

Book Review

The magic and mystery of birds

NOAH STRYCKER, 2015

Souvenir Press, London. \$24.99

Paperback, 288 pages

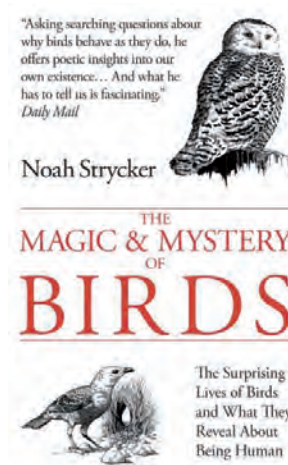
First published in 2014 as 'The thing with feathers'.

I first heard of Noah Strycker in 2015 when he visited Australia as part of his Big Year, in which he saw 6042 species. To me that is a huge achievement – I still haven't seen that many birds, even though I've been travelling for over ten years. So when I saw this book in a bookstore recently, I was intrigued.

Noah Strycker turns out to be pretty good at a lot of things. He is obviously good at birding, and he is also a very engaging writer. He's a talented illustrator as well, if the drawings he has done to head each chapter are any guide.

The subtitle of the book is 'The surprising lives of birds and what they reveal about being human'. It is arranged in three parts: body, mind and spirit, and each part covers various aspects of bird (and human) life. In Noah's own words, each chapter 'explores a compelling bird behavior and focuses on a bird that embodies it.'

The book opens with 'Imagine what might happen if birds studied *us*'. I found myself chuckling at Noah's descriptions of the scientific method as applied to our species by birds. There is a serious point, though: much recent research has shown parallels between our



species and others in areas such as reproduction, populations, movements, daily rhythms, communication, navigation and intelligence.

In each chapter Noah reviews a range of sources and research relating to the topic he is discussing. For example, in 'The buzzard's nostril', Noah outlines experimental work, beginning with John James Audubon in 1826, aimed at discovering whether Turkey Vultures use sight or smell to discover carrion, their favourite food. As well, we are regaled with Noah's own experience as a teenager in placing a road-killed deer carcass in his backyard to see if he could attract and photograph Turkey Vultures.

'Fight or flight: what penguins are afraid of' includes some lovely descriptions of penguin behaviour in discussing sources of and responses to perceived threats (which don't include humans). It draws on Noah's three-month stint at Cape Crozier in Antarctica as well as looking at conditioning experiments in the human world and the theories and conclusions stemming from them.

I particularly enjoyed the chapters on bowerbirds and fairywrens. In 'Arts and craftiness: the aesthetics of bowerbird seduction', Noah describes the work of John Endler, who showed that male bowerbirds with the best

mating success 'had created bowers with the most regular geometry, best forced perspective, and deepest visual illusions.' In New Guinea, Jared Diamond found that two populations of Vogelkop Bