

ABOUT BOOKS

Who Needs Aesthetics and Ornithology?

Mark Lynch

Birds and Light. Lars Jonsson. 2002. Princeton, NJ:
Princeton University Press. 224 pages, 20 color illus.
11 13/16 x 11



"If aestheticism is for the artist what ornithology is for the birds, then I don't give a damn for aesthetics, for birds do not give a damn for ornithology ? I paint, they fly." (Written at the bottom right corner of *Autodidakt*, a self-portrait done by Lars Jonsson in 1982.)

I have a confession to make. When I was first exposed to the artwork of Lars Jonsson, I didn't know what to make of it. Sheila Carroll had gone to Britain on business in the early 1980s and brought back four volumes of Lars Jonsson's habitat-based guides to European birds. These had been originally published in Sweden as *Faglar i Naturen* a few years before and were completely unknown in the United States at the time. I looked at the illustrations in these slim volumes and was frankly confused. They were all so painterly, so loose looking. Instead of being shown simply from the side, many birds were shown in different positions in relation to the viewer. Waterfowl were depicted in water that actually showed the reflections of the light and the birds. Some pages would illustrate only one species. What a profligate waste of space I thought. Even though I had been teaching at an art museum for some time, these bird illustrations made no sense to me. After all, I had been using the Peterson and National Geographic guides, both of which illustrate birds like road maps to field mark identification, not living creatures.

My next run in with Lars Jonsson was brief but more instructive. I was just about to leave for my first birding trip to Australia and therefore in a state of total confusion and stress, when the phone rang. It was some damned person with a Swedish accent asking me if I could arrange a private viewing for him of the Worcester Art Museum's justly famous watercolors by Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. It was the absolute last thing I needed. Trying to be polite, yet also trying to brush this person off, I briskly asked him his name again. Of course it was Lars Jonsson, and my heart sank. I had to leave very soon and there was no way to arrange his visit to the museum, something I have regretted to this day. By then I had realized that Jonsson's birds have more in common with the paintings of artists like Homer, Sargent, and Anders Zorn than with the field guide illustrations by Peterson. Jonsson was as passionate about the observable natural world as he was about numerous effects of light on his subjects.

Lars Jonsson is now a familiar name to most New England birders. The article he coauthored with Richard Veit on Calidris sandpipers in a 1987 issue of *American Birds* was an instant classic that many serious birders still refer to. This piece featured a good number of full-page color plates by Jonsson of all the North Atlantic peeps and stints. These still remain the best field illustrations of the Calidrids. For some time, Lars was also trundled hither and yon across Massachusetts doing numerous paintings for Mass Audubon's wonderful centennial volume *The Nature Of Massachusetts* (1996). One week he would be in the Berkshires painting a spring Salamander in a stream; the next week he was on South Monomoy painting shorebirds and seascapes. Many birders got a chance to meet him at this time and marvel at his ease at painting plein air watercolors of birds and denizens of the natural world. Finally, numerous birders visiting Europe have also used Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*. This book was an extension and consolidation of his five-volume *Faglar I Naturen*.

The sumptuous volume *Birds and Light* clearly delineates Jonsson's important contributions to both fine art and natural history. The book starts with a cogent essay by Staffen Soderblum, which considers the formal aspects of Jonsson's paintings and places Jonsson's career in the cultural and historical context of other Swedish artists who have found themselves straddling the fields of so-called scientific and artistic painting. When considering a watercolor study of Hooded Crows in flight that Jonsson painted, Soderblum notes:

“Even lousy ornithologists like myself know what a crow looks like. We seldom mistake it in the field, and we do not need pictures of it in field guides. But crows are also in the guides, and they have to be of course: the principle of the field guide is not exclusion, but completeness. So, how does one paint a picture that nobody really ‘needs’? This is the question that Lars Jonsson appeared to have asked himself with his crow, and his answer seems to have been to paint a picture of the bird’s character, or its attitude. Or quite simply, what it says to us” (p.11).

This gets to the crux of the success of Jonsson's work. At their best, his paintings show us not every minute detail of a bird's plumage as if a skin was studied under a lens in a laboratory. Instead, a living, active bird is revealed as it looks to us in the field with all the changeable vagaries of light. Jonsson's paintings are about the human experience of birds, akin to a contemporary Impressionism of ornithology.

The bulk of the middle of *Birds and Light* consists of a profusely illustrated biography of Lars Jonsson taken from a series of interviews between Jonsson and Bjorn Linnell. This proves to be a successful format because instead of just a dry recitation of the facts, Jonsson's life is revealed in a series of lively conversations. We learn that Jonsson was born in Stockholm in 1952 and began drawing birds when only four-and-a-half years old. Some of these early works are lovingly reproduced here in full color. Jonsson developed an intense passion for birding as well as for color and light at this young age and from that point on never stopped his visual exploration. Trips to Gotland with his family, and later to Africa with birding friends expanded both his ornithological and artistic repertoires.

