than martins or swifts and may seem to be flying faster than they really are. They are closer to us, in this and in various other ways. "Barn swallow" is the official British name now—also in this case the American name—and it once used to be "house swallow" or "chimney swallow," all indicating an intimate sharing of living spaces.

I hear the snap of a passing swallow's bill, but I'm not sure if that means he has just caught something or has just missed something. He calls a few times, a quick and untranscribable sort of bleat. I think of it as *uiveet-uiveet* or perhaps a clipped *ouwhit-ouwhit*. I check the British field guides afterwards and they say *vit-vit* or *tsee-wit* (and that makes me want to check some foreign

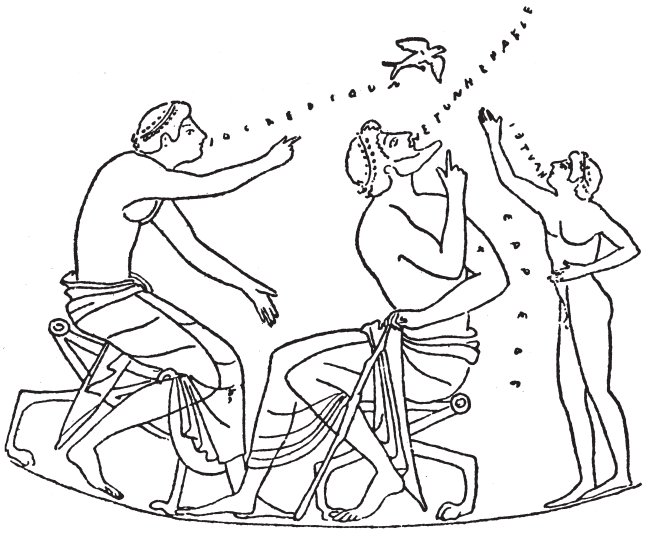
guides, which I'm sure would hear this differently).[1] Now and then one of the swallows breaks into a snatch of their cheerful twittering song interspersed with soft dry trills. I wonder why they should be singing now, on passage?

Looking back along the seawall into the distance I can see more loose groups of swallows coming my way, all instantly recognisable, even a long way off, from their characteristic flight and profile. There are also some house martins travelling with them, and I can pick those out at a glance from their stubbier outline and the little circling glides they make as they feed, usually in some higher corridor of airspace; they also have a more chirrupy call, harder and more penetrating. Sand martins fly differently again, more direct yet at the same time light and fluttery, almost batlike, and there are one or two of those passing by as well. Perhaps I should also be looking out for other strangers caught up in this mixed flock of hirundines, like a red-rumped swallow, a very rare visitor to the United Kingdom. That would be a different kind of thrill, and a local coup. Is there anything in the procession moving in an unusual way?

The swallows keep coming by in straggly groups for the next hour or so, hundreds of them in all; and then there is a pause in the passage. A change of weather, a different line of flight, the end of summer? I think of where they are heading. Strange that it will be just as natural and ordinary for them to be swooping around elephants and crocodiles in southern Africa for their "winter" as it is for them to be here in our gentler countryside. Are these just different seasonal homes or is our hemisphere the primary one because this is where they breed? Do they *belong* in the same way in both landscapes? And are they welcomed back at the other end the same way as they are here in spring? A closely related species of swallow in Australia is actually called the "welcome swallow," which seems a very happy choice of name—remember the scenes in the Minoan frescoes, which are surely welcoming spring and which catch the flight of the swallows beautifully (better than even Leonardo does, in fact; see plate 1a). There is also the nice illustration on a Greek vase where they are actually saying, "Look, a swallow. . . . It must be spring!"

I think how much swallows figure in our representations of the world: in sayings and proverbs, art and literature, myth and folklore. One swallow may

[1] I also check the authoritative *Birds of the Western Palearctic (BWP),* which comes in with a whole range of variant calls (or are they really just different renderings?), including *witt-witt, widwid, wiet-wiet, wic, twic, chwic, huit,* and *kuit,* and then goes on to offer some wonderful versions of distress calls, including *chiir-chiir, dschrlit, zissit, splee-pink,* and *dschiddschid;* and the indefatigable correspondent Vietinghoff-Riesch reports a variety of rather muffled calls when the birds are in danger, for example *zibist, zetsch, tsätsätsa,* and "a quiet *dewihlik* of distress." I shall listen out for that quiet *dewihlik.*



2. Greek vase painting, *The First Swallow of Spring* (in S. Reinach, *Répertoire des vases peints,* 1899)

not a summer make, but it's also true that it wouldn't be summer without the swallows. It is a fact, a semantic and psychological truth and not just a sentimental whimsy, to say that they are part of the meaning of summer for most of us. Suppose that with global warming they found that they could survive the winter here and stayed? Wouldn't "swallows" and "summer" mean something else then? Anyway, half an hour later the passage resumes and they are all around me again. Summer isn't quite ended yet.

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I keep interrupting myself with all these questions, musings, and asides. But then, why should I move in straight lines, any more than the swallows do? This is how I experience birds—some combination on my part of sensation, perception, curiosity, playfulness, and imagination. These swallows make me wonder, in both senses of the word.

This book starts from such wonderings. It is about our experience of birds: the reasons why we are attracted to them, the ways we encounter and describe them, and the significance they have in our lives. I want to explore the sources of what is a widespread and for many people a very powerful interest, even a passion. I look at how this plays out in the different ways we perceive (or misperceive) birds, come to know and identify them, seek them out (in some cases obsessively), and find beauty, pleasure, and excitement in them. That will

lead me to consider the dimensions in which we experience birds, in particular the seasonal cycle of time and the landscape of place. I hope by the end to understand better the ways we think and talk about birds: their names and classifications, their role in our imaginative and emotional lives, and their representations in myth, folklore, and culture. The book is therefore at least as much about ourselves as about birds.

Here are more examples of the sort of questions that interest me and on which I shall reflect within this framework.

