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Thinking with Birds

For as long as people have had thought, they have thought with animals, partly because they wore their skins, made tools from their bones, ate them—and were eaten by them—but mainly because they saw animals as both like and unlike themselves. Animals served as bridges to the world outside and keys to doors within. They still do. Their appeal is in part timeless—we still stand in awe before Neolithic cave art—but also shaped by culture. In ours we understand animals with science and come to them from our homes in industrial society. Darwin put our bodies fully into the animal world, ethologists like Konrad Lorenz our minds, and several generations of ecologists and biologists laid out in detail our species' impact on the world. We do not use animal totems, except for sports, but we see animals as indicators of ecosystem health, test our medicines on them, and read about chimpanzee behaviour for hints about the roots of human nature. The generation that rushed to the cities in the late nineteenth century also began the search for a way back to nature from within that life. They relied mainly on birds, and birds are still the creatures that most often draw us to nature and hold our interest through life. How we think with them and how those ways of thinking have changed opens a window on our understanding of the world beyond the sidewalk. Three approaches, all from the late nineteenth century, all strong today, stand out: birding, a mix of science, sentiment, self-education, and competition; birds around the home, mixing nature and our daily lives; and bird conservation, society's organised reaction to our effect on the wild.

Birding, the apparently simple act of identifying and listing species, intricately mixed nature and culture. Birds' biological characteristics made it a plausible hobby: they do not hide, come in a comparatively few shapes, and many have diagnostic feather patterns. North American birds, for instance, belonged to about four dozen families, and most people knew hawks and herons, woodpeckers and thrushes, before they began. That helped them find the right section of the guide, and from there plumage often led them to a species name. Early success encouraged them to take up the hobby, but challenges remained for even the most expert. Sparrows look much alike and immature gulls have a confusing array of plumages; picking out soaring raptors required knowing details of form and behaviour; and identifying birds by their songs called on an entirely different body of knowledge. Listing, like any good game, was easy to start and impossible to master.

While biology made listing a plausible hobby, culture defined the list. Birders set bounds in space by property lines and in time by the calendar, ordinarily making lists for what they saw at home, in the state, and in the nation (and more recently the world) during a day, a year, or a lifetime. Science had a key role; birding may usefully be seen as an individual, cut-down version of natural history's great project of cataloguing, classifying, and mapping on the land the varied productions of life (to use a period description). Subordinating aesthetics and emotion to science, birders counted species rather than forms, even when these could be easily picked out in the field. On the list the drably coloured female warbler departing on fall migration was the same as her distinctly, brightly coloured, and easily identified mate arriving in the spring, and the Ferruginous Hawk soaring over the prairie counted no more than the pigeon on the windowsill. Birders changed their lists as the ornithologists changed their minds, deleted a checkmark when the Committee on Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union "lumped" the Oregon Junco and the Slate-coloured Junco as subspecies of the Northern Junco, added one when the committee "split" the Boat-tailed Grackle and the Great-tailed Grackle into distinct species. Science even changed what people called the birds. Before birding people used whatever names they liked, with the result that, depending on where in the United States you lived, "redbird" meant the Northern Cardinal, the Scarlet Tanager, or the Summer Tanager. Common species might have dozens of different names: an ornithologist compiled a list of 103 for the Northern Flicker. Confronted with this lexical chaos, early guide writers turned to the AOU's standard English-language names. Here, at least, was an authoritative set. They often added a selection of local names to help their readers, but as more people learned birds from books instead of neighbours, said "Osprey" instead of "fish hawk" and "Yellow-rumped Warbler" and not "butter butt," guides dropped the old names.

American birding's roots in Progressive-era women's reform made listing and competition central. Bird study seemed an ideal way to get educated, genteel women outdoors for healthy exercise and self-education in science—while encouraging support for bird conservation—but advocates could hardly recommend the established method. Shooting birds and preparing their skins for a collection offended equally humane sentiment, genteel sensibilities, and conservation. Instead they urged women to put a name to what they saw, and Florence Merriam told them how to do it in *Birds through an Opera Glass* (1889), the first true field guide. The list gave the novice a starting place, pleasure at the end of the day, and a measure of competence, while the competition it encouraged sharpened field skills. The American guide, serving this audience, evolved into a book stripped of all information except what led to a name. In other countries, where birding grew out of natural history, field identification was seen as only a first step in bird study, and guides included much information on life history. The more general adoption of the American guide and of competitive listing after World War II forms an important and as yet little-studied chapter in the history of amateur nature study.

