

Book reviews

OWL

By Desmond Morris

2009. Published by Reaktion Books, London. 216pp., 91 colour and 32 black and white illustrations. Octavo, paperback, AU\$20.95, ISBN 9781861895257.

Owl is one of the latest in the Animal Series, produced by British publisher Reaktion. These attractive little books are filled with wit, wisdom and illustrations of some of the world's best-known animals, from elephants to ants. The books cover the evolving understanding and significance of each animal to humans, linking their history, interpretation in art and literature, legend and mythology, and biology, from pre-history to present, all in about 200 small pages. Among the current bird titles are *Crow*, *Falcon*, *Parrot*, *Peacock*, *Swan*, *Duck*, *Pigeon*, *Penguin* (see p. 101 this issue) with *Chicken* forthcoming.

Owl's author Desmond Morris leapt to fame with his 1967 *The Naked Ape*, still a best-seller, followed by other publications that explain human behaviour from a zoological standpoint. Morris is not only a zoologist but a human behaviourist and surrealistic artist, so it is no surprise that owls, with their human-like faces and otherworldly associations are a favourite of his. *Owl* is sparely and eloquently written, scholarly and highly readable. The chapter headings speak for themselves: prehistoric owls; ancient owls; medicinal owls; symbolic owls; emblematic owls; literary owls; tribal owls; owls and artists; typical owls; and unusual owls.

Morris opens with the astute observation that owls are 'the best known and the least known of birds'. This is as true in Australia as anywhere. While the populace becomes ever more city-bound, our suburban owls go about their business almost unnoticed, their distinctive calls deadened by traffic and television. This review will be read by a bird-loving audience, but how many Australians can say that they have heard, let alone seen, a Boobook, or glimpsed a Powerful Owl in Australia's largest cities: Melbourne and Sydney and Brisbane? Yet, any schoolchild could sketch a recognisable owl.

This familiarity with the unfamiliar can be partly ascribed to human's long fascination with owls and their wide adoption into culture and folklore. Every continent except Antarctica has a suite of owls of various sizes and habits. There are: day and night owls; flighted and flightless; terrestrial and arboreal; from insect gleaners to fishing owls. The smallest is the Brazilian–Paraguayan Least Pygmy Owl (40 g and 28 cm), according to Morris, though other authors nominate the Elf Owl of south-west USA and Mexico (averaging around 35 g and 20 cm). The largest is the Eurasian Eagle Owl (averaging 3 kg and over 70 cm from top to tail; females larger), which makes Australia's mighty Powerful Owl (the largest males of which reach 65 cm and 1.7 kg) seem positively petite.

The greatest known owl of all, the flightless Cuban Giant Owl weighing in at 9 kg and standing 1.1 m tall, and described only from fossils, is not mentioned, but Morris does mention another super-sized, terrestrial owl: the 1 m tall, burrowing Bahaman Barn Owl. The latter was driven to extinction soon after Europeans and

their slaves arrived in the Bahamas and felled the forests in the sixteenth century.

Owls frequently feature in the folk-tales, myths and legends of indigenous peoples. Their solemn stares, mysterious nocturnal ways, and eerie maniacal screeches and enquiring or accusatory 'who?' calls provide plenty of fodder for superstition. As Morris discusses, owls represent contradictory qualities. On the one hand they are considered good, still, silent, thoughtful, wise and all-seeing. On the other hand, they are perceived as portents of death, evil, fear and temptation, visitors from dark-side, blind (blinker) and bad luck.

One interesting aspect of biology that Morris draws out is the attention-grabbing mobbing by other species of birds that owls suffer if they are flushed out in daylight. Some artists have interpreted the behaviour symbolically, as the masses seeking wisdom, or jealous of the wise, or, more piously, as the righteous attacking the sinner. More pragmatically, this frenzied behaviour has been used to catch small birds for the pot. An early example, illustrated in *Owl*, is a 6th century Greek pot decorated with an owl tied to a post under a tree, surrounded by a swirling flock of mobsters, some trapped on the bird-limed branches of the tree.

On the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, tradition has it that owls are to be consulted before travelling, and villagers listen at night for the go or stay call. To some indigenous groups in Australia, owls represent women and women protect them because they are kin-sisters. Owls seem not to be acceptable subjects for aboriginal art, but their significance to women is represented in the 'owl stone', a natural formation resembling a hawk-owl in Victoria, protected and respected by the Nyungah people (Macintyre and Dobson 2009).

In Western history, owls were often perceived as feminine totems. The early Greeks attributed them with wisdom – the little owl was the bird of the important goddess Athena and still has significance as an icon today. Other species were associated with female deities elsewhere. Owls' framing as a feminine caused them trouble, most evident in their persecution as witches' familiars, and also connected with their defamation under the Roman Catholic Church. In the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus includes owls among 'the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable', that is, unclean (Leviticus 11: 13). In Medieval Bestiaries owls are associates of the Jews, who chose darkness over light in their rejection of Christ.

