



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie



In the mythology of olden times there were ways by which man could understand the language of other species of the animal world. Siegfried unwittingly tasted dragon's blood and thence understood the messages of the forest bird. Konrad Z. Lorenz in his preface to "King Solomon's Ring" tells of another method. "As Holy Scripture tells us, the wise King Solomon 'spake also of beasts and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.' A slight misreading of this text...has given rise to the charming legend that the king was able to talk the language of animals... I am quite ready to believe that Solomon really could do so, even without help of the magic ring which is attributed to him by the legend in question, and I have very good reason for crediting it; I can do it myself, and without the aid of magic, black or otherwise."

In this book Lorenz tells us some of the ways in which he has been able to "talk" with birds and animals, even with fish. Translated from the German, the text was published in 1952 by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. More recently, Apollo has produced the text in a paperback edition.

Lorenz is undoubtedly the leading animal ethologist of all time. In his introduction to the book, Julian Huxley writes: "Konrad Lorenz is one of the outstanding naturalists of our day. I have heard him referred to as the modern Fabre, but with birds and fishes instead of insects and spiders as his subject-matter. However, he is more than that, for he is not only, like Fabre, a provider of an enormous volume of new facts and penetrating observations, with a style of distinction and charm, but in addition has contributed in no small degree to the basic principles and theories of animal mind and behavior. For instance, it is to him more than any other single man that we owe our knowledge of the existence of the strange biological phenomena of 'releaser' and 'imprinting' mechanisms."

He "has given himself over, body and soul, to his self-appointed task of really understanding animals, more thoroughly than any other biologist-naturalist that I can think of. This has involved keeping his objects of study in what amounts to the wild state, with full freedom of movement. His readers will discover all that this has meant in the way of hard work and inconvenience - sometimes amusing in retrospect, but usually awkward enough or even serious at the time."

Banders will undoubtedly be most interested in the accounts of avian behavior, but will surely find the entire text most interesting. There is a chapter entitled "Poor Fish" containing data to dispel the original connotation of that expression. It ends with a fantastic description of jewel fish faced with a serious predicament. "If ever I have seen a fish think, it was in that moment." After seconds of possible mental torment, the fish worked out a satisfactory solution. "Some students who had witnessed the whole scene, started as one man to applaud."

Under the title "The Covenant" a chapter is devoted to dogs. It is a forerunner of a slim little paperback book called "Man Meets Dog." Dog owners will love this. Anyone interested in animal behavior will find it valuable. In one chapter of the book under consideration - "The Language of Animals" - the author claims, "My Alsatian...knew, by 'telepathy', exactly which people got on my nerves and when. Nothing could prevent her from biting, gently but surely, all such people on their posteriors. It was particularly dangerous for authoritative old gentlemen to adopt toward me, in discussion, the well-known 'you are, of course, too young' attitude ...I could never understand how it was that this reaction functioned just as reliably when the dog was under the table and was therefore precluded from seeing the faces and gestures of the people around it."

In a chapter called "Laughing at Animals" Lorenz claims that such humor lies more in the caricature of the human, than in the actual drollness of the animal. Then he states: "The comparative ethologist's method in dealing with the most intelligent birds and mammals often necessitates a complete neglect of the dignity usually to be expected in a scientist... It is only my reputation for harmlessness, shared with the other village idiot, which has saved me from the mental home." He then recounts three incidents which reduce the reader to hysterical laughter. At the same time a reader gains a valuable insight into the methods of an ethologist.

The outstanding chapter from an avian standpoint is "The Perennial Retainers." In its pages, which comprise one quarter of the book, are related details of the lives and loves of jackdaws. "I knew the characteristic facial expression of every one of those birds by sight. I did not need to look at the coloured leg-rings."

Here is recounted the Cinderella-like story of the low-ranking lady jackdaw that Robert Ardrey mentioned in "African Genesis". You must read for yourself the tale of her rise to the top. Once there she "knew within 48 hours exactly what she could allow herself, and I am sorry to say that she made the fullest use of it. She lacked entirely that noble or even blase tolerance which jackdaws of high rank should exhibit toward their inferiors. She used every opportunity to snub former superiors, and she did not stop at gestures of self-importance as high-rankers of long standing nearly always do.