- What are our favourite birds and why? Are there charismatic species (or just special experiences)?
- By what right and on what grounds do conservation bodies such as the RSPB (Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds) and the Audubon societies decide which species to privilege and "invest in"?
- Why are rare birds so important to birdwatchers when rarity is obviously just relative to time and place (gannets in London, tufted ducks in Central Park, swallows in December)?
- Why does the act of identification play such a large part in the experience? And why is that more about species than individuals?
- How much is what we see determined by what we know? And why do we make such bizarre mistakes (the cases of the Spanish crop-sprayer and the Scilly cowpat)?
- Does our concern with lists and counting indicate something we should worry about in ourselves? Is this acquisition or experience?
- How does the beauty of a bird differ from that of a butterfly, a tree, or a landscape?
- Can you enjoy a bird's song just as much if you don't know what it is? (Could anyone mistake a nightingale?)
- Why is it so satisfying to see the first swallow or swift of the year?
- Do birds "belong" in certain landscapes and help to define them?
- Do names matter, and are some bird names better or more "real" than others? (Why does the cuckoo seem to speak so many different European languages?)
- Why have birds been so important in augury, folklore, and literature? (And why particular birds such as eagles, owls, and cranes?)
- Is there some third realm between sentimentality and science in which we can relate to birds for what they are?

There are more ruminations than answers in what follows, I have to say. I do, however, summon help from a wide range of sources. Some of these will be familiar, like Gilbert White, John Clare, Keats, Thoreau, Darwin, Audubon,

Roger Tory Peterson, and E. O. Wilson; but others may be less so, at least in this context, like Aristophanes, Kant, Benjamin Franklin, Oscar Wilde, Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and Yogi Berra (talk about herding cats!). In fact, one principal purpose of the book will be to relate an interest in birds to other spheres of life, in both directions. That means a lot of the arguments and examples will be taken from work in literature, biography, philosophy, and science that is not usually thought of in this connection at all but can be brought to bear on the sorts of questions I ask. And it also means trying to use our experience of birds to take us outwards into other domains. The enrichment works in both directions. Some of the particular questions that occur to me watching these swallows can be answered or illuminated by relevant work in other areas, but the same questions can in turn also serve to enlarge and inform our curiosity about the world more generally and about our relation to it. This sort of reciprocity applies to many other activities, like gardening, sport, cooking, beekeeping, and mountaineering, but it may be ignored or resisted by the more introverted practitioners all these interests tend to attract. There is a sort of Gresham's Law of leisure pursuits, whereby the nerd drives out the good. But it need not be so, and my twin objective here is both to encourage some birders to look beyond the end of their telescopes, so to speak, and at the same time to draw in other people uncertain about their qualifications or embarrassed about the company they might be keeping. I want to show something of the range of different interests that can be taken in birds and the corresponding range of questions they provoke.

One large initial question all this may seem to raise, or even beg, is this. Granted that there are all these different kinds of interest and approach, are some more valid than others? Do some actually preclude others? Do we give an equal welcome to the sentimental and the scientific, the descriptive and the lyrical, the loopy and the learned, the acquisitive and the experiential? Do we say, in a generous democratic spirit, that these can all illuminate some aspects of the subject, or do we have to make distinctions and choices? Is there some new kind or combination of interests that may offer special insight and satisfaction? Could there be, in short, any one right way to talk about birds? There is a real question here, and an interesting one, but I think it is best asked towards the end of the book rather than at the beginning, by which time I suspect it may have dissolved or changed into something else. I hope at least that the intervening chapters will suggest some ways of approaching it. A good way to get our bearings at the outset, perhaps, is to look at some actual examples of the different ways people have responded to birds and the different ways they have expressed these responses. That sets up the discussion in a more direct way and demonstrates some of the options.

Witnesses and Prophets

I start with John Clare, who has been very happily described as "the finest poet of Britain's minor naturalists and the finest naturalist of Britain's major poets." He was especially drawn to seek out corncrakes and to write about them in both his poetry and his prose. Corncrakes are rare birds in Britain now, confined as breeding birds to the remote islands of the Hebrides in the far Northwest, and even if you are in the right place at the right time and the birds are "craking," they are so secretive and well-camouflaged that they are still extremely hard actually to see. But in the nineteenth century the landrail (as it was then called) was much more widespread in Britain and was a regular summer visitor to Helpston in Northamptonshire, where Clare lived much of his life. The bird was just as elusive then as now, though, and just as much a source of wonder (a word I notice Clare uses a good deal):

> They look in every tuft of grass
> That's in their rambles met,
> They peep in every bush they pass
> And none the wiser yet,
>
> And still they hear the craiking sound
> And still they wonder why—
> It surely can't be underground
> Nor is it in the sky,
>
> And yet 'tis heard in every vale,
> An undiscovered song,
> And makes a pleasant wonder tale
> For all the summer long.

As for the nest, that is even harder to find:

> A mystery still to men and boys
> Who know not where they lay
> And guess it but a summer noise
> Among the meadow hay.

Clare always pursued mysteries like this and seems to have had a special interest in finding birds' nests, not to rob them but for the sense of discovery this gave.[1] He enjoyed the hunt and the pleasure of knowing the ways of the

[1] He wrote one six-hundred-word poem in which he describes the nests of, among others, the blackcap, redcap (goldfinch), mavis (mistle thrush), blackbird, pettichaps (probably chiffchaff),

3. Corncrake
(Robert Gillmor)

bird well enough to find its nest—intimations here of ideas I shall be exploring further.

But a sense of discovery can take more than one form. The poets Clare and Keats were near contemporaries and their attitudes to nature have often been compared. Clare was a countryman and wrote from intimate knowledge and close observation. He expresses a delight in his findings, sometimes a simple delight but not a merely sentimental one. Indeed, Keats starchily complained that in Clare, "the Description too much prevailed over the Sentiment." Clare for his part thought that Keats had no firsthand knowledge of nature and so idealised it and made use of it for purely symbolic purposes: "his descriptions of scenery are often very fine but as is the case with other inhabitants of great cities he often described nature as she appeared to his fancies and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he described."

Here for comparison are extracts from their very different treatments of the nightingale. First Clare, who discovers another nest and gives it his close attention:

> How curious is the nest: no other bird
> Uses such loose materials or weaves

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firetail (redstart), wren, wryneck, Egypt bird (spotted flycatcher), and swallow. He also devoted separate poems to the nests of the corncrake, nightingale, yellowhammer, skylark, bumbarrel (long-tailed tit), raven, moorhen, peewit (lapwing), and fern owl (nightjar). In addition to enjoying some of these old country names we may wistfully note the wider distribution then of the raven, nightjar, and wryneck, as well as of the corncrake.