Reproduced in *Birds and Light* are passages from Jonsson's extensive field diaries that he has kept since an early age. These journals are an interesting combination of scientific exposition and poetic reverie. Writing about Atlantic Puffins on the Faroe Islands in 1969, Jonsson notes:

"Not many Puffins are seen to be about when the skies are grey. Puffin country is then empty and deserted, and only their burrows bear witness to their existence. But when the sun appears, hundreds and hundreds of these small auks crowd the ground and the skies. The sheer masses are really surprising when one knows how empty the place can appear to be. Like mushrooms growing out of the ground, they come out of their burrows. Like small gnomes from nowhere, suddenly, they are just there. The heavens are full of fluttering birds. They fly around in circles in enormous flocks, wings whizzing as they pass overhead. At longer distances these flocks look like mosquitoes, comparable in size to the locust swarms of Africa" (p. 56).

Like his paintings, Jonsson's writing is always focused simultaneously on accurate field observation as well as the human experience of nature.

Lars Jonsson was "discovered" in 1967 when a curator noticed him sketching in the galleries of the Natural History Museum. The director of the museum soon met Lars and gave him his first show, which introduced him to the community of other Swedish wildlife artists. By the early 1970s, Jonsson was regularly writing bird papers and illustrating articles. With the publication of *Faglar i Naturen* Jonsson became established as a natural history artist of international importance.

Most of the birds in that series of books were painted in the field and thus represent Jonsson's personal experience with that species. While continually striving to not copy the work of others, Jonsson has also resolved to stay as close to his subject as possible, always watching and sketching even common birds out his window for some nuance, some new attitude. He relates his considerable struggles to get a drab Willow Warbler just right. Never satisfied with merely a technical approximation, Jonsson wants to literally paint the essence of the experience of the bird on that particular day.

"I am striving for a balance between details and the bird's essentially reclusive nature ? the fortuitous nature of its presence before us. It is just the moment, the experience of the encounter with an individual bird in the wild, that I wish to convey equally as much as factual content" (p. 74).

After the biographical notes, *Birds and Light* continues with a stunning sixty-seven-page section titled "Paintings 1983-2002," which features finely printed full-page reproductions of paintings and field sketches. Personally, I am most fond of the more painterly pieces like "Great Black-backed Gulls" (1993) and "Raven" (1993), which showcase Jonsson's rather spontaneous command of watercolors and light. He is fond of painting birds in situations and times of the day that create unusual lighting effects. In "Common Gull and rocks" (1987) there is a slight shimmer to the air and the gull's reflection can be seen in the shallow water. In "Sidor av Ijus" (Aspects of

light: 1987) three European Avocets are shown preening and sleeping in late afternoon or early morning light. In “Desire” (1998-1999) a flock of Common Eiders is shown in a slight haze. Jonsson’s pencil drawings are also a revelation because they allow us to glimpse the artist at work, ceaselessly sketching, looking for that one certain pose of the bird that will capture the moment.

A section of small reproductions of Jonsson’s limited edition lithographs is also included in *Birds and Light*, many of which will be unfamiliar to American readers. Even in these prints, Jonsson’s obsession with light is evident.

It is in Jonsson’s seascapes that you can begin to see his relationship to great past landscape painters like Winslow Homer. Reversing the process, if you look at some of John Singer Sargent’s Florida watercolors like “Muddy Alligators” (1917, collection of the Worcester Art Museum), you can understand that Jonsson is never merely illustrating birds, but continuing a fine art tradition of Impressionist natural history painting that has included some of the great artists of Europe and America. *Birds and Light* shows the reader who may be familiar only with Jonsson’s field guide work, the real depth of his work. Although he is always focused on the actual and real, Lars Jonsson is also trying to pin down that ephemeral abstract aspect of any experience. The quote I used at the beginning of this review concerning aesthetics and ornithology was inspired by a quote by Barnett Newman (1905-1970). Newman was a pioneering American abstract painter associated with Abstract Expressionism and nonrelational painting and, interestingly, also a birder. As Jonsson states in *Birds and Light*: “The question is whether Newman painted his images for the same reason as the birds fly, which probably was his aim” (p. 106). The brilliance of Jonsson’s work emanates from his understanding the visual language and passions of the likes of Newman and Anders Zorn as well as Roger Tory Peterson and John James Audubon. He is unafraid to reach for that ineffable experience that happens every time we are awed by the natural world.

