

The
Extraordinary
Beauty
of
Birds

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Designs, Patterns and Details

Photographs by Deborah Samuel

Texts by Mark Peck

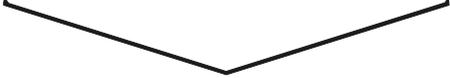
PRESTEL

Munich • London • New York

In Memory of Graham E Todd

For Pat McCarthy

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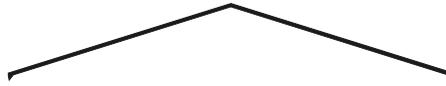
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Why Birds Matter

NEIL PEART



The truth of the matter is, the birds could very well live without us, but many - perhaps all - of us would find life incomplete, indeed almost intolerable without the birds.

Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996)

Roger Tory Peterson was an important naturalist and author of many field guides - and he was my first hero. As a boy of five, growing up in Southern Ontario, I became fascinated with birds - hawks, hummingbirds, cardinals, bluebirds, orioles, goldfinches, grackles. I still have a special affection for robins, our harbingers of spring, and perhaps most of all for chickadees, the cheery spirits of Canadian winter.

Birds appeared to me like miraculous flying jewels, with all the grace and splendour of tropical fish. I delighted in their flickering silhouettes, rhythmic wingbeats, and distinctive calls and songs - the rusty-hinge squeak of the red-winged blackbird as much as the mournful fluting of the hermit thrush. Birds made the suburban lawns and woodlands as lively and exotic as a coral reef. Around our yard or on weekend hikes in springtime I would seek out their nests, thrilled to climb high and peek at their eggs and young. Finding a dead bird along the roadside made me sad, but I would always pause to study its plumage.

My grandmother, Lena Louise Peart, taught me their names in her bird books, four little volumes with yellow, green, blue, and red covers. She let me learn to draw the different species with tracing paper, and almost sixty years later, the impressions of my pencil in those pages are still visible - for I have those books now.

In 1957, when I was five, the Red Rose tea company introduced collectible cards of 'Songbirds of North America'.

Written and mainly illustrated by Roger Tory Peterson, these cards were objects of great desire although, despite my urgings, Mom and Dad drank coffee, and Grandma and Mrs Pirie next door did not buy enough tea for me to collect all forty-eight. The promotional photographs of Roger Tory Peterson showed him in the field, wearing weather-proof clothes and holding big binoculars. I felt my first ambition: to be a professional birdwatcher.

Life carried me in different directions, into music and words, but I never lost that passion for birds - they have been a gift to me always and everywhere. My travels around the world can be traced by the row of field guides on my bookshelf: Birds of North America, South America, East Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia, Hawaii, Tahiti, Barbados, and more.

So having established that 'context', when my eyes rest on these sumptuous still lifes created by Deborah Samuel, I feel instinctive love for the subject, yet a fresh delight, even awe, at the forms, colours, and miracles of design. The only word seems to be 'gorgeous'.

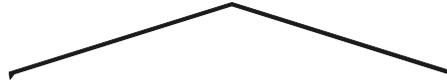
William S. Burroughs wrote: 'The object of art is to make the reader or viewer or listener aware of what he knows but doesn't know that he knows. This is doubly true of photography.'

While Deborah's images might remind me of why I admire the rakish sleekness of the cedar waxwing, her eye takes mine - and every other viewer's - to the splendour of a feather, an egg, an intricately woven nest. We may have seen these objects before, but we have not seen them with this level of insight and care in the focus, frame, and lighting. It is truly a rarefied array of the kind of beauty we didn't know we knew.

Admiring these images gave rise to a new thought. Perhaps when we try to create music, weave words, or capture visions with paint or lens, we are simply trying to make something as beautiful as nature.

The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds

DEBORAH SAMUEL



The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds is the latest chapter in a photographic odyssey that began with *Passing*, continued into *Elegy*, and is now further elaborated with these images from the avian world. In the beginning, *Passing* was about the cycle of life - its splendour, its persistence, its conclusion. *Elegy* proposed a reflection on mortality that examined the translucent beauty to be found in skeletal remains. Luminous images settled in a velvety black darkness, a darkness that gained no purchase on their light. Leonard Cohen once famously sang, 'There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'.

After darkness comes the light. Metaphorically and spiritually, birds have become the agents of that transition. In their flight they break free of the earth, with all its complications and anxiety, and soar above it in a realm closer to heaven. They are symbols of freedom and harbingers of whatever lies above. In 1958, Ferlin Husky sang, 'On the wings of a snow white dove . . . A sign from above, on the wings of a dove'.