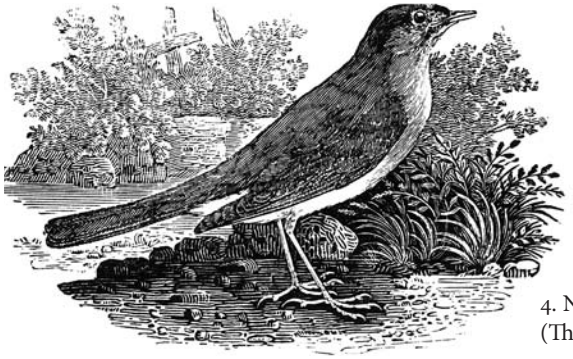
Their dwellings in such spots—dead oaken leaves
Are placed without and velvet moss within
And little scraps of grass and, scant and spare,
Of what scarcely seem materials, down and hair.
For from man's haunts she nothing seems to win,
Yet nature is the builder and contrives
Homes for her children's comfort even here
Where solitude's disciples spend their lives
Unseen, save when a wanderer passes near
That loves such pleasant places. Deep adown
The nest is made, a hermit's mossy cell.
Snug lie her curious eggs in number five
Of deadened green or rather olive-brown,
And the old prickly thorn bush guards them well
And here we'll leave them, still unknown to wrong,
As the old woodland's legacy of song.

Then Keats, discovering himself. Here he is in his "Ode to a Nightingale," with all the stops out:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

And suffering a *petit mort* of passion:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
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!



4. Nightingale
(Thomas Bewick, 1797)

Some later authors have tried to combine the sentiment and the description in a way that is both moving and authentic. There is a line of natural history writing that runs from John Clare through figures such as W. H. Hudson and Richard Jeffries and reaches its furthest development, perhaps, in the work of the reclusive J. A. Baker, whose prose trembles constantly on the edge of excess. His most famous book is *The Peregrine,* an account of his obsessive quest to enter the peregrine's world and in a sense lose himself in it. Here is an extract from the introduction in which he explains the origins of his fascination and his mode of approach. He has just seen his first peregrine:

> This was my first peregrine. I have seen many since then, but none has excelled it for speed and fire of spirit. For ten years I spent all my winters searching for that restless brilliance, for the sudden passion and violence that peregrines flush from the sky. For ten years I have been looking upward for that cloud-biting anchor shape, that crossbow flinging through the air. The eye becomes insatiable for hawks. It clicks towards them with ecstatic fury, just as the hawk's eye swings and dilates to the luring food-shapes of gulls and pigeons.

By the end of the book the objective is accomplished, as he stalks a peregrine preparing to roost:

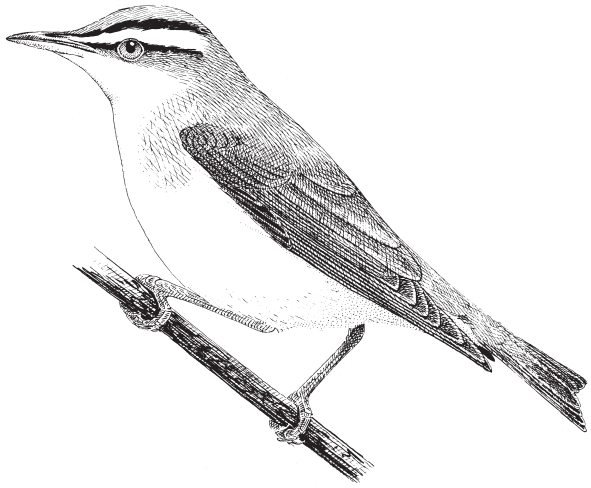
> I ran along the path beside the wall and saw him alighting on a fence-post on the inland side of the dyke. As I approached, he moved farther inland, flitting from post to post. When the fence ended, he flew across to a small thorn bush on the far side of the old sea-wall.
>
> Screened by the low green bank of the wall, I stumble along on my hands and knees towards the place where I think the hawk will be, hoping he will stay there till I come. The short grass is dry and brittle and sweet-smelling. It is spring grass, clean and sharp as salt water. I bury my

face in it, breathe in it, breathe in the spring. A snipe flies up, and a golden plover. I lie still till they have gone. Then I move forward again, very softly, because the hawk is listening. Slowly the dusk begins to uncoil. Not the short wild pang of winter dusk, but the long slow dusk of spring. Mist stirs in the dykes and furs the edges of the fields. I have to guess where I am in relation to the hawk. Three more yards, and I decide to take a chance. Very slowly I straighten up and look over the top of the wall. I am lucky. The hawk is only five yards away. He sees me at once. He does not fly, but his feet grip tightly on the thorny twigs of the bush, the ridged knuckles tense, and big with muscle. His wings loosen, and tremble at the edge of flight. I keep still, hoping he will relax, and accept my predatory shape that bulks against the sky. The long feathers of his breast are rippled by the wind. I cannot see his colour. In the falling gloom he looks much larger than he really is. The noble head lowers, but lifts again at once. Swiftly now he is resigning his savagery to the night that rises round us like dark water. The great eyes look into mine. When I move my arm before his face, they still look on, as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away. The last light flakes, and crumbles down. Distance moves through the dim lines of the inland elms, and comes closer, and gathers behind the darkness of the hawk. I know he will not fly now. I climb over the wall and stand before him. And he sleeps.

That is one kind of passion. Fanaticism is another, and today's twitchers have their own *sensations fortes*. Here is Richard Millington, a leading practitioner in the early days of serious twitching, who published a diary of his successful attempt in 1981 to find more than three hundred species in Britain in one year.[1] Note the combination of close description and euphoria when he encounters a real rarity, excited rather than moved:

11 October. St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly
One Red-eyed Vireo seen feeding in lower part of hedge above the quarry at Porthellick House. Watched in bright sunshine in this, just about the only, sheltered spot on the island! A totally hyperzonky megacrippler,

[1] A real feat then, before the advent of modern communications systems, and therefore seen as more outlandish. The RSPB hierarchy of the time considered *A Twitcher's Diary* so offensive to good taste and to the traditions of their "establishment" organisation that they tried to censor it and actually blacked out the title in a book club advertisement in their magazine *Birds*. The gentlemen versus the players. Three hundred was more species than most birdwatchers had seen in a lifetime then. When Baden-Powell published his *Scouting for Boys* in 1908, he wrote confidently, "There are 177 different kinds of birds in Great Britain," and he urged "the good scout" to discover as many of them as possible.