“Man likes to seek explanations for his actions, looks in the register of interpretive models and established values. But explanations rarely satisfy the sense of feeling, they just dress it in words, but the emotive influence, the abstract element that drives one onwards, never has a name” (p. 140). 

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Mark Lynch is a teacher, ecological monitor, and trip leader at Massachusetts Audubon Society's sanctuary at Broad Meadow Brook, Worcester. He is one of the regional editors for the new *Finding Birds* in Western Massachusetts. Mark has been a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum for almost thirty years and leads a Birder's Tour of the collection every year. He also hosts INQUIRY on WICN (90.5 FM), an interview show of the arts and sciences.



Brookline Bird Club Ninetieth Anniversary Celebration

The Brookline Bird Club (BBC) was founded in 1913 to study, observe, and protect native songbirds and to encourage their propagation. Bird walks have continued to be the main reason for the club's existence. In ninety years the BBC has scheduled more than 13,000 field trips, in the course of which a total of 396 species have been recorded on the Massachusetts life list of the club, including one species now extinct, the Heath Hen, which was added to the club's list on a trip to Martha's Vineyard on April 19, 1931.

A gala evening celebration is planned for Saturday, November 8, 2003, at the Peabody Marriott Hotel. The keynote speaker is Shawneen Finnegan, a world-class birder, birding guide, illustrator, and photographer, who will speak about "Confessions of a Female Birding Addict."

Because of space considerations, the total number of attendees is limited. For further information see <<http://www.massbird.org/bbc/>> or call Joe Paluzzi at 978-922-5035.



NUTTALL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

2003 Request for Proposals

Charles Blake Fund Grants

The Nuttall Ornithological Club is soliciting proposals for bird-related projects to be conducted in 2003-2004 under the direction of organizations meeting certain qualifications (see below). Selected projects will be supported by grants from the Club's Charles Blake Fund.

Grants will support ornithological research, conservation, and education, with particular emphasis on the birds of New England and the Northeast. The Fund will support grants for research, publication, education, and other worthy ornithology-related efforts.

The postmark-date deadline for applications is September 15, 2003. Awards will be announced by October 15, 2003. All funds will be distributed by November 31, 2003.

Application Guidelines:

1. Applying organizations must be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and must not be private foundations under section 509(a). Applications from individuals will not be considered.
2. Three typed copies of a brief proposal must be submitted in the following format:
 - a) Title page: project title and brief abstract; name, address and phone number; proposed starting and completion dates; total amount requested from the Charles Blake Fund;
 - b) Narrative of up to 5 pages including a) objectives, b) brief review of what is already known or has already been done, c) methods, d) value of the project to ornithology, e) project timetable, including a submission date for the final report, f) detailed budget, including funds applied for or expected from other sources;
 - c) Brief statement of investigator qualifications and a resume; and
 - d) Documentary evidence of section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status must be provided with each proposal.
3. Grants will be awarded on an annual basis from total available funds. The available money varies annually, but rarely is below \$15,000 per year. Proposals may request

up to that entire amount. Applications for projects expected to last more than one year will be considered, but no commitment beyond the funds available in the present year will be made.

Nuttall Ornithological Club 2003-2004 Blake Fund Criteria

4. Proposals will be reviewed by the Blake Fund Committee and will be selected for awards based on the following merits:

- a) Contribution to the goals of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,
- b) Conservation, management, or educational applications,
- c) Scientific merit,
- d) Feasibility, and
- e) Qualifications of investigator(s).

5. Typically the Blake Funds along with other Club funds (when available) are distributed in grants ranging from \$1000 to \$5000. Grants requested for more than one year will be noted, but funding will be on an annual basis only. No commitments to future funding are inherent in any grant.

6. Grant payments will be made directly to the 501(c)(3) organizations, and the Nuttall Ornithological Club will retain no authority over use of paid grant funds. However, the Nuttall Ornithological Club requires that recipients prepare a report on their work and use of grant money within twelve months of receiving the grant.

Proposals should be addressed to:

David S. Deifik, MD
Nuttall Ornithological Club
Chair, Blake Fund Committee
C/O Dartmouth-Hitchcock Nashua
21 E. Hollis St.
Nashua, NH 03060
Email: David.S.Deifik@Hitchcock.Org



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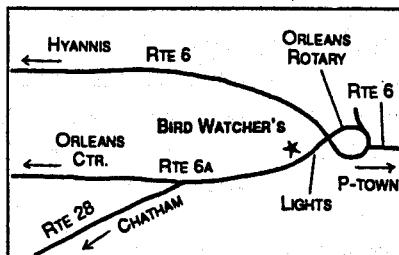
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