"You think I humanize the animal? Perhaps you do not know that what

we are wont to call 'human weakness' is, in reality, nearly always a pre-human factor and one which we have in common with the higher animals? Believe me, I am not mistakenly assigning human properties to animals: on the contrary, I am showing you what an enormous animal inheritance remains in man, to this day.

"And if I have just spoken of a male jackdaw falling in love with a female jackdaw, this does not invest the animal with human properties, but, on the contrary, shows up the still remaining animal instincts in man. And if you argue the point with me, and deny that the power of love is an age-old instinctive force, then I can only surmise that you yourself are incapable of falling a prey to that passion."

Before you have a chance to digest these sentiments, the author goes on to claim that "jackdaws, like wild geese, become betrothed in the spring following their birth, but neither species becomes sexually mature until twelve months later, thus the normal period of betrothal is exactly a year ...In those species which marry for only one brood, as for example most small songbirds, herons and many others, the engagement is necessarily of shorter duration. But nearly all those that marry for life become 'engaged' long before they 'wed'."

All of the betrothals and marriages that Lorenz was able to follow were successful except one. There was one lady jackdaw who broke up another marriage and went off with the male. So human females didn't invent the vampire role!

Jackdaws are social birds, and Lorenz' home flock engaged in an occasional routine that had him puzzled. "It took me quite a time to find out: it represents neither more nor less than communal action against a social delinquent!" There follows a fascinating account of a situation wherein the entire jackdaw flock rushed to discipline an erring member.

The final chapter is called "Morals and Weapons", and is a forerunner of "On Aggression", by Lorenz, which is next on our list for review. There are species, birds as well as animals, which will fight each other mercilessly, and there are other species which observe a chivalry comparable to that of medieval knights. Among gallinaceous birds the turkey is claimed to be the only species that shows mercy. "If a turkey cock has had more than his share of the wild and grotesque wrestling-match in which these birds indulge, he lays himself with outstretched neck upon the ground. Whereupon, the victor behaves exactly as a wolf or dog in the same situation, that is to say, he evidently wants to peck and kick at the prostrated enemy, but simply cannot." This is an amazing trait about which you will want to learn more.

At this point it should be mentioned that the wide margins of the book's pages contain delightful black and white sketches of creatures to illustrate the text. In this case there is a drawing of a prostrate

turkey, with the victor standing above, but inhibited from inflicting further damage.

This is the springboard from which Lorenz takes off from weapons into morals. He quotes scripture with a new and startling interpretation and continues, "When, in the course of its evolution, a species of animals develops a weapon which may destroy a fellow-member at one blow, then, in order to survive, it must develop, along with the weapon, a social inhibition to prevent a usage which could endanger the existence of the species."

The entire text has been sprinkled, at intervals, with passages from, of all sources, British poetry. At this point are mentioned these lines of Wordsworth's:

"If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?"

The concluding paragraphs, whose contents you should be able to imagine, constitute the theme which is developed in Lorenz' recent book, "On Aggression". Its sobering conclusions are based on further details of animal behavior.

In concluding this brief survey of "King Solomon's Ring" it is pertinent to mention the following bits from the publisher's blurb. The book "is at once charming, unpredictable, and filled with the humility that God sends great naturalists...In writing this book Dr. Lorenz remarks, 'I hope to convey to my kindly reader at least a slight inkling of the infinite beauty of our fellow creatures and their life'. (He) has more than fulfilled this modest wish for he has translated animal terms into everyday language and brought vividly alive the fascination inherent in the animal kingdom."



T H E R I N G

As most EBBA News readers know, The Ring is an international ornithological bulletin published by Dr. W. Rydzewski in Poland. Its U.S. co-editor for EBBA territory is Mr. Frederick S. Schaeffer, and material for The Ring should be sent to him at 139-48 85th Drive, Jamaica, N.Y. 11435.