5. Red-eyed vireo, St. Mary's Isles, Isles of Scilly (October 1980) (Richard Millington)

> perhaps reminiscent of a giant Firecrest. In size possibly a little larger than Garden Warbler, and often appearing pot-bellied with a broad, flat head. Upper-parts goldengreen, extending as a smudge on the "shoulders," with darker bronzy-olive wings and tail. Underparts silky-white with a clear lemon-yellow wash on the vent area and under-tail coverts. Head pattern most striking—bluey-grey crown bordered on either edge by a black stripe, long white supercilium (narrow at bill and flaring out behind eye) and black eye-stripe above green ear-coverts. Rather heavy dark-edged pale bill, strong grey legs and feet, and deep wine-red irises noted. Though moving very quickly between bushes, appeared rather lethargic while feeding, adopting Hippo-like actions to pick up caterpillars which were beaten on the branch before being swallowed. The clean, fresh plumage and yellow vent suggest a juvenile bird.

This sort of pursuit has the potential to generate competitive tensions, of course, especially when flamboyant characters are involved. D.I.M. Wallace pioneered many of the identification criteria that have since found their way into standard field guides and was also one of the small group of birdwatchers who in the 1960s "discovered" the Isles of Scilly as an outstanding place for rare migrants. Here he is reminiscing, with more than a hint of nostalgia, about the popularisation of birding and the eclipse of the officer class:

> Coming back to St. Agnes in 1971 after a near three-year sojourn in Nigeria, I was astonished by the rise in the number of birdwatchers.

> Where once a rarity might have been seen by a handful of veterans, any good bird would rapidly attract a boatload of 30 to 50 new faces and it was clear that an all-island search strategy was close to achievement. Thus while St. Agnes was still respected as something of an ornithological sanctum, any sense of its experienced observers exercising any real leadership over the archipelago had largely gone. This collapse in discipline was never more apparent than during the still-famous controversy over the identity of a smallish crake that haunted the Big Pool from 26th September to 9th October 1973.

Two bitterly opposed parties form, one claiming it as a spotted crake (a rare but fairly regular migrant in Scilly), the other as a sora rail (an extreme vagrant from North America). Wallace supports the minority (sora) party. The combatants very nearly come to blows in the Turk's Head Pub and eventually it is decided to trap the bird to settle the matter. The affair ends in farce.

> The Sora walked dutifully into the net, was there ignored by the netminder . . . and wriggling free of the mesh performed one last flight to the safety of the opposite rushes. Asked what on earth he thought that he was doing, the leader of the Spotted camp could only mutter abjectly, "Sorry, I thought it was a rat." Paul Dukes announced an imminent heart attack and the Big Pool echoed with guffaws of laughter. After its unneeded brush with man, the bird left overnight for places unknown and 14 days of rather bad behaviour went into birding history. Ornithopolitics had finally reached Scilly and muddied all our feet.

The ultimate prize in this domain is of course a "first for Britain," which generates exceptional levels of adrenaline, interest, and anxiety all round, now boosted by the speed of modern communications via mobile phones, the Internet, and personalised pagers. Returning to the hirundines, here is part of the report by Jeremy Hickman, the lucky finder of Britain's first tree swallow (a North American species) in June 1990, again in Scilly:

> On Wednesday 6th June 1990, having finished my shift behind the bar in the Mermaid Inn, I decided to go to Porth Hellick. I watched from the main hide for a while and could hardly believe how devoid of bird life it was. I could not even console myself by counting the Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus.*
>
> At about 19.00 BST, five hirundines approached low over the pool: one House Martin *Delichon urbicum,* three Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and another bird. This fifth bird gave the impression of a martin, but with no white rump and a glossy blue-green mantle and crown, and pure

white underparts. My heart sank as the bird then flew to the back of the pool and began hawking around the pines and surrounding fields. I rushed to Sluice to obtain closer views and to note its plumage in detail.

It appeared slightly bigger and bulkier in the body than a House Martin, with broader-based wings and more powerful flight. Its underparts were all pure snowy white, from its chin to its undertail coverts, with only a very tiny extension of white from the flanks to the upperside of the body at the base of the wing. Its upperparts were the most amazing bright, glossy blue-green. The wings and tail were matt-black, and the underwing and undertail off-white to silvery grey. The colour of the crown extended well below the level of the eye and squared off into the ear-coverts. The shape of the tail was similar to that of House Martin, being short, but less forked when closed.

The next few minutes were total panic. Would it go? Would it stay? What was it? I was not calm! As it was June, there was no-one anywhere. At about 20.00 BST, I ran back to my car and drove to Old Town to phone the other resident birders on St. Mary's (all two of them). At this stage, I was still unsure of exactly what I had found. I was not expecting to see American birds in June, and I had no knowledge of any eastern species of this nature.

He checks it out in the books and excludes other remote possibilities like violet-green swallow and Bahama swallow and goes back to claim the tree swallow as a first for Britain, which a thousand desperate birders rush to Scilly to see over the next five days. The bird leaves again on 10 June with the same group of hirundines with which it had arrived.

But this is only a mild taste of the sort of extended taxonomic description the serious field ornithologist deploys. Here is a short extract from an article in *Birding World,* a popular rather than a scientific journal—light reading for the experts. The authors are making comparisons between various closely observed individual gulls, to identify the separate subspecies involved. I give three of the summary captions to illustrations, though in fact you scarcely need to read beyond the title of the article to get the general flavour:

Moult Variability in 3rd Calendar-Year Lesser Black-Backed Gulls
Larus fuscus graellsii. Commonly, all the primaries, secondaries and retrices are retained through the winter and spring, as on this bird. Note that few wing coverts and upper tertials have been renewed in the winter quarters. Some scapulars have also been retained but, in general, the brown wing covert panel contrasts with the grey saddle. This is typical 3cy *graellsii* with a black tip to the bill.

Which is clearly very different from:

> *Larus fuscus intermedius.* The moult on the wintering grounds included the whole tail, all the secondaries and at least P6–P7 (probably P1–P7), where the sequence was interrupted. The wing coverts are a mixture of new dark and retained brown feathers. The complete moult began with the innermost primary and has now arrived at P5, which has been dropped. The advanced winter/spring moult and blackish upperparts of this 3cy *intermedius* are features more typically associated with 3cy *fuscus.*

And hardly likely to be confused with:

> *Larus fuscus fuscus* undergoes an extensive moult in the winter quarters, which includes some or all of the primaries. "CIXE," a typical 3cy *fuscus,* has interrupted its moult at P8, with the inner primaries renewed and just the two outer primaries retained. The fresh primaries have small white tips and are glossy black, contrasting with the browner retained feathers. The mirror on P10 is exceptionally large. The worn scapulars and wing coverts show a mahogany hue characteristic of *fuscus.*

The text of the article goes into more detail, of course.

