Book review

Edited by D. Jones

GREAT AUK ISLANDS: A FIELD BIOLOGIST IN THE ARCTIC
by Tim Birkhead

1993. T. & A.D. Poyser, London. Pp. 275, colour plates 1, colour photographs, 13, many b&w photographs and drawings, maps. 250 x 165 mm. $78.

When I was starting out as a research postgraduate, I was dimly aware of having commenced a form of 'rite-of-passage'. The apparently all-encompassing way of life that I was entering involved, it seemed, discovering important rules and lore largely or entirely by osmosis. While I expected most mental effort to be expended on scientific methodology and esoteric evolutionary concepts, I was unprepared for the 'cultural dimension' of research: the special language, the unspoken but powerful paradigms of convention and orthodoxy; the feeling of belonging to either an intellectual elite or a pathologically isolated sect, or both.

These personal views have obviously been tempered by time and realism. Equally, however, I am convinced that many people outside science retain this impression of eccentric specialists involved in mysterious and probably unfathomable tasks. And it is not a view that scientists themselves have not always been eager to shed.

Aware of this 'cultural' aspect of becoming a scientist, I have searched widely for books that described this experience and process of science, not as practiced by perfectly objective, coldly analytical automatons but by real, fallible, enthusiastic people like myself. To my surprise, such books appear to be extremely rare, at least among biologists. Many seem to be written either by Nobel-standard intellectuals for similar-level minds, or by adventurers who do a bit of biology on the side.

This book, however, is close to being ideal for the purpose. Although written by one of the most accomplished and prolific modern behavioural ecologists, this book is a revelation of clarity, sensitivity and ever apparent enthusiasm. But just as evident are the tedium, discomfort and frustration that inevitably accompany much field biology. It is this strong element of realism that gives the book one of its clear qualities: the author may be writing about life history strategies but you can also feel the icy blasts and hear the muffled noise of a guillemot colony in the background. Fairly unfamiliar stuff for anyone expecting the lifelessness of most journal prose.

In this country, Tim Birkhead will be best known for his immensely influential studies into the mysteries of sperm competition in birds. The seminal ideas of his interest in this ever-expanding field can be traced to his own doctoral studies on guillemots in the mid-1970s. This interest in the birds of the far-northern latitudes and the wild beauty of their environment has persisted for two decades. The papers have all been published in the right journals but here is the personal story that lies behind the 'bland, sure surface' (to borrow a phrase) of the journals. While Tim admits that this exercise is somewhat self-indulgent, its positive benefits are evident.

The author vividly justifies the book's stated intent: 'Few books are written about how scientists work. Scientists are often seen as a different breed from the rest of humanity and what they do often appears to be unintelligible to the lay-person.' A major reason for this is the terse and telescopic language of the journals we write for: 'But there is no need for scientists to write in a boring and esoteric way.' Birkhead, in contrast, fulfils this even in his 'serious' writing: his *Sperm Competition in Birds* (with A.P. Moller, Academic Press, 199?) is eminently readable and even exhilarating in places. And in this present book, he has tried hard to combine style and descriptive prose, yet retains the unsentimental but sympathetic point of view. A tough assignment and I feel the objective is a little too dominant in places.

However, this is not a novel-style book, with a subtle but definite thread leading one on to the climax in the last few pages. True to its ambit, the stories are very 'real-life', even if set in exceptional settings. The author is also no slouch when it comes to digging beneath the permafrost of his spectacular sites. There are numerous human stories of previous visitors and detailed accounts of the history of exploration and exploitation that were such a hallmark of the era.

But certainly the soul of this book revolves around the birds of the title. The Great Auks were the first species to be called 'penguins' and the story of their violent and tragic interaction with humans makes for unsettling reading. The awful absence of these birds on their bleak island homes is made especially pertinent by Tim Birkhead's biological detective work.

This is a beautifully produced book with many colour and black and white photographs of the landscapes and animals, and lots of superb drawings and paintings by David Quinn. I would encourage anyone with either an interest in the arctic or polar regions to read this book. But I would especially like amateur birdo's and students to delve into this work by an author gifted at avoiding the jargon without diminishing the scientific importance of the questions being asked.

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