



A golden eagle perches on the glove of a Kazakh hunter in the Altai Mountains, western Mongolia.

## ORNITHOLOGY

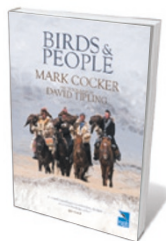
# Feathered encounters

Nicky Clayton enjoys a tribute to the enduring relationship between birds and humanity.

**B***irds and People* is a delightful duet between nature writer Mark Cocker and wildlife photographer David Tipling. This monumental compendium is a reference book on the relationship between the class Aves and humanity — told in part through the personal stories of more than 650 people from 81 countries. But it is also a coffee-table collection of gorgeous images detailing that relationship, captured in 39 countries across 7 continents. At its core is our fascination with birds, and their enchanting and elaborate acoustic, visual and aerial displays.

Cocker vividly depicts how birds have become embodied in our arts and science, entwined in our philosophy and politics, and embedded in our cultures, from folklore to costume and cuisine. The eggs of the common ostrich (*Struthio camelus*), for example, have been used as water carriers, and birds are a central inspiration in Western art: think of the ballet *Swan Lake* or Constantin Brancusi's 1920s sculptural masterpiece *Bird in Space*.

Part natural history, part cultural anthology, the book describes how and why birds have colonized our imagination and become an integral part of the everyday, from back-garden birdwatching to feather duvets and boiled eggs. Images of penguins seem to be ubiquitous, appearing on everything from



## Birds and People

MARK COCKER

Jonathan Cape: 2013.

publisher Allen Lane's famous paperbacks to Brazil's Antarctica beer. As a devotee of crows, ravens and other corvids — justly celebrated for their intelligence in the art of Pacific Northwestern Native Americans — I was pleased to see behavioural ecologist Tim Birkhead puncturing the persistent myth that magpies are responsible for the decline of some garden bird species.

There are some 10,500 species of bird and they inhabit every continent and almost every environment: land, water and the air (swifts, for instance, land only to breed). The book is organized by avian family, following the taxonomic-order classification and nomenclature of ornithologists Frank Gill and Minturn Wright. The science on each is beautifully plaited into the stories on birds' places in human cultures.

These stories are staggering in their diversity and as gripping for neophytes as for ornithologists. Cocker tells us that the domestic chicken, derived from the red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*), is the biggest single

source of protein we consume. I shed a tear over how the black robin (*Petroica traversi*) of the Chatham Islands off New Zealand was pulled back from extinction, thanks to the dedication of scientist Don Merton and Old Blue, once the last remaining fertile female, which Merton found. Human-bird cooperation is an ancient phenomenon, of course: in East Asia, some fishermen encourage free-flying cormorants to catch fish. The birds deposit these on their 'owner's' boat, and are fed with some of the fish as a reward.

Numerous books have been written on the interactions between animals and humankind; few investigate cultural perspectives. Of those that do, the tendency is to focus on a species or family. *Birds and People* is refreshing in not being speciesist. Cocker and Tipling explore a relationship that lies at the heart of human experience and that has inspired great science and art, from Charles Darwin's groundbreaking findings on the Galapagos finches to Percy Bysshe Shelley's soaring 1820 poem *To a Skylark*. ■

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