I could go on further in this direction, with examples of ever longer, denser, and more detailed accounts that treat the bird as a combination of physical parts to be analysed, studied, and minutely described. The great advantage of this more scientific approach is that it is demonstrably so *successful* in its objectives. It does produce definite, verifiable answers to at least the factual questions that amateurs ask about the characteristics, behaviour, distribution, and migration of different species. It is also *progressive,* in that it continuously extends and improves our knowledge in ways that eventually trickle down to the ordinary observer through better descriptions in the field guides and reference books.

Compare, for example, the following descriptions of the arctic tern in four different field guides, published respectively in 1927, 1937, 1954, and 1999 (see fig. 7). The first is Edmund Sandars's *A Bird Book for the Pocket* (1927), which was my very first birdbook and which I learnt almost by heart. The entry for the arctic tern is a brief one:

> Length 14½ ins. *Sexes* alike. *Summer migrant,* Apl.–Oct., in Scotland and Ireland, locally in England and Wales. Differs from Common Tern as follows: breeds later in June, preferring island sites. Its call is shorter, a harsh *Kleeah.* Sometimes eats earthworms.

6. Arctic tern from Edmund Sandars, *A Bird Book for the Pocket* (1927)

I'd forgotten about the earthworms (can it be true?). The illustrations in the book are quite appalling, or as the author modestly says in the introduction, "In my drawings a just general effect has been aimed at rather than feather accuracy."

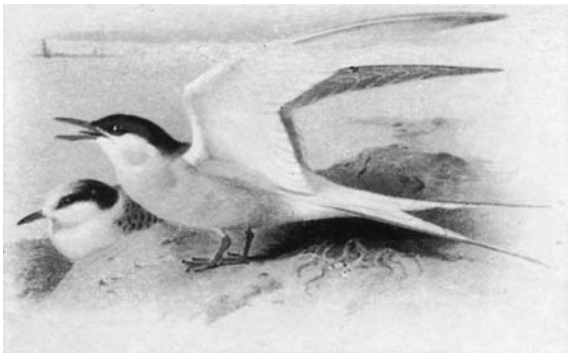
The Observer's Book of British Birds was published ten years later and the illustrations are certainly more realistic, most of them being reproduced from the work of Thorburn and other serious bird artists. The book is compiled by a Miss S. Vere Benson, whose style on the title page is given as "Hon. Sec. of the Bird-Lovers' League" and who devotes most of the introduction to anecdotes about the "interesting and lovable bird personalities" she had encountered in her work of caring for injured birds. The main species accounts, however, are unsentimental and workmanlike and an improvement on those in Sandars:

> The Arctic Tern closely resembles the Common Tern, though the underparts have a distinctively grey tone, instead of only slightly so. The mantle is soft grey, the crown and nape black, and the bill and legs red. The immature plumage is mottled with buff. The Arctic Tern is a summer visitor. The breeding haunts are further north than those of the Common Tern, the terneries being most numerous in Scotland and Ireland.
>
> Haunt. The coast.
>
> Food. Small fish.
>
> Notes. Almost indistinguishable from those of Common Tern: *krik* or *kree-a.*

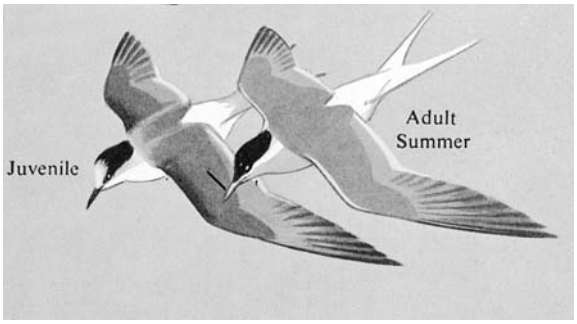
The third book is the famous Peterson *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* (1954), which in its time revolutionised bird identification. The illustrations were both more accurate and more revealing, and included depictions of a greater variety of plumages (not just spring males). The text too was more closely based on observable field characters:

> Identification: 15″. Distinguished from Common Tern by *wholly blood-red bill* (wholly blackish in winter, and tip may still be black in spring);

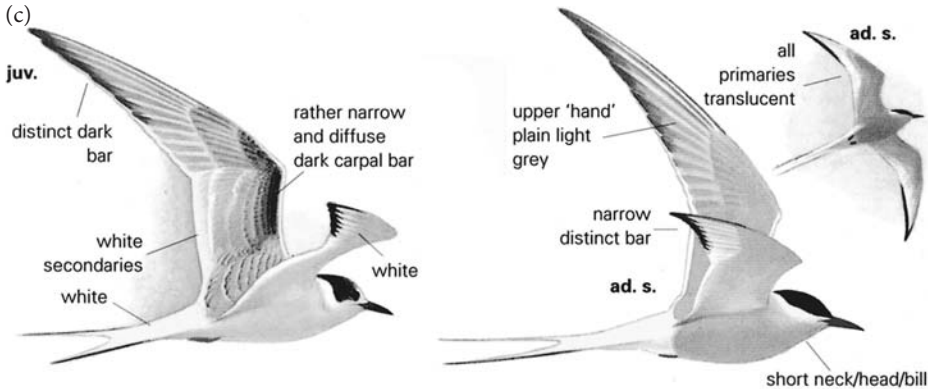
(a)



(b)



(c)



7. Arctic terns from (a) *The Observer's Book of British Birds* (1937); (b) Peterson, Mountfort, and Hollom, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* (1954); (c) *The Collins Bird Guide* (1999)

when perched, usually by *shorter legs.* Under-parts and neck usually greyer than in Common and Roseate, often showing by contrast a *white streak below the black cap.* Tail streamers usually project *a little* beyond the wing-tips when perched, but never as far as in Roseate.

Voice. As Common Tern, but whistled *kee-kee,* with rising inflection, said to be characteristic.

Habitat. As Common Tern, but more maritime and more frequently on rocky off-shore islets.

And the fourth is the current market leader, the *Collins Bird Guide* (1999), which says of itself that it "provides all the information needed to identify any species at any time of the year, with detailed text on size, habitat, range, identification and voice. Accompanying every species entry is a distribution map and illustrations showing the species in all the major plumages (male, female, immature, in flight, at rest, feeding: whatever is important)." The account of the arctic tern now introduces several more differentia:

L 33–39 cm (incl. tail-streamers 7–11½ on ad.), WS 66–77 cm. Breeds in colonies (in N often very large and dense) or singly along coasts, on islands in sea-bays, locally at ponds in taiga or barren mountains, and on tundra near water. Summer visitor (end Apr–Oct), winters off S Africa and Antarctica. Probably has the longest migration of all birds.

