

## DIVINATION BY BIRDS

[**Dr. Alexander F. Skutch**, whose love of Nature and her creatures springs from his sense of the unity and sacredness of all life, here points out how the need in all human beings to feel this deep and actual union of life is being shown by the recent marked increase in bird-watchers. Birds, he writes, "may be looked upon as symbols or modes of expressions of a transcendent reality of which the whole visible world is the manifestation." They present Nature in one of her most beautiful and benign aspects, thus hearing and watching them brings some relief to beauty-starved human kind in our ugly mechanical age.—ED.]

One of the encouraging developments of our time is the steadily growing interest in birds. Were this merely a resurgence of the old collector's mania for boxes full of particolored eggs and for stuffed skins neatly laid out in cabinet drawers with their feet in the air or mounted with horrible glassy eyes, the new preoccupation with birds would be deplorable rather than heartening. There is, particularly in England, a fresh outbreak of the egg-collecting which a generation or two ago was the accredited approach to ornithology; but on the whole the recent growth of interest has taken a more promising direction. It is, above all, an appreciation of the living bird in its natural environment. It is bird-watching, not bird-collecting. It sends the enthusiast through the fields and forests and marshlands, along the inland waterways and the seashores, equipped with binocular and camera rather than with a gun, and brings him back laden with notes, memories and photographs rather than limp feathered corpses which have

lost that warm vitality which is the essence of a bird.

Those less strenuous and mobile in the pursuit of their hobby draw the birds to their dooryards and gardens by supplying food and planting shrubbery that offers shelter and sites for nests. And this growing interest in the living bird has stimulated the formation of numerous clubs and societies with their meetings and publications devoted to the discussion of observations and experiences with birds; while the presses pour out ever more guides for the recognition of birds in the field and countless volumes dealing with the habits of birds and the adventures of those who go in search of them.

What is the significance of all this recent interest in the feathered kind? What is sought by the countless bird-watchers who spend long hours marching along the country roads and trudging over the fields in all kinds of weather, returning home with no tangible trophies of their strenuous quest, yet feeling richly rewarded for their effort?

What of the inmost nature of the seekers does all this seeking disclose? To what extent do they find that for which they search?

It is easy to point out some of the attractions of bird-watching and to show how it fills certain obvious gaps in the lives of men and women who dwell and work in artificial surroundings, preoccupied with the worrying complexities of modern life. There is the esthetic appeal of creatures beautiful in form and color, swift and graceful of movement, gifted with melodious voices. There is the perennial excitement of hunting for the hidden and the exhilaration of stumbling upon the unexpected. For these mobile winged creatures are here today and far away tomorrow, and there is always the possibility of meeting in one's own shade trees some rare, exotic bird unknown to one's neighbors. There is the advantage of combining with necessary exercise a pursuit that sharpens the senses of sight and hearing, exercises the mind, and stimulates the fancy. There is the charm of a quest that not only leads one into the fairest of rural and sylvan scenes, but gives a point to all one's rambles, an added zest to every excursion. For those endowed with the requisite patience, there are the thrills of discovering cunningly hidden nests, the insights to be won through the self-effacing observation of the devoted parent birds. Systematically cultivated, bird-watching brings a wider knowledge of the natural world, a deeper

understanding of the ways of living things.

It is generally recognized that men and women, girls and boys, are led by these advantages to become watchers of birds. But that they are often, perhaps usually, drawn to this pursuit by a more profound and subtle impulse, so deeply embedded in the spirit that they themselves are scarcely aware of its presence, is a consideration that has been too often overlooked. Society, always jealous of the minds and loyalties of the individuals who compose it, strives insidiously to absorb them wholly into itself. This tendency, already clear enough in primitive races, takes subtler forms in modern civilization, where on the one hand men have ever fewer contacts with the natural world which sustains human as well as all other forms of life, where on the other hand the narrowing of vision for which science is at least indirectly responsible turns their thoughts and aspirations away from that vast unseen world which surrounds and penetrates the small segment of reality revealed to our senses and measured by our instruments. But there is that in us which refuses to be satisfied by the amenities of a mechanical civilization, intercourse with our fellows, and the slowly won discoveries of positive science—that which society strives in vain to domesticate and place wholly at the disposition of its vast, ponderous and insatiable organism. We instinctively yearn for contact with some-

thing that envelops and transcends that purely human world which so loudly asseverates its own adequacy, so insistently presses its claim upon our bodies and our spirits.

