

Book Reviews

Lars Jonsson: Birds and Light. 2002. By *Lars Jonsson*. Translated and edited by David A. Christie and Erik Hirschfeld. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. Hardcover, 232 pages. \$49.50US. ISBN 0-691-11489-7.

It was in 1985 that I “discovered” Lars Jonsson in one of the numerous used bookstores on Queen Street West in Toronto. I came across a thin hardcover volume entitled, *Birds of Wood, Park and Garden*. Oh, I’d heard of Jonsson before. But here, staring out at me from within these pages were birds which were unbelievably alive! It was not just that they were accurately depicted, but the artist had captured them in the midst of their active lives. I’d found one book in Jonsson’s series of habitat-based guides to the birds of Europe. Alas, I searched all the used bookstores over and over but it was not until years later that I managed to acquire three of the other four in this series.

Now comes this retrospective examination of the life and works of a genius. Of course, the paintings dominate. Many are full-page images, but there are also lots of smaller images, sometimes several to a page. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen so many before in this style of book. And what images they are!

I’m not sure I can tell you what is so compelling about Lars Jonsson’s

drawings and paintings of birds. However, the not insubstantial text of the book explores the impressions and analyses of others, as well as delving rather deeply into the thinking and feelings of the artist. In fact, the tendency among readers will be to skim the text and pore over the lovely paintings. This is a mistake if you wish to have at least minimal understanding of this marvellous artist-naturalist and his works.

Art critics constantly put painters of nature on the defensive. The text begins with a foreword by Hans Henrik Brummer, Head Curator, National Museum (of art) of Sweden. His theme, as it inevitably is in discussing nature artists, I can paraphrase with the question, “yes, it is lovely, but is it art?”. He refers to the long-established view of the supremacy of abstraction and rebukes the notion that the accurate depiction of nature is not art. Jonsson addresses the issue thusly: “I’m good at birds and I don’t see that as a handicap”. We know intuitively as we examine Jonsson’s portrayals, and we learn from the reading of the text, that his work is far more than accurate, scientific illustration.

The “Looking at Nature” section is a reflection by Staffan Soderblom from a birder’s point of view on the paintings and the painter. He goes some distance in explicating the magic of Lars

Jonsson's paintings. In his guides, Jonsson paints individuals, not representative models of each species. He paints the character and attitude, the "feel" of the birds. Like no other, he has incorporated the human element into his field guide illustrations—how it feels when we see the bird. The artist himself says, "I can't even make a definitive image of a House Sparrow...I seem repeatedly to be finding new lines and shapes, new colours and patterns, new types of behavior and posture, new angles of approach". Of course, the same can be said for all of his works. For example, there are seven illustrations of (Pied) Avocet and nine of (Common) Eider. The artist never tires of watching, studying and depicting these birds, his neighbours in Gotland in the south of Sweden where he lives. Neither do we exhaust our interest and fascination with these images.

The historical evolution of methods of the bird artist quite parallels that of the bird watcher. Earlier artists painted specimens or, to get something closer to life, used freshly shot birds just as did the scientific precursors to bird watchers. The binocular afforded birders closer studies of birds and, commensurately, paintings showed a combination of life and accuracy not seen before. Today is the age of the telescope. Jonsson has used his to perfection, allowing him unhurried entrance into the serene private lives of birds and at the same time

enabling him to depict features which birders can now look for in their scope images. Put another way, the scope allows the artist to place himself within the landscape. He dissolves into the whole of the scene in an existential experience.

The bulk of the remainder of the text follows the format of a conversation with Bjorn Linnell. These questions and answers follow somewhat chronologically Jonsson's life from a very early age to the present. They accomplish much more than a recounting of adventures and accomplishments, however. Many questions delve into the influences and techniques of the artist. They draw out philosophies and feelings that help us appreciate the work and the worker. Photographs show Jonsson at the drawing board at the age of seven; his oil-pastel of a Green Woodpecker at the same age would have no trouble being accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC).

A couple of amusing but absurd stories stand out from his youthful artist days. Apparently, many people were surprised that such a large and ungainly youth was the depicter of delicate birds and butterflies. In the third grade, his drawings were refused by a competition because traced or copied work was not acceptable!

Throughout the discussions, pages from Jonsson's diaries are presented to illustrate his feelings and points of view. The sketches and splashes of colour make it seem

as if we are looking over the artist's shoulder as he works. But it is not only the paintings that are wondrous. His prose reveals a depth of perception and reflection beyond all but a fortunate few. I cannot paraphrase these or quote them out of context. You must read them for yourself.

Linnell tenaciously inquires into Jonsson's artistic influences, his methods, his thoughts on his contemporary colleagues and, always, his feelings about his work. We learn that Jonsson had no professional art training. However, he has studied the work of nature artists and many other artists from China to England and all points in between. Two artists he greatly admires are the Swiss, Leo-Paul Robert, and the American, Louis Agassiz Fuertes. It is not surprising, given whence he hails, that earlier Swedish and Russian nature artists have strongly influenced his thoughts. However, his style and his results transcend all those who have come before. Jonsson has little regard for painters who paint from photographs. He quotes one of my favourite bird artists, the American, Don Eckelberry, who coined the expression for such illustrators as "the Kodachrome school". Jonsson states, "the simple replication in paint of a photograph is always a complete failure".