Like birding, popular interest in birds around the home had its base in biology and its practice in the culture. Because birds nested in their trees and sang in their bushes, Victorian women easily brought them into their own kingdom, the domestic sphere; they looked to birds for, as Mabel Osgood Wright had it, *The Friendship of Nature*, or, to use Neltje Blanchan's title, an acquaintance with their *Bird Neighbors*. Birds in the yard remain a common enthusiasm, as demonstrated by the modern magazine *Birds and Blooms* and the robust demand for (allegedly) squirrel-proof bird feeders, specialised feeds, and bird houses, but ecology and the environmental movement transformed birds in the backyard from an extension of the home into the place where home and the world met. People saw their work as an individual contribution to environmental preservation, chose plantings to provide food, nesting sites, and cover for the birds as well as for beauty for themselves, and welcomed all species, not just the brightly coloured songsters the Victorians loved. Mabel Wright, despite her deep commitment to humane ideals, thought the Cooper's Hawk, which preyed on other birds, suitable only for target practice, but a nesting pair now makes a neighbourhood attraction, and some birders have two-stage feeders: they put out bread for the starlings to attract the hawks.

Conservation, like other aspects of our interaction with birds, changed with our understanding. The first generation, in campaigns marked by humane ideals and domestic sentiment, worked to end market hunting, egg collecting, and the casual slaughter of songbirds. Their successors, who were more conscious of birds as part of natural systems and who were seeing homes and factories marching out into wild areas, pressed for bird preserves on every level, from the local park to the National Wildlife Refuge System. In the 1950s birders pointed out the dangers of pesticide residues, and the environmental movement that grew in the wake of that controversy—and in part because of it—changed conservation from the protection of nature and wildlife to the defence of the biotic systems on which all species, including our own, depended. People saw the flocks of wild parakeets that bred in some American cities not as colourful additions to bird life but as potentially invasive species and as an unintended consequence of the pet trade. They viewed the deaths of albatrosses in the Southern Ocean from eating floating plastic and bits of Styrofoam as eloquent and alarming testimony to the extraordinary reach of our ordinary artefacts.

Environmental research drew birders into conservation, further blurring the (never quite clear) lines between scientists and citizens. From the 1920s ornithologists used amateur labour to band birds, and from the 1940s records like the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count to assess populations, but faced with the need for fine-grained current data on many species, they mobilised the masses. In 1986 the US Fish and Wildlife Service began a National Breeding Bird Survey, directed by Chandler Robbins—ornithologist, birder, and field guide writer—to measure the relative abundance of songbirds by reports of what expert birders heard each spring. In the next generation computers and the internet allowed data gathering on a far larger scale and analytical tools that could make use of even novices' observations. Now, every year, 200,000 people send reports to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's programs, which range from protecting endangered species to tracking bird diseases across the continent—this last with reports from backyard feeders.

Common everywhere, visible even in the heart of our cities, birds brought the wild to everyone, and birding encouraged an attention to the world, which, coupled with education, raised awareness of nature and our ties to it. Birders knew that some of the warblers they saw in the park on spring mornings came from the tropics and would go on to the boreal forests. They related the appearance of some new species and the dwindling of others to changes in a neighbourhood wetland or meadow. In addition, birds' easy movement from city to wilderness called into question our categories of wild and tame, humans' place and the realm of nature, making them the ideal form to think with, in a world so dominated by humans that some have proposed a new geological age, the Anthropocene, and so threatened by rising seas, global climate change, and emerging diseases that our civilization, if not our species, seemed in peril.

Our methods and approaches have changed since early humans scratched lines on bone and spread pigments on cave walls, but we go to birds for the same reasons they did—to better understand those other tribes with whom we share the world and the journey from deep time.

For Further Reading and Thought

Humans' relations with birds extend far beyond what I could cram into my book on North American field guides to the birds, *In the Field, Among the Feathered* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and even field guides deserve more attention. On the scientific end, Mark V. Barrow, Jr., *A Passion for Birds: American Ornithology after Audubon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) gives an introduction to the American scene, and Paul Lawrence Farber's old but still useful *Discovering Birds: The Emergence of Ornithology as a Scientific Discipline, 1760–1850* (1982; reprint Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) introduces the discipline as a whole. Two of Harriet Ritvo's works, *The Animal Estate* and *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987 and 1997), introduce the larger cultural dimensions. Beyond lies a vast and disorganised literature on people and birds from antiquity to the present. For a start, dip into Jeremy Mynott's *Birdscapes: Birds in Our Imagination and Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), an individual and somewhat quirky but almost encyclopaedic personal study of what birds mean to humans. It, like Ritvo's work, should stimulate the imagination. Also, put a field guide from your country alongside one from another continent. Because the books had to appeal to ordinary people, make a profit, and be scientifically respectable, every aspect, from the paper to the arrangement of the illustrations, carried a message from the culture, some as immediate and local as the technology of printing available then, others as universal as the urge to put in order all the things we see around us.