Identification. Very similar to Common Tern; Arctic told by: slightly smaller size; shorter bill, head and neck and longer tail, making wings look ahead of centre of body; very short legs; slightly narrower wings. Flight often more elastic and gracefully bouncing than Common Tern's, but display flight of latter is just as elegant. Often dives with "stepped hover," dropping short distance and hovering again before final plunge; at times snatches prey from surface in Black Tern fashion. Adult summer: Bill dark red (blood-red) without black tip; lower throat, breast and belly washed grey, creating subtle contrast with white upper throat and cheeks, stronger than on most Common Terns; long tail-streamers extending beyond wing-tip when perched. Upperwing uniformly pale grey (lacking dark wedge or "notch" of Common), and all flight feathers near-white and translucent from below, outer primaries with neat black trailing edge (narrower than on Common). Juvenile: Carpal bar often fainter than on normal Common Tern, and secondaries are whitish, not shaded grey as on Common Tern; often a white triangular area on hindwing. Dark bill first red-based, from Aug/Sep all black. Forehead white (more clearly demarcated than on Common). Ist-summer (scarce in Europe): white forehead, dark bill, a faint dark carpal bar (thus resembles adult winter).

> Voice. Recalls Common Tern; includes piping, clear *pi-pipi-pi, pyu pyu pyu,* and ringing *prree-eh,* and quarrelling, hard rattling *kt-kt-kt-krrr-kt;* alarm disyllabic *krri-errrrr* (variable, like Common's or harder, drier).

And if you want the full treatment you can turn to the comprehensive reference work *Birds of the Western Palearctic* (9 volumes, 1977–94), where the arctic tern gets about fifteen thousand words in a tight two-column setting, summarising every known fact about the species—including the very welcome information that in Iceland earthworms do indeed figure in its diet (but we read it first in your book, Mr. Sandars).

These are real advances, which not only help us see the significance of features we may have noticed but ignored before (like the "stepped hover") but are also enabling us actually to see things we did not see before (like the translucence in the wing). The same sort of thing has happened often in the history of art. The first European painters in Australia in the nineteenth century could not actually *see* the shapes or colours of the native eucalyptus trees except through European spectacles, and they drew them as if they were oaks or elms.

Moreover, this is the kind of progress in ornithology to which we can all, in principle, contribute; there still are many unanswered questions about bird behaviour, which intrigue amateurs at least as much as scientists and which amateurs can sometimes help answer, as they do also in the sciences of astronomy or archaeology (but scarcely at all in nuclear physics or neurology). After all, it is the observations and records of thousands of ordinary birdwatchers that provide so much of our knowledge about bird migration and distribution, for example the arrival and departure dates of migrants in different parts of the country. Scientists may call it phenology when they do it, but the data are largely supplied by amateurs. The famous evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, whose life (1904–2005) spanned almost the entire twentieth century, made this point very strongly in a presidential address to the American Ornithologists' Union in 1962:

> There is perhaps no other branch of biology, indeed of science as a whole, to which the amateur has made so many and such important contributions as ornithology. In a way, I do not like the word "amateur" because it suggests something dilettante, and this would surely be a misleading description of the work of so many of our leading ornithologists. The precision of their observations, the imaginative and highly original posing of problems, and the lucid and informative recording of their researches would dispel any notion of their work being that of dilettantes. . . . They differ or differed from professionals only in one

> respect, by earning their living as doctors, lawyers, or businessmen and receiving no pay for their ornithological labors.

He might have added any number of other occupations, since birding is notoriously, and attractively, a classless interest. He might have particularly mentioned vicars. For the father of phenology in this sense, as well as the unofficial patron saint of natural history writers worldwide, is of course Gilbert White, the vicar of a small Hampshire village in the eighteenth century, whose *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* is one of the most famous books in the English language and a perennial comfort to booksellers and publishers.[1] I am duty bound to include an extract from Gilbert White in this initial sampling of "talk about birds," but he does in any case provide a paradigmatic example of a further genre of writing, the nature diary, which you might expect to be at least partly superseded by scientific progress in the way that the older field guides are. Gilbert White was a wonderfully painstaking and honest observer, but he has, not surprisingly, been proved wrong in some of his speculations, for example that swallows and martins might hibernate locally in the winter rather than migrate away from Britain. Why then does his work outlast and outsell the further and better accounts of such things that we now have? Here is an extract from his account of house martins, which he is comparing to the swallow and other similar species. Note the sensitivity to what we would call "jizz" (and what he called a bird's "air") and the final unsentimental observation.

> Martins are by far the least agile of the four species; their wings and tails are short, and therefore they are not capable of such surprising turns and quick and glancing evolutions as the swallow. Accordingly they make use of a placid easy motion in a middle region of the air, seldom mounting to any great height, and never sweeping long together over the surface of the ground or water. They do not wander far for food, but affect sheltered districts, over some lake, or under some hanging wood, or in some hollow vale, especially in windy weather. . . .
>
> House-martins are distinguished from their congeners by having their legs covered with soft downy feathers down to their toes. They are no songsters; but twitter in a pretty inward soft manner in their nests. During the time of breeding they are often greatly molested with fleas.

The hirundines were evidently White's favourite family and he was particularly fond of swallows. Here are the two words (and several exclamation

[1] *The Natural History of Selborne* is said to be the fourth "most published" book in English (presumably after the Bible, Shakespeare, and perhaps Izaac Walton or Bunyan), with more than two hundred separate editions.

marks) with which he greeted the arrival of the first swallow, in his diary entry for 13 April 1768. It was still possible in those days to be emotional in Latin.

Hirundo domestica!!!

A modern salutation of a different kind comes in Kathleen Jamie's *Findings,* in the chapter where she talks about corncrakes. As I explained, the population of corncrakes in Britain has declined dramatically since Clare's time, so keen birdwatchers make for known locations in places like Coll and then spend hours of anxious searching trying to catch sight of a corncrake to add to their lists. And not only young men:

> Birdwatchers come especially—Sarah tells of an old lady who sat quiet and demure on this very viewing bench for an hour, two hours . . . then there was a whoop, and Sarah turned to see the old lady leaping around, punching the air like a footballer, just for a glimpse of an elusive brown bird.

