

The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology

By Tim Birkhead. 2008. Greystone Books, 2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201, Vancouver, British Columbia. 433 pages. 45 CAD. Cloth.

When I was in my teens, I collected plants. On my bike I used to scour the deserted roads of wartime Yorkshire in search of new finds. I was abetted in this lunacy by my parents, who had unearthed a vast 1888 tome, detailing every published report of every plant species in West Yorkshire from, it seemed, the beginning of time. One day I came across a very rare cinquefoil near a neighbouring village, and eagerly checked its status in this catalogue. To my astonishment the species had been recorded for this same location by the great botanist, John Ray, in 1670. It was still there! The effect was magical – I was no longer just an isolated kid with a weird hobby, but part of a proud tradition that went back almost 300 years!

It turns out that Ray did far more than publish a plant catalogue, noteworthy though that achievement was for its time. Unknown to me – and likely to most of the readers of this review – he went on to produce two books that laid the foundations for modern ornithology, and in this totally fascinating book Tim Birkhead argues Ray was the most influential ornithologist ever.

Historians have an image of dry-as-dust recitations of dates and names, but in essence science is about ideas. It is the history of the ideas that have influenced ornithology that Birkhead explores here, and at times there's more of the element of a detective story than a dull recitation to his account. He doesn't hesitate to use colloquialisms to make his point; you'll find the odd sentence without a verb, but his meaning is clear and his account is consistently lucid.

Nine broad topics, each the subject of a full chapter and together covering much of ornithological thought, form the body of the book. These range from the egg and its development to reproduction and longevity. For each, Birkhead looks at key questions: in the case of the egg, what was the origin of the new life, why do birds lay hard-shelled eggs, and how did the new life develop? He uses Ray as a starting point, as one of the first to ask the questions, capturing well the difficulty he and his contemporaries had in dealing with the com-

plexed problems they presented, and then traces the work that eventually led to the answers. Many of the issues discussed were not resolved until well into the last century, and indeed the answers to some of the questions preoccupied the ornithological community for much of the 1900s.

Such topics, then, will be familiar to ornithologists and others interested in the field. But Birkhead provides broader insights, giving interesting and valuable additional context to the subjects he discusses. While one might be familiar with the work of, say, David Lack, here Lack's work is presented as part of an expanded framework, showing its historical foundations and some of the issues that arose at the time he was active.

The opening and closing chapters bracket the rest of the book with an account of Ray's work and life. Together they form an excellent basis and fitting conclusion for the body of ideas in between.

The book's references, together with notes on the text, are gathered into 20 pages of notes at the back, together with an 18-page bibliography and a short glossary. There is an extensive and [as far as I could see] accurate index, plus an assortment of picture credits, biographical information and information on the type also gathered at the rear.

The illustrations deserve a special comment, as they are mainly reproductions of work by early artists, some occupying double pages – and some of these for no apparent reason! Apart from a few photos, only one painting by David Quinn was able to evade the seeming embargo on work later than the early 1900s. This approach seemed rather contrived, but nevertheless most of the plates were relevant and fit the historic theme, while providing an opportunity to see work that would be unfamiliar to many readers.

This is a wonderful book that discusses difficult concepts in a clear and readable way, and offers an insightful view of the history of ornithology. Highly recommended.

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Central Park in the Dark – More Mysteries of Urban Wildlife

By Marie Winn. 2008. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 18 West 18th Street, New York, New York 10011 USA. 304 pages. 25 USD. Cloth.

I'm not normally a fan of this type of book, but Winn's newest was indeed a pleasure to read. The chapters are laid out almost like a series of adventures, albeit tame ones compared with the sword and sorcery genre which I do follow. Unlike books in the

latter category, Winn's book does not include a map on the endpapers, ergo, the biggest drawback of this book is that Winn either assumes that the only people who will read this book frequent Central Park, and don't need a map, or somehow that all the geographic names she mentions really aren't important (then why mention them?). A map would allow the reader to keep track of where Winn, and her shifting bands