

ABOUT BOOKS

Bird's the Word

Mark Lynch

Editor's Note. This review was originally written for inclusion with *Editors' Choices for Seasonal Gifts in the December 2003 issue.*

Instead it is appearing here in a revised and expanded version as a piece about bird poetry.



ARTE DE PÁJAROS/ART OF BIRDS. 2002. Pablo Neruda. Barcelona, Spain: Lynx Edicions.

Ever since the first poem was penned, there have been verses about birds. Because birds fly and can gracefully escape the earthbound life, for poets and other artists birds have symbolized the connection between heaven and earth, between the spiritual and the carnal. In the late 12th century English epic poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* by an unknown author, the two nocturnal avian singers of the title debate the ideas of courtly love (the nightingale) versus the traditional morality of the Church (the owl):

It happened in the summery heart
Of a secret vale's most hidden part,
I heard an Owl and a Nightingale
Disputing on a mighty scale;
Most keen and strenuous the debate,
Now gentle, now in furious spate.
(translated by Brian Stone)

One can imagine being awake on many nights in Medieval England and hearing a Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) sing its rich and varied song, while at the same time a Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) would give its solemn whistled hoots. But what did this contrasting nocturnal chorus mean? *The Owl and the Nightingale* was written at a time of European history when it was believed that the entire natural world was placed there by "God" to be either directly used by humanity for food and shelter or to teach it some moral lesson. So everything in the environment, every event that occurred, no matter how insignificant had a divine purpose and meaning that needed to be uncovered.

An even more impressive use of birds as symbols of the divine in poetry can be found in the *Mantiq al-tayr* or *The Flight of the Birds To Union*, a poem by the 12th century Persian Sufi mystic Farid al-din Attar. In the 4458 verses of this epic, all the birds meet to select a king. This avian congress eventually travels en masse long

distances while facing great hardships to meet the Simurgh, whom they consider the only worthy leader. The Simurgh is akin to a phoenix and a Persian symbol of the divine. Each of the thirty bird species described represents a different human personality type. In this poem the nightingale symbolizes the love of external and distracting beauty, while the owl exhibits miserliness. Other bird characters of Attar's masterpiece include the parrot, the peacock, the duck, the heron, the partridge, the francolin, the wagtail, the Lammergeier, and even the Gyrfalcon!

I have recited for you the language of the birds one by one
Understand it then, O uninformed one!
Among the lovers, those birds become free,
Who escapes from the cage, before the moment of death.
They all possess another account and description,
For birds possess another tongue.
Before the Simurgh that person can make an elixir,
Who knows the language of all the birds.
(translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr)

At the poem's conclusion it is revealed that the Simurgh is not just a single creature, but is instead composed of all the best aspects of all the birds together. In the *Flight of the Birds to Union*, different species of birds are used to convey a very abstract and complex idea about the nature of the divine in all of us.

Of course, not all bird poetry has been heavy-handed epics about the ultimate fate of humanity's soul and the true nature of the divine. Thank the gods! Besides flying, birds also sing and therefore have been imagined by poets to create their own art. Birds come in a resplendent variety of shapes and colors too. Birds are therefore muses incarnate that have often inspired poets of all cultures to just appreciate them on their own earthly terms.

In the early 19th century city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo) in Japan, as winter waned, wonderful Surimono would be published. These were limited edition prints with poems celebrating the coming of spring. These Surimono were a unique collaborative effort involving the skills of artists, poets, calligraphers, block cutters, printers, and text engravers. Many of these Surimono used birds as an apt image of the impending change of the seasons.

The wings of the crows on the rooftop overlap,
their first cries announce the priceless Spring.

The lines are by Yamato Watamori and appear on a Surimono featuring a stunning image of flying crows against the rising sun by Yashima Gakutei. Bird imagery can even be found in Japanese Zen Buddhist koans, phrases used in meditation to hopefully achieve satori. One of my favorites is a seven-character phrase that can be translated as:

When the snowy heron stands in the snow,
the colors are not the same.

I can often be heard reciting this mantra-like while searching for a Snowy Owl in February on a snow-covered marsh in Newburyport.