The churches, once the chief stairways by which men sought to ascend from the humdrum human world to a transcendent realm that gave it significance, have lost much of their old appeal and authority. One reason for this decline in their liberating power is the obsolescence of their symbols. For religion, which speaks to men of things never seen nor heard nor touched with the hands, must enter their minds by means of signs; yet the symbolism adequate for one generation becomes fantastic to another, whose ideas and practical experiences flow in different channels. The yearning toward a larger sphere, no longer satisfied by conventional religion, seeks fulfilment in other directions. Often it turns to nature, so much older, wider, more stable and dependable than our feverish human societies, so silent and enigmatic, that one may regard it, if not as that ultimate reality to which the religious aspiration impels us, at least as a more adequate and revealing symbol of that reality than any which the human mind has devised.

I do not wish to suggest that this consideration is explicitly present in the minds of the great mass of the enthusiasts who spend so much of their leisure time combing the countryside with binoculars to spy the earliest returning migrants, or

to add yet another rare species to their list of birds seen. Probably few of them have ever thought of their hobby in this light, and many would strenuously reject the implication that a recondite or spiritual motive underlies their pursuit. Nor do I intend to create the impression that bird-watching is a truer or more adequate outlet for the impulse to which I allude than botanizing, or star-gazing, or gardening, or any other form of dedicated association with nature. I selected bird-watching only because, of late, it has won so many zealous votaries that it is coming to occupy an important position in 20th-century culture. And my contention is simply that many people devote their spare time to birds, rather than to stamp-collecting or golf or the theatre or any other avocation concerned solely with the activities and artifacts of men, because, among other things, it is one mode of contact with that larger, embracing world in which humanity is but a transient stirring.

Bird-watching, then, is an indication of our human need to reach out beyond the narrow confines of society and establish contact with a wider, more inclusive order of being. Birds, which in some measure satisfy this need, are like ourselves segments of this larger world, and may be looked upon as symbols or modes of expression of a transcendent reality of which the whole visible world is the manifestation. In seeking birds we become aware

of certain facets of our own nature too often overlooked. But can we go farther than this, and through the birds which are the objects of our quest gain some insight into the force which created them? Every search reveals something of the character of the seeker, and also, in the degree that it is successful, gives us glimpses of the nature of its object. The first point has received sufficient attention. We turn now to the second.

Whatever the character of the creative energy to which this world owes its existence, whatever the goal toward which it deliberately or unconsciously strives, birds seem well fitted to reveal these mysteries to us; for on the surface of our planet they are so abundant and widespread that we must look upon them as no accidental or aberrant outcome of the formative process. On the contrary, they are so prominent a part of the life of our globe that we are constrained to regard them as a major expression of the energy which produced and inspires life. Compared with the vegetation that covers with a green mantle the more benign regions of our planet, birds account for a small fraction of the mass of living matter, yet of the animal kingdom they are one of the most flourishing branches. Wherever he wanders over the surface of the earth, birds claim the attention of the observant traveller more than any other class of animals, save possibly the far more numerous but individually smaller insects. By

voice, color and movement, these vivacious creatures of the air and light reveal themselves to men more freely than the usually bigger but duller, more silent and often nocturnal mammals, and far more than reptiles, amphibia, or any humbler form of terrestrial life. Without the voices of birds, the magnificent forests of the tropics would be as still as the desert and seem almost devoid of sentient creatures. On the great grass lands and over the arid wastes, the soaring forms of birds remind us of the omnipresence of life. During the summer months, at least, the sub-polar barrens teem with nesting birds. Even on the high seas, hundreds of miles from shore, birds rather than fish or cetaceans are the animals most frequently glimpsed from the deck of a ship.

And under what aspects do birds present themselves to us? Most obviously, that of beauty; and this is what chiefly attracts us to them. Many are bedight in the most brilliant colors; and even on those more soberly attired, the dull shades are so soft and warm, blended so delicately and in such intricate patterns, that when we gaze attentively upon them we may ask ourselves whether these unpretentious sparrows, night-jars and quail are not more beautiful than the gaudiest of the macaws and tanagers. But the esthetic appeal of birds owes as much to delicacy of form, to the soft loveliness of feathers, and to swift yet graceful movement, as to coloration. And they charm us through our sense of

hearing no less than through that of sight, for birds are the musicians of nature. Then, too, there is the beauty of nests so variously and skilfully wrought, and the loveliness of eggs in their shapely forms and endless diversity of shades and ornamentation. Birds account for no mean share of the beauty of our earth.