Morris tracks the ebbs and flows in owls' public profile. Fifteenth century artist Hieronymus Bosch's darkly moralistic paintings often contained owls, interpreted by historians as symbols of death or sinfulness. In the 1940s and 50s, Pablo Picasso also played on owls' association with death. He kept a little owl as a pet. So too did Florence Nightingale, who, as Morris recounts, had rescued it as a nestling from children who were tormenting it. Famously, this owl travelled with her in her pocket and attacked visitors who approached too closely.

Owls get better press in the sixth century Aesop's Fables, which feature sage-like owls, as does A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, published in 1926. In contemporary times, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, casts owls back to witching world, as messengers. But they are loyal companions, not harbingers of ill-omen.

Owl is an entertaining and informative little gem. It will particularly appeal to the many devotees of these eternally iconic birds.

Penny Olsen

The Australian National University

Reference

Macintyre, K., and Dobson, B. (2009). Report on Aboriginal Consultations and site Investigation of the 'Owl Stone' at Hansons Red Hill Quarry, Lot 11, Toodyay Road, City of Swan. Available at www.nyungah.org.au/susannah/owlstonereport.pdf

PENGUIN

Edited by Stephen Martin

2009. Published by Reaktion Books, London. 198pp., 66 colour & 29 black and white illustrations. Octavo, paperback, \$30.00, ISBN 9781861893765

Penguin is one of those books that defy classification. One can say what it says what it is not, but it is difficult to tie down what sort of book it really is, or even what message the author is trying to convey.

Clearly this is not an ornithological textbook, although it does have a good set of short species notes. Nor is a coffee table book with lots of beautiful photographs of penguins, although it is well illustrated with all sorts of pictures of penguins (real and imagined). Nor is it a treatise on the history or evolution of the penguins; although it does take the reader on a more or less detailed chronicle of human interactions with penguins. However, it certainly is a book that all penguin lovers will want to read.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to work with penguins sometimes can be irritated by the peculiar and often inaccurate perception of penguins held by many less lucky people who, although fascinated (and in some cases obsessed) by penguins, have never met one beak to beak as it were. Moreover, it can seem quite incredible that people who devote considerable effort to collecting penguin figurines seem to have no real interest in understanding their biology. Such people may hunt the globe to find a missing ceramic from their collection, but apparently neither know, nor care where in the world real living penguins be found.

Having read *Penguin*, I can, at last begin to understand how a particular concept of 'penguin' has over last century crept into the public consciousness to the extent that highly successful recent movies have, without much adverse comment, portrayed penguins as cute and cuddly cartoon characters (*Madagascar*, *Happy Feet*) or, unintentionally, as noble guardians of morality (*March of the Penguins*).

Stephen Martin takes the reader through the history of human interactions with penguins – from the early explorers and traders who met and ate penguins on their voyages, to the scientists who tried to classify them and the entrepreneurs who have used them to help sell an incredible variety of goods. In this journey we can begin to understand how it is that penguins have so captured the human imagination and how the myth of the penguin as a cute and cuddly creature has come about.

There are many anecdotes and examples of the uses of penguins in advertising and labelling of goods from products of all kinds – my own favourite was a jam jar label from South America featuring a Granny figure baking cakes for her penguin – as if a penguin would ever eat a jam tart! But, for me the penguin cavorting with Rita Haworth to advertise cigarettes takes the prize for the strangest use of a penguin in advertising.

I particularly enjoyed the penguin sketches, cartoons and posters liberally sprinkled around the text. The gem must be Shackelton's 'This is a Penguin?' graffiti – it's a pity we are not told where to find the wall it adorns!

Being married to a penguin obsessive, as I am, means that I rarely discover any new penguin items – but Stephen Martin has managed to unearth a couple of surprises – 'Woddles' the Waffle maker – a penguin shaped electric waffle maker if it is still made should make a perfect present!

As with any book, this one is not without its own faults. Perhaps the most annoying is that although Stephen Martin manages to explode many of the myths that surround the public perception of penguins (that they always mate for life, that they are found only in cold places and so on); he does in a few places, perhaps due to minor proofing errors, promulgate other myths about penguins that can be so annoying. For example, he states that penguins are closely related to the alcid (specifically guillemots) when what I suspect he intended to say was that due to similar evolutionary pressures both groups of birds developed similar characteristics. In another place he tells the reader that male penguins alone incubate the eggs, of course he really only intends this to cover Emperors, but unfortunately, the caveat is missing.

In summary, *Penguin*, is a book for all penguin people – it covers much ground and provides a background explanation of the anthropomorphic view of penguins held by most people – even by some who work with them – I challenge any penguin researcher to honestly state they have never talked to their study subjects (even if only to request politely that they desist with the pecking)!

Peter Barham

H H Wills Physics Laboratory
Bristol, UK

BIRDSCAPES: BIRDS IN OUR IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENCE

By Jeremy Mynott

2009. Published by Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA. 367pp., 8 colour illus., 32 halftones, 25 line illus., Hardback, \$56.00 (ISBN: 0691135398).