Jamie doesn't share this compulsion:

> When, later that day, I do see one, it's scuttering away from the wheels of the car. Like a miniature roadrunner, a slender upright hen with hunched shoulders and strong, long, pinkish legs, it squeezes under a wire fence, and with relief vanishes among the irises, even as I brake. It's the colour of slipware and looks, in that glimpse, like an elegant ceramic water jug suddenly come to life. That's that. I do not punch the air.

But she is attracted by another response, very different again:

> Another person arrives at the viewing bench, not an old lady but a man in young middle age, a holiday-maker. We fall into conversation—he obviously knows his stuff about birds. He has a young family with him on the island and, while they're on the beach, he has slunk off for an hour in the hope of spotting a corncrake. So here he is, an Englishman of higher education with a professional job, a family, a cagoule and good binoculars.
>
> "Can I ask why you like them? Corncrakes I mean."
>
> "Well," he said. "They're like . . . little gods of the field, aren't they."
>
> I could have punched the air. If corncrakes are rare, animism is rarer still. Anyone can clear his throat and talk about biodiversity, but "Corncrakes . . . little gods of the field" will not get you published in ornithologists' journals. That's how I picture them now, however: standing chins up, open-beaked, like votive statues hidden in the grass.

I end this section with a response to birds that is purely physical and performative, a silent acknowledgement of affinity. Barry Lopez, in the preface to *Arctic Dreams,* describes how on his first encounters with snowy owls and other Arctic birds he found himself bowing:

> It was on that evening that I went on a walk for the first time among the tundra birds. They all build their nests on the ground, so their vulnerability is extreme. I gazed down at a single horned lark no bigger than my fist. She stared back resolute as iron. As I approached, golden plovers abandoned their nests in hysterical ploys, artfully feigning a broken wing to distract me from the woven grass cups that couched their pale, darkly speckled eggs. Their eggs glowed with a soft, pure light, like the window light in a Vermeer painting. I marvelled at this intense and concentrated beauty on the vast table of the plain. I walked on to find Lapland longspurs as still on their nests as stones, their dark eyes gleaming. At the nest of two snowy owls I stopped. These are more formidable animals than plovers. I stood motionless. The wild glare in their eyes receded. One owl settled back slowly over its three eggs, with an aura of primitive alertness. The other watched me, and immediately sought a bond with my eyes if I started to move.
>
> I took to bowing on these evening walks. I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, toward the birds and the evidence of life in their nests—because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing.

This can surely only be understood as an act of homage and of recognition.

Birds and Ourselves

These scrapbook cases of different kinds of reaction to birds do not, of course, illustrate all the possible genres and subgenres. I have not, for example, yet represented the hunter (of or with birds), the cook, the bird-fancier, the farmer, or the gamekeeper, along with many others, and there is a whole tribe of white-coated specialists at work on aspects of avian taxonomy, physiology, and behaviour. But this first selection does already exhibit sufficient variety both to alert us to the breadth of the spectrum and to locate a central issue I want to explore. There is a tension, at times a conflict, in these sources and in ourselves, between the wish to be open to all these interests and experiences and the equally strong wish not to be fooled or embarrassed by them. We want to be both tough-minded and open-minded, to recognise the

constraints of science and hard fact but also the insights of literature, art, and the imagination. We want to be sensitive, that is, without being merely sentimental. The great bogey here is anthropomorphism. If sentimentality in this context is the sad vice of expressing towards animals emotions that are more properly directed towards people, then anthropomorphism is its scientific counterpart—ascribing to animals what are distinctively human emotions, purposes, and capacities. The emotional exchanges are devalued in the first case and misrepresented in the second. But what then are the *appropriate* emotions in these cases? What is an *authentic* experience? Do we have to choose?

Most writing on animals is undoubtedly marked (or, if you like, infected) with some degree of anthropomorphism. This is evident in its most obvious forms in the kinds of children's books where owls offer wise advice and female badgers are likely to be wearing aprons, but it also insinuates itself into quite sober and technical reference works. For example, the excellent *Collins Guide* I cited earlier says of the swallow's voice:

> Noisy, its loud calls enlivening farmsteads and small villages. In "itinerant flight" gives cheerful sharp *vit,* often repeated two or three times. Mates preen each other and entertain the barn livestock with cosy chatter almost like budgerigars. Cats are announced with sharp *siflitt* notes.

All that is vivid, helpful, and recognisable, but is it "true" in a more austere sense? In the same vein, robins are said to "curtsy," corncrakes "sneak away cleverly," and jackdaw pairs look "amorous." And we don't even notice the more subtle implications of the language when magpies are said to "walk confidently," herons "wait patiently" when fishing, and swifts produce a "chorus of screams" as they fly in a group around buildings. But what are we to do? Can the language of our descriptions and responses to birds be purified without being altogether drained? How are we to convey the meaning or significance certain encounters have for us without projecting something of our own experience into the description?

I hope to deal more fully with these issues later. My instinct now is to say that some degree of anthropomorphism is probably both unavoidable and positively desirable. I would argue this, partly by pointing to the benefits of a largely unnoticed *ornithomorphism* or *zoomorphism* in our lives. That is, there are similarities and continuities as well as differences between the human and the natural world and they work in both directions, from birds to ourselves as well as from us to them. And we can perhaps see this more easily if we travel the other way—seeing how we use the world of nature to illuminate our own world, which we do very regularly, if often unconsciously. For now, however,

I shall try at least to arrest this bogey long enough to prevent it from threatening the whole enterprise.

Scientists are taught to develop a deep disapproval of anthropomorphism, as the cardinal sin against objectivity. The sort of thing they are objecting to may be illustrated from the work of a nineteenth-century naturalist, the Reverend F. O. Morris. Here is his description of the dunnock as a model of Victorian family values:

> Unobtrusive, quiet and retiring, without being shy, humble and homely in its deportment and habits, sober and unpretending in its dress, while still neat and graceful, the Dunnock exhibits a pattern which many of higher grade might imitate, with advantage to themselves and benefit to others through an improved example.[1] (F. O. Morris, *A History of British Birds,* 1853)

No wonder, then, that scientists have sometimes thought of anthropomorphism as a kind of disease, which they are especially qualified to cure:

> In conclusion, I think we can be confident that anthropomorphism will be brought under control, even if it cannot be cured completely. Although it is probably programmed into us genetically as well as being inoculated culturally that does not mean the disease is untreatable. We human primates can defy the dictates of our genes. Anthropomorphism may be showing some resurgence just now but over the last two hundred centuries it has been retreating. This must be credited to the remarkable human invention called science. (J. S. Kennedy, *The New Anthropomorphism,* 1992)