Of particular interest to the birder is the section entitled, "The Individual Bird and the Field Guides". Jonsson spent most of the

1970s producing his five-book, habitat-based series of guides to the birds of Europe. Jonsson elucidates his style and (for me) its attractiveness for the reader. In his field guide paintings, "the bird is perceived to have a will of its own" and "it has to have done something the moment before". During the 1980s, Jonsson compiled these five books into one field guide, *Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*. Most illustrations were re-worked and many new ones added. He created a classic guide that set the stage for the newer generation of guides on both sides of the Atlantic.

His discussion of the process of observing and drawing are particularly relevant to birders who wish to document a rare bird. My comments are in parentheses. His artistic method is to sketch with pencils and watercolours in the field. He says, "the sketchbook is everything" and "it is difficult to lie with a water-colour painting". Further, "there seems to be a limit to what we call the immediate short-term memory, seven or eight seconds... after which the impression is stored in the memory... If one paints (or describes a sighting in writing) from memory then the hand is guided by an experience already assimilated...not by the immediate first-hand impression". Has there ever been a more eloquent argument for in-the-field documentation of rarities than this? Even in these days of digital cameras, the interactions of the bird

in its environment and the perceptions and feelings of the observer noted as she/he is looking at the bird represent vital documentation in support of rarities.

What are my personal favourites among the paintings in the book? It's a bit like saying what is one's favourite duck or warbler. Usually it's the one I'm looking at right now. Nonetheless, I'll mention a few, although each reader will have her/his own. I love the ephemeral nature of the water-colour sketches and paintings. It is as if the birds could dissolve. In fact, the scenes portrayed by Jonsson are of one exquisite moment in time; a moment later and everything has changed. This is, in part, what the chapter and book title, *Birds and Light*, means. To pick two, try the American Woodcock on pages 27–28 and the (Eurasian) Golden-Plovers on page 149. Jonsson's oils capture the interplay of birds and light no less magically. Try for example, the (Pied) Avocets on page 109 or the (Common) Eiders on page 137.

I particularly enjoy his paintings of multiple birds. These depict active relationships among the birds and, at the same time, serenity. Again, to pick just a few from among many, I like the Black-bellied Plovers on page 136, the Northern Pintails on pages 134–135, and the Mistle Thrushes on page 69. Frequently, one or more birds or animals will directly face the artist (and the viewer of the

painting). I have never before seen these “head-on” portrayals done as skillfully. The birds are staring unconcernedly “through” the painter and viewer. To me this is magical. Particularly excellent examples are the Sea Otters on page 115, the Shelducks on page 216, and the (Eurasian) Wigeons on page 218. Finally, I can't leave out the small Calidrids on page 75. This was one plate from the famous small *Calidris* genus sandpiper article which appeared in *British Birds* and *American Birds* in 1984. This paper and these paintings marked a huge advance in the field identification of ‘peeps’ and of bird identification in general. Many more paintings are truly outstanding.

In addition to the hundreds of drawings and paintings in the book, another treasure lies in a collection of small images of 73 lithographs he has produced in collaboration with a Swedish printer. Jonsson prepares the plates himself, painstakingly. One salivates at the prospect of hanging any of these on one's walls. There is a summary biography of four pages near the end of the book that, in a more straight-line fashion, takes the reader through this remarkably creative life. One telling passage recounts Jonsson's collaboration with The Mill Pond Press which published limited edition prints of his art. He broke off this association after a couple of years since Lars felt that, as an artist, he could not really develop within the limits of the American

ideas of what a wildlife picture should look like.

The book copies the traditional coffee-table format; it is 31 x 28.5 cm, with a strong hard cover and a paper dust jacket. The paper is of very fine quality and presents the paintings beautifully. It seems picayune to point out a few production flaws. I found a few typographical errors: towardas (should be towards) on page 68; cay (may) on page 82; obseved (observed) on page 110 and emendments (amendments) on page 136. On page 80, Jonsson speaks of Victoria Island when he means Vancouver Island. The most glaring error is a blank page 182

where there should be a Bullfinch. Fortunately, this painting is also lithograph 68 on page 219, so we have a small image of the painting.

If you want to be reminded why you started watching birds, you should buy this book. If you love evocative images of birds and landscapes, buy this book. It is the consummate bird watchers' bird art book. It is a magical blend of science and art. Lars Jonsson, himself, says this in discussing his ongoing studies of large gulls. Words are too imprecise to capture the nuances involved. But the eye and, in his case, the paintbrush can do so. It is here that his "science" and his "art" fuse.

Bob Curry, 3115 New Street, Unit 30, Burlington, Ontario L7N 3T6

OFO Annual Convention Point Pelee National Park 20 and 21 September 2003

The OFO Annual Convention will return to Point Pelee this year, with a very interesting weekend of birding and presentations planned. On both Saturday and Sunday, experts will lead groups of convention participants to the many excellent fall birding spots in Point Pelee National Park and nearby areas. These field trips produced over 160 species at our Point Pelee convention in 2001, and we anticipate exceptional birding again this year. There will be a banquet and special program on Saturday evening at the Roma Club in Leamington. Watch for details in *OFO News* and on the OFO Website (www.ofo.ca). Don't miss this great event!