What does one make of a book with chapter titles such as 'wondering about birds' or 'birds are good to think with'? One can try to classify it by asking who this book is written for. What is immediately clear is that ornithologists do not really form its target audience: this is a book about how we view birds rather than about the intricacies of the lives of birds. This is not to say that the author Jeremy Mynott doesn't know his birds (every detail in the book shows that he does). But when he muses about whether a bird listening to a song sung by a familiar

neighbour might feel different to one listening to a 'foreign' song, he does not bother delving into the literature which tell us that hooded warblers not only recognise their neighbours individually, but also retain the memory of their songs after having migrated to Central America and back (Godard 1991). One has to look elsewhere for such information; this book is intentionally much more subjective. From birdsong to species-specific 'gizz' and to the way we name birds, the author asks how we relate to the avian world around us, and what it all reveals about *us*.

However, despite an impressive number of quotes and excerpts from writings across millennia, this is not really scholarly study of bird-inspired literature either. The quotes are presented in a far too haphazard order for that, often jumping between examples from several different centuries on one page. *Birdscapes* is, of course, not a totally random anthology. Instead, Mynott has ordered his findings according to themes such as the value of rarity, or birds in relation to the landscapes they inhabit. But he is too eager to tell us about the next literary gem to have the time to stop to explain the current one in any depth. For some of these passages, Mynott's impatience is a real shame. For example, I'd like to know what on earth made Eliot Howard, a 20th century author, go nuts (in the worst metaphysical sense) about his gallinules? Just listen: 'I divide the Waterhen's life into cycles, the cycles into parts, the parts into actions. I separate action from action, and part from part, and thus reduce everything to one. [...] For two months, day by day, or hourly, or even minute by minute, the Waterhen shifts from one world to another. [...] The particular actions which belong to a particular world and express a particular feeling have, as their natural correlate, a particular object which is external to the bird's body'. Amazing stuff, but there isn't much context provided, except that Mynott politely classifies this author as an 'amateur scientist'.

Who is this book really for then? Perhaps this problem is best illustrated by an example. In the chapter on 'Amusive birds', the author wants us to reflect on how birds make it onto someone's list of personal favourites. Fully acknowledging a British bias, he lists, among others, the Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), the Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), and the Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*), and then ponders why these particular species and not some others made it onto his own list. When discussing the nightingale he of course makes the familiar comment about its drab plumage and, to make his point, shows a photo of the Thrush Nightingale (*L. luscinia*), which looks pretty much the same but due to its much poorer song could not possibly make it onto the list of favourites. This immediately prompted me to ask: I beg your pardon? Having grown up in northern Europe myself, the Nightingale v. Thrush Nightingale comparison is of course a familiar one to me, but, as a result of having spent all those wondrously pale summer nights listening to the impeccable rhythm and power of the latter, I totally disagree with all the literature there is about the superiority of the former. (To me, the southerner just bubbles away: rushed and without much grace.)

So, is this oft-repeated yet (to me) false claim just a product of neural imprinting, so that birds inhabiting more popular regions end up being praised more often – or are we confronted with the phenomenon that propaganda is successful, if repeated often enough? Likewise, I of course, with all seriousness, take issue with the author's claim that the (European) magpie lacks character. Even if, say, an Australian reader had never seen one, a birdwatcher who has watched any corvid anywhere in the world should easily see the need to challenge this view.

Now, I'm not sure if a reader of *Emu* should be that interested in my native habitat and to what extent it may or may not have shaped my preferences for various *Luscinia* songsters. However, there is a reason why I mention all this: it forms the perfect test of whether you, as a reader, might find *Birdscapes* a worthwhile read. Do you enjoy hearing someone's personal views on how difficult it is for a visitor to remember Australian bird names, or a tongue-in-cheek 'Beaufort scale' modified to describe a birder's reaction to seeing rarities of various kinds? If you do, then the author, through his own musings as well as literally hundreds of others' opinions, will provide you with plenty of things to react to.

The way the book makes you want to respond – by disagreeing or by reminding you of an anecdote or experience of your own – is its strength and its greatest weakness too. Reading this book is, at its best, like chatting to someone in a pub after a great day out watching birds together, and its real target audience is anyone who loves this kind of activity. Unlike your average birding companion, the author has also spent more time in the library than I can imagine possible (that is, with all the keen birding that must have been going on too), and is able to come up with the most amazing collection of anecdotes and quotes one won't have encountered before. What a great chat over a beer one could have with him! But ultimately, when enthusiasts go on and on about birds, this really is best done in the pub, and the one-way street of a book format somehow does not do justice to the potential of this chat. At this point, I cannot resist mentioning that the author would probably digress to point out that 'chat' is also the name of a bird; he then wouldn't give us a complete etymology, but would prompt us to think about other cases where a verb becomes a bird's name when we think of it as a noun.

What, as a whole, did I learn? To be brutally honest I'm not totally sure, but I know that if I ever in my lectures need an amusing example of birds duetting with musical instruments (or, for that matter, moorhen-inspired metaphysics), I now know where to look it up.

Hanna Kokko
The Australian National University

Reference

Godard, R. (1991). Long-term-memory of individual neighbors in a migratory songbird. *Nature* **350**, 228–229.