But I dare say, when most American birders think about birds and poetry, it's the lines penned by the Brits that come to mind. It sometimes seems that British poets of the last 350 years have cranked out more odes, sonnets, and just plain doggerel to the feathered tribe than any other people on the planet. This conclusion may simply be because we were all forced to read some of these poems in countless high school and college English lit courses. The Brits really went into rhyme scheme overdrive during the Romantic Era (late 18th – early 19th centuries), when it seems that everyone and his cousin was merrily traipsing about the muddy fen waxing eloquently (if archly) on the throstle, dunnoek, cuckoo, or especially the lark:

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.
(from *To A Skylark* by Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Nature in all its wild splendor, especially birds, was THE inspiration for putting pen to paper during this time. Shelley and a select few aside, much of the romantic era's bird poetry does get rather silly and has not aged as well. For example, William Cowper's *On the Death of Mrs Throckmorton's Bullfinch*, is a hilariously emotional ode to a rat killing said caged bird complete with overwrought classical references.

For, aided both by ear and scent,
Right to his mark the monster went-
Ah, Muse! Forbear to speak:
Minute the horrors that ensued;
His teeth were strong, the cage was wood-
He left poor Bully's beak.

He left it—but he should have ta'en
That beak, whence issued many a strain
Of such mellifluous tone,
Might have repaid him well, I wot,
For silencing so sweet a throat,
Fast set within his own.

Maria weeps—the Muses mourn:
So when by Bacchanalians torn
On Thracian Hebrus' side,
The tree-enchanter Orpheus fell,
His head alone remained to tell
The cruel death he died.

There must have been countless drawing rooms that witnessed live readings of that poem complete with grim down-cast eyes and expressive gestures. Proper ladies, as well as gentlemen of refined tastes and gentle demeanor, probably swooned. It is interesting to note that, though Cowper's poetry was very influential at the time, he suffered from frequent bouts of serious depression and his pastor had to rescue him from several suicide attempts. That must have been some Bullfinch!

If I read too much of this stuff, I start to feel compelled to don some tweed, make several watercress sandwiches (with the crusts cut off), pack them in my rucker with a fine but unassuming port and, sans bins, gaily tromp off into my local hill and dale to commune with the tits and peewits. It's not a pretty sight to contemplate. I imagine it is memories of flowery poetry like this that have turned off generations of contemporary birders, and others, to the many and varied pleasures of bird poetry. This is a shame; because there are several great modern poets who have written some very interesting and wonderful works about birds, poems even a hardcore lister could love. Typically at the head of most people's list of great bird poets of the 20th century is Pablo Neruda, and Lynx Edicions has just published a beautiful edition of Neruda's *Art of Birds*.

Can a bird book ever be romantic? A strange question, that, and probably the last thing that would be on the mind of a birder buying a book. However, this beautiful version of Neruda's 1966 poems gets about as close to that concept as any book I have seen. Pablo Neruda was a Chilean poet, Nobel laureate, natural historian, and avid birder. He wrote many poems about the birds of southern Chile where he lived. This edition of *Arte de Pájaros* has been published by Lynx Edicions, the organization that is publishing the unprecedented *Birds of the World* series. In this version of *Arte de Pájaros*, Josep del Hoyo and Jordi Sargatal, editors of the landmark series, have written a wonderful introduction to Neruda's poems. A line-by-line English translation of Neruda's poems by Jack Schmitt is found on alternate pages with the original Spanish. Full-page color illustrations of species mentioned in the poems by Aldo Chiappe, Toni Llobet, and Jorge Rodríguez Mata are true to life and a beautiful complement to the poems. As to Neruda's poems, suffice it to say that whether he is writing about the Chilean Tinamou, the Chuaco Tapaculo, the Andean Condor, or a Red-breasted Meadowlark, these works are never baldly sentimental and fey. Neruda's poetry effortlessly combines a birder's sharp eyes with a modern poet's metaphorical and metaphysical heart. If your only experience with birds and poetry has been the "hark a lark" romantic-era sublime-ridden odes, then you are in for a treat when you read Neruda's poems.

No sonrío a la primavera
el jote, espía de Dios:
gira y gira midiendo el cielo,
solemne se posa en la tierra
y se cierra como un paraguas.