Birds inspire us. Their flight is transfixing. They are compelled by mysterious instincts to feats of migratory endurance far beyond their size and apparent strength. Their beauty is limitless and rare. When we are weighed down with worries and burdens, they lift our spirits. In our dreams, the bird expresses the possibility of escape - the desire for liberty. Who can forget the film *Birdman of Alcatraz*, a story of a man whose tender care of birds helped him survive in prison? Historically, women and men have festooned themselves with feathers to enhance their beauty or to represent strength or nobility. A white dove with an olive branch

has long been one of the most popular international symbols of peace. But of course birds have also been seen as agents of loss, deception, and even horror. Think of Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Raven' or Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*. Birds seem to embody our deepest emotions - their flight can literally carry us away.

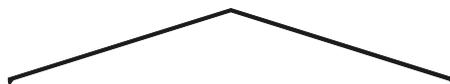
Birdwatching is an enormously popular hobby throughout the world. In the United States alone, it is estimated that there are approximately 48 million dedicated 'birders'. As Joseph Wood Krutch puts it, 'it is the joy that cannot be analysed'. Birdwatchers will travel long distances to sit in motionless, meditative silence, hoping to see a bird. And failure does not deter them. What is it that captivates them, that inspires such passionate devotion? Perhaps it is the simple idea that when birds fly up above our heads and off into the vast horizon, it is not only profoundly beautiful but an act of liberation, an expression of life's boundless possibilities.

These photographs of feathers and nests, eggs and birds are the soaring conclusion to a meditation on what it means to be alive, following an exploration of the meaning of death and its inevitable place in life. With these images we take off into the limitless potential of living - its beauty, its abstraction, its endless options. Many of the photographs are stunningly beautiful - like the one showing the downy white feathers of an Osprey or the topography of the Black Sicklebill. In the diptych of an American Robin Egg and Nest there is the architecture of all life in one powerful image. The feathered eye of an Osprey looks back at you as if to remind you that you are not alone.

The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds is a magnificent document, full of unexpected portraits and of abstract ideas personified through art. This is one photographer's journey to the light, a celebration of the beauty in life.

The Art and Science of a Museum Collection

MARK PECK



A museum's mandate is to collect, conserve and exhibit objects of historical, scientific and cultural interest and to communicate the value of these objects to the public. To achieve this goal, objects in the collection should become an integral part of a story, should spark the imagination of the visitor, and encourage learning and further study. The stories can be told in many different ways. Through the proper use of science and art we can encourage a greater understanding of the world around us. Within a museum, there are public spaces and galleries to exhibit the artefacts, but the vast majority of the objects often remain out of the public eye, in large collection rooms designed for research and study, carefully labelled and wisely organised.

The Ornithology collection at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is subdivided into four sections: skins, skeletons, nests and eggs, and blood and tissue. The collection rooms are full of wonders, touched with sadness. There are 12,000 nests and eggs, 45,000 skeletons, 40,000 blood and tissue samples and over 140,000 stuffed bird skins lying on their backs, neatly organised according to their taxonomic relationships. They are hidden away on many shelves in numerous cabinets, protected from excessive light levels, heat, extreme humidity and potential insect pests. Some of the specimens were prepared over 200 years ago and more are added to the collection every month. The skins, skeletons, and nests and eggs have come to the museum from a variety of sources including faunal surveys, bequests from private collectors, research studies and, more recently, from window strikes and road kill.

Traditionally, research specimens are prepared differently from the taxidermic mounts seen in the public displays and

galleries. Egg sets are 'blown' to remove their yolks and whites and then placed carefully on a bed of cotton in a cardboard box just large enough to contain the fragile clutch. Skeletons are cleaned by using dermestid beetles (which feed on carcasses), given a final cleansing with soap and water and then placed, disarticulated, into small, covered labelled boxes. Bird skins are turned inside out, much of their flesh and some of the skeleton are removed, and they are then returned to their original size and shape, stuffed with cotton and sewn back up. First and foremost, the collections are for scientific research but they are also made available for artists, for educational tours and interested members of the public. The exquisite beauty of each specimen endures, and from the deaths of these marvellous creatures scientists can derive knowledge which is then shared with the museum's visitors. Artists can achieve something else - they can, in a sense, bring a specimen back to life. Through the artist's vision and skill, the wonder and beauty of a bird that may have been dead for 150 years is revived.

My first opportunity to work with Deborah Samuel came during her preparation for her 2012 *Elegy* exhibition at the museum, but I had heard of her achievements long before that. I have worked in the Ornithology Department of the ROM for over thirty years. My education had focussed primarily on zoology but included a strong interest in photography. As well as university, I had attended the photography programme at Sheridan College, one of Deborah's alma maters, a few years after she had graduated. She was already making a name for herself in portraiture and fashion photography and she was held up in our classes as an example of the photographer we should strive to be. Shortly thereafter I began my career at the ROM but I continued my interest in photography and examples of Deborah's work continually surfaced.

