

# Book review

**Birds and Us: A 12,000 Year History, from Cave Art to Conservation** by Tim Birkhead (2022) 464 pp., Viking, London, UK. ISBN 978-0-241-46049-8 (hbk), GBP 25.00.

Birds are one of the most observable and best understood group of animals. The state of the world's birds and our interaction with them is indicative of trends in nature as a whole, making birds an ideal subject for a review of humankind's relationship with nature. *Birds and Us* represents a reflection on our long history living alongside birds and comes at a time when the relationship we have with nature is being redefined, hopefully for the better. The move towards a harmonious relationship with nature, and away from an extractive or corrosive one, is something we have yet to achieve, and although people have always exploited natural resources at some level, Birkhead highlights that the pressures exerted by our current consumption levels are increasingly unsustainable. Readers of *Birds and Us* will receive rich cultural insights and will be sure to conclude the book with a view of birds as a treasure to cherish and conserve rather than a resource to exploit.

Birkhead writes extensively about ornithology and has published one of my favourite books to date, *The Wonderful Mr Willughby: The First True Ornithologist*. From a background of scientific rigour and research in avian behaviour and ecology, the insights delivered by him are credible and captivating.

Consequently, I was eager to read *Birds and Us* to gain a more comprehensive overview of the history of birds and people. This book appeals to those with a true passion for ornithology but is equally accessible for a readership with a general interest in nature, as well as art, history and anthropology. This book acts as a thorough review of birds and people over the last 12,000 years, paying particular attention to various case studies and anecdotes from different times. What makes this book all the more engaging, is that many of the tales are recounted from first-hand experience by the author. There are ample photographs, paintings, drawings and inserts across 32 pages supporting the text—all of good quality and many previously unpublished—that bring the stories to life. It is clear that the author feels a genuine love for birds, history and art, which is infectious to the reader.

It must have taken a huge amount of work and dedication to compile such a comprehensive collection of information, which will be sure to provide novel insights to even the most well-read ornithologists. The book is well structured with 12 chapters describing different eras and themes in broadly chronological order. With 12,000 years to cover, the journey is inevitably somewhat disjointed and requires a fair amount of time travel, but the relatively discrete chapters make the book easy to pick up and digest. Whilst there is only limited space for such a variety of topics as

Birkhead covers in this book, this merely whets the reader's appetite for more in-depth investigation into particular species, people and events.

The book resonated with me in a number of ways, but particularly as coming out of confinement during the global pandemic, many of us found a renewed appreciation for nature, which—from a perspective of holistic well-being and connectedness with the natural world—is being recognized as increasingly important. Coincidentally, I had the opportunity at the time of reading this book to study, for the first time, the exquisite and extensive depictions of birds, commissioned by Maria Theresa in the 18th century for the Bergl Rooms of Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna, the main summer residence of the Habsburg family. Reading *Birds and Us* gave me a whole new perspective into the value of these opportunities for learning, and I began to appreciate that they offer unrivalled insights into the culture at the time, and into the value that birds from around the world held in society. I believe that any reader of *Birds and Us* will also come away with their own enhanced personal connection with birds from across the myriad ways in which they enhance our lives, which I am sure the author would be delighted by.

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