(The vulture, God's spy,
does not smile at springtime

it circles round and round, measuring heaven
solemnly settles on the ground,
and folds up like an umbrella) (pp.106-107).

Lynx Edicions has created a volume of Neruda's bird poems that is itself a work of art and, yes, would make a very appropriate gift to that significant other in your life. 📖

Other Literature:

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- Munsterberg, P. (editor). 1980. *The Penguin Book of Bird Poetry*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
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- Stone, B. (translator). 1971. *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Cleanness. St. Erkenwald. Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics.

Mark Lynch is a teacher, trip leader, and ecological monitor for the Broad Meadow Brook sanctuary of the Massachusetts Audubon. He is also a docent/teacher at the Worcester Art Museum and hosts an interview show on the arts and sciences on WICN (90.5FM). He would like to leave you with a couplet by John Heywood (1497-1580) titled *Of Birds and Birders*:

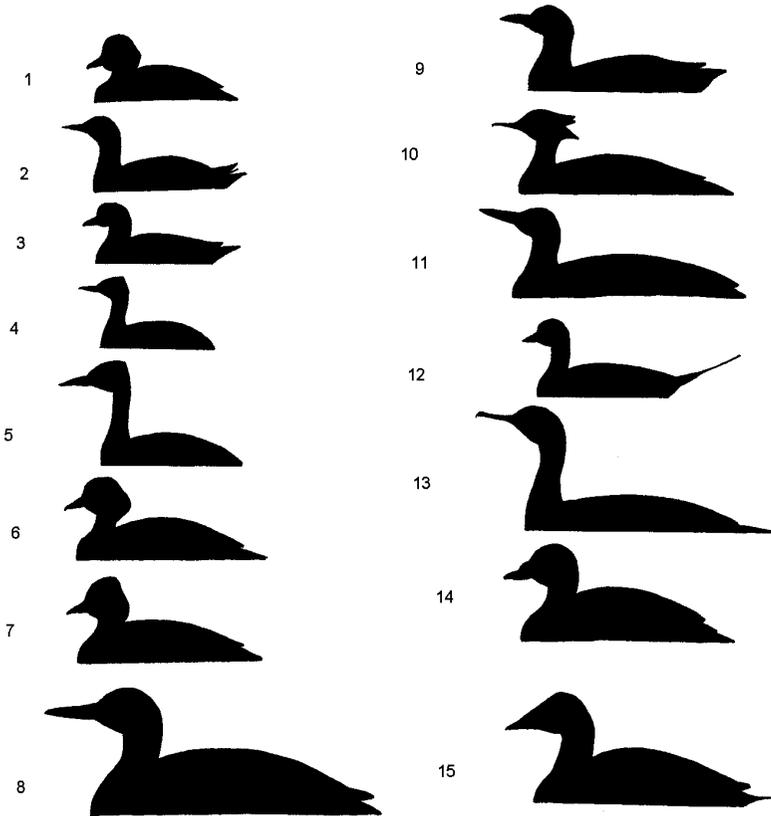
Better one bird in the hand than ten in the wood:
Better for birders, but for the birds not so good.



BALD EAGLE BY GEORGE C. WEST

Winter Waterfowl Quiz Answers

In the last issue of *Bird Observer* (Vol 31 (6): 364), we challenged you to match these silhouettes with the species (or groups) listed below. Now that you have had plenty of time to do your homework, we present the answers.



Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Black Guillemot, Murre sp., Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck, Scoter sp., Common Eider, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Barrow's Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-throated Loon, Cormorant sp., Common Loon.

- 1. Bufflehead
- 2. Black Guillemot
- 3. Harlequin Duck
- 4. Horned Grebe
- 5. Rednecked Grebe
- 6. Barrow's Goldeneye
- 7. Common Goldeneye
- 8. Common Loon

- 9. Murre sp.
- 10. Red-breasted Merganser
- 11. Red-throated Loon
- 12. Long-tailed Duck
- 13. Cormorant sp.
- 14. Scoter sp.
- 15. Common Eider

Images courtesy of Bill Gette, Sanctuary Director of the Joppa Flats Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary (Mass Audubon) in Newburyport, Massachusetts).