During *Elegy*, Deborah spent days photographing skeletons in the collection room, immersing herself in her work but taking careful note of the skins, nests and eggs that were being researched and curated around her. During her breaks she toured the collections, learning about particular species or specimens that caught her interest. Her work continued for several weeks until *Elegy* had been completed. She went home to Santa Fe, New Mexico but came back

several months later, returned to the collection room and began taking photographs

The results are stunning. Deborah's wonderful images, rooted both in art and science, provide stimulation for both the left and right side of our brains and bring a fresh perspective and meaning to the beauty of evolution. Her skill as a photographer brings out the splendour of the simple feather, the sensuality that bursts from the 'eyelashes' of the Black Sicklebill, or the aerial ballet of the Tree Swallow, and the subtleties and complexities of the modest bird egg. The extraordinary patterns of colour and design inherent in birds are isolated and brought into sharp focus. She engages with viewers, challenging them to look closer and re-evaluate what they see. Her connection to nature gives us a far greater appreciation of the avian world and helps us to better connect with our extraordinary fellow creatures.

King Bird-of-paradise

Makira Starling

Copper Pheasant

Emu

Chipping Sparrow

Black
Sicklebill

Reeve's Pheasant

King of Saxony Bird-
of-paradise

King of Holland
Bird-of-paradise

Blue Jay

Common Scimitar-bill

Common or
European Starling

Resplendent
Quetzal

Blue-winged
Teal

Eastern
Wood-pewee

Cedar
Waxwing

American
Woodcock

American Tree Sparrow

American
Crow

Crimson Topaz

Red Knot

Baltimore Oriole

Mountain Bluebird

Great Argus

Indian Peafowl

Hooded Pita

Black-billed Magpie

Mourning
Dove

Great Horned Owl

Rose-breasted
Grosbeak

Satyr Tragopan

Southern Masked
Weaver

Scarlet Ibis

Greater Rhea

Ostrich

Golden
Pheasant

Rusty
Blackbird

Common or
Ring-necked Pheasant

Fork-tailed Flycatcher

Vervain Hummingbird

Greater
Bird-of-paradise

Great Grey
Owl

Two-barred or
White-winged Crossbill

Scissor-tailed
Flycatcher

Wild Turkey

Western Crested
Guineafowl

Common Murre

Brown-headed
Cowbird

Himalayan Monal

Long-tailed
Sylph

Osprey

Magnificent
Bird-of-paradise

Superb
Bird-of-paradise

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

New Zealand Scaup

American
Redstart

White
Bellbird

Hyacinth Macaw

Olive-backed
Sunbird

Wilson's Bird-of-paradise

Ruby-throated
Hummingbird

Domestic Duck

Southern Brown
Kiwi

Superb Lyrebird

Cooper's
Hawk

Least Flycatcher

Guianan Cock-of-the-rock

Golden-winged
Warbler

Mute Swan

Tree Swallow

Razorbill

Grey
Junglefowl

Willow Flycatcher

Shaft-tailed
Whydah

Sharp-
shinned Hawk

American Robin

Greater Racket-
tailed Drongo

Bald Eagle

Red-billed
Blue Magpie

Long-tailed
Duck

Blue and Yellow
Macaw



Himalayan Monal

PREVIOUS PAGE

The three monal species are among the most striking and iridescent of all pheasants. The Himalayan Monal, the national bird of Nepal, has a dazzling metallic green head crest, which is absent in the other species. The neck feathers are a shimmering copper, the back a glossy metallic blue, and the breast and belly a lustrous black. Its rufous tail is the only part of its plumage lacking an iridescent sparkle.

Great Argus

Eyespots (ocelli) are found on many different animals including insects, fish, reptiles, mammals and birds. Examples in birds include those on the tail of the peacock, the wings of the Sunbittern, the head of Pygmy-owls and the wing of the male Great Argus. Each secondary flight feather on a male may have between ten and twenty-five ocelli on the outer vane, running vertically along the rachis. Ocelli are thought to be a form of mimicry in some animals or may play a role in courtship and communication as is probably the case in peafowl and the Great Argus.



Cedar Waxwing

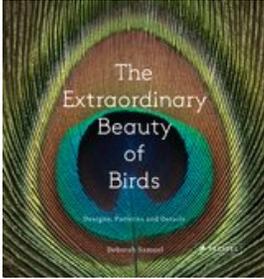
Cedar waxwings are found throughout most of North and Central America, with the exception of the Arctic. They are frugivores (fruit eaters) but supplement their sugary diet with insects during the summer breeding season. There are three species of waxwings throughout the world, and all have silky, shiny feathering, a short crest and a striking black mask. During the winter, waxwings congregate in large flocks and move around the country, foraging for berries.

Black Sicklebill

NEXT SPREAD

With its striking plumage, the Black Sicklebill provides one of the finest examples of sexual selection in birds. Sicklebills belong to the Bird-of-paradise family found in Papua New Guinea and northern Australia. In most members of the family, males are polygamous, and the selection by females of the 'biggest and brightest' has led to more elaborate and gaudy plumage evolving over time. The erectile black and iridescent blue pectoral feathers emanate from the sides of the breast and are raised around and behind the back of the head during courtship displays.





Deborah Samuel

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Designs, Patterns and Details

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