The second aspect under which birds present themselves to us is that of friendliness or love. In the milder regions of the earth, where winter's dearth does not scatter the feathered tribes nor send them afar in pursuit of food or warmth, a large proportion of all the birds live in pairs throughout the year. Since for many months their reproductive instincts slumber profoundly, it seems evident that something other than sexual attraction holds the male and female together—personal affection or something very like it. The sociability or friendliness of birds often leads them to join in flocks, which are not incompatible with the maintenance of the bond between mates, of which one becomes aware when he watches parrots winging overhead in a great flock made up of couples flying side by side.

These modes of association of birds with others of their own species are familiar enough among ourselves; but what seems strange to the human observer who pauses to reflect, what sets birds sharply apart from men, is their friendliness toward other species. On the whole, we humans are shunned and feared by

practically every kind of terrestrial animal larger than insects, except the few that we have domesticated for our own selfish ends. But among birds, individuals of diverse species band together in a friendly company. One meets such mixed flocks in northern woodlands, but they are more important in the economy of the birds of the tropical forests. Here, where the peculiar ecological conditions are unfavorable to the formation of large companies of a single species, birds with complementary modes of foraging hunt together; and the companionship of such motley flocks is perhaps a psychic necessity of birds cut off from close association with others of their own kind. Since these mixed groups are composed not only of members of distinct species, but of representatives of different families and orders, their equivalent among mammals would be a party comprising men, deer, antelopes, bears, rabbits, bison, etc.—one or a few of each kind—keeping close company all day with never a serious conflict between two individuals. The very notion of such a band strikes us as fantastic, as of the stuff of Messianic visions or of fairy tales.

The third aspect of bird life which claims our attention is its orderliness. In some manner of which, despite many specious theories, we have little real understanding, birds find their way over vast stretches of the earth's surface to the very same garden or meadow where they nested or wintered the previous year. And



their coming and going is so regular that one might suppose that they time their journeys by observations of the movements of the heavenly bodies. Then there is the order brought into their lives by the widespread system of claiming territories or circumscribed plots of land where pairs rear their families with a minimum of interference from others of their kind, who on the whole respect their neighbors' boundaries. In watching the rearing of a brood of young birds, we behold not only an admirable exhibition of parental devotion, but a marvellous degree of co-ordination between the activities of the two parents and between these and the reactions of the helpless offspring. This close interlocking of the behavior of the several members of the family group results from innate or instinctive modes of behavior rather than from learned or rationally directed conduct as with ourselves. We hesitate to say that the parent bird attends its nestlings, or respects the boundaries of its neighbor's territory, from a sense of duty or in obedience to the dictates of conscience. Yet this beneficent regularity in behavior, leading to the perpetuation of life and the prosperity of individuals, is the goal toward which the greater part of our explicit human morality is directed; so that wherever we encounter such ordered patterns of activity, we are constrained to recognize a moralness of which our own self-conscious morality is only one particular development.

Birds, then, reveal to us beauty and friendliness, and an orderliness of behavior which is of the nature of moral goodness—not in one species only, or in one narrow segment of the earth's surface, but in their thousands of kinds, which together form the most conspicuous division of animal life on our planet. We are obliged to look upon them as a highly important and characteristic expression of whatever force brought this globe and its life into existence, and as a revelation of the direction in which this creative energy is moving. And in so far as we accept the feathered kind as a true indication of this movement, we cannot deny that it is toward the production of beauty, of love or friendship, and of a moral order—that is, toward the realization of all those values which men have traditionally esteemed most highly, with the exception of truth or disinterested knowledge. What the intrinsic nature of this creative energy might be we can not consider without far exceeding the bounds of this short essay; but doubtless it is more important, as it seems easier, for us to discover whither this power is tending than what it essentially is. The rapidly growing interest in birds which suggested this train of reflections appears to result from the striving of the little spark of the creative energy immanent in each of us individually to realize its affinity, or to establish harmony, with that great source whence it sprang.

Thus this yearning toward birds, as toward other aspects of the natural world, teaches us not only something about our own inmost selves, but about the larger whole of which we are a part. The ancients firmly believed that through the trained observation of the flight and other activities of birds they could inter-

pret the will of the gods and foretell future events. In somewhat the same spirit, we of a less credulous age may, through sympathy with birds, win insight into the trend or purpose of the constructive energy which is the divine principle in the Universe.

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

---