But could that be just a little *too* confident, both about the human race in general and scientists in particular? Scientists can try their best to expunge any trace of human contamination from the language in which they describe other species, including of course birds. They rightly want to avoid importing into their studies any false assumptions or implications that could vitiate the results. At a certain point in this process of cleansing, however, the language they use almost ceases to describe in any real sense, or at least so limits its area of application that it fails to describe the whole phenomenon it is confronting. Eliot Howard was an amateur scientist, not now much remembered, who wrote about bird behaviour in the 1930s and 1940s and tried to grapple with

[1] This is both unctuous and inaccurate: the dunnock is now known to have a very lively and devious sex life. See N. Davies, *Dunnock Behaviour and Social Evolution* (1995).

this problem. He published a study of the moorhen in 1940 with the rather jolly title *A Waterhen's Worlds*. The book was issued in a large format, has some attractive illustrations, and gives every expectation that it will be a good read. That plural in the last word of the title may already have given a warning to the wary, however, and in any case the preface soon leaves us in no doubt about the difficulty of the enterprise:

> I divide the Waterhen's life into cycles, the cycles into parts, the parts into actions. I separate action from action, and part from part, and thus reduce everything to one. But no part has separate being or separate value. Each owes its being and its value to the whole, and therefore each has the nature of the whole. But the whole is never the same, for everything is always changing; and so it comes about that a waterhen lives in different worlds—territory, sexual, platform and family worlds.

By the end of the book the author has staggered with his moorhens through these metaphysical swamps. He emerges, breathing heavily, and announces his conclusions:

> So, in sum, it amounts to this:
>
> I start with the Waterhen as percipient, with power to refer.
>
> The becoming of a world depends upon the exercise of this power.
>
> For two months, day by day, or hourly, or even minute by minute, the Waterhen shifts from one world to another.
>
> The particular actions which belong to a particular world and express a particular feeling have, as their natural correlate, a particular object which is external to the bird's body.
>
> Mere vision abstracted from all mental stuff records no whole, but a succession of unrelated points.
>
> A whole is never seen as a whole, but is perceived as a whole.
>
> Perception, being a process which has in it something of the past as well as something to come, involves reference, memory, and expectation.
>
> Knowledge of the external world is therefore indirect.
>
> A particular feeling for a particular object has no abstract existence. Nor has the particular action, which belongs to the particular feeling and is directed to the particular object, any abstract existence.
>
> Feeling, action, and object are a whole or nothing.
>
> Having no language a bird has no power to abstract—no self, no past or future, or any other concept. The past is perceived as present, and lived in as present, and is the basis of expectation and seeking.

I take this to be an admission of defeat.

A corrective move is made, rather more attractively, by John Ruskin in his essay "The Relation of Wise Art to Wise Science" (1887). He has been admiring the intricate architecture of a bullfinch's nest:

> It was a bullfinch's nest, which had been set in the fork of sapling tree, where it needed an extended foundation. And the bird had built this first story of her nest with withered stalks of clematis blossom; and with nothing else. These twigs it had interwoven lightly, leaving the branched heads all at the outside, producing an intricate Gothic boss of extreme grace and quaintness, apparently arranged both with triumphant pleasure in the art of basket-making, and with definite purpose of obtaining ornamental form.
>
> I fear there is no occasion to tell you that the bird had no purpose of the kind. I say that I fear this, because I would much rather have to undeceive you in attributing too much intellect to the lower animals, than too little. But I suppose the only error which, in the present condition of natural history, you are likely to fall into, is that of supposing that a bullfinch is merely a mechanical arrangement of nervous fibre, covered with feathers by a chronic cutaneous eruption; and impelled by a galvanic stimulus to the collection of clematis.

If we reduce language to a system of symbols capable of describing a bird in terms only applicable to a bird, then almost by definition it is no longer a language we ourselves understand. Perfect accuracy is achieved only at the cost of total incomprehension. What we have to do instead is use the language we have to bridge this gap, knowing that it is systematically impure in this way and using it as sensitively and critically as we can. That is why we rely so much on analogy and metaphor in our ordinary descriptions and evocations of birds and why we need to be open to the larger imaginative frameworks of art and literature as well. Description involves language and the language is in the end a human language, which has its own history and is shot through with echoes and reverberations from that history and with meanings and metaphors drawn from human experience. The metaphors may be conscious or unconscious, dead or alive, but they are there at work.

This plays back also into the emotional tensions we feel, wanting to empathise in some way with birds without sentimentalising them. The author to quote here is Richard Jeffries. Few writers of natural history have conveyed so strongly the sense of affinity with nature that Jeffries enjoyed, but it was all the more painful for him to realise that his feelings could never be reciprocated:

> I thought myself so much to the earliest leaf and the first meadow orchis—so important that I should note the first *zeezee* of the titlark—that I should pronounce it summer, because now the oaks were green; I must not miss a day nor an hour in the fields lest something should escape me. How beautiful the droop of the great brome-grass by the wood! But today I have to listen to the lark's song—not out of doors with him, but through the windowpane, and the bullfinch carries the rootlet fibre to his nest without me. They manage without me very well; they know their times and seasons—not only the civilized rooks, with their libraries of knowledge in their old nests of reference, but the stray things of the hedge and the chiffchaff from over sea in the ash wood. They go on without me. Orchis flower and cowslip—I cannot number them all—I hear, as it were, the patter of their feet—flower and bud and the beautiful clouds that go over, with the sweet rush of rain and burst of sun glory among the leafy trees. They go on, and I am no more than the least of the empty shells that strewed the sward of the hill. Nature sets no value upon life, neither of mine nor of the larks that sang years ago. The earth is all in all to me, but I am nothing to the earth: it is bitter to know this before you are dead. These delicious violets are sweet for themselves; they were not shaped and coloured and gifted with that exquisite proportion and adjustment of odour and hue for me. High up against the grey cloud I hear the lark through the window singing, and each note falls into my heart like a knife. (Richard Jeffries, "Hours of Spring," 1886).

We are less likely to be anthropomorphic in the wrong ways, that is, if we are also less anthropocentric, but it may be a painful recognition. This sort of reflection encourages a proper modesty, and even irony, in our attempts to come to terms with the natural world, see it as it is, and enjoy it in the ways we may. This is the sense in which a book like this on birds is really about ourselves or even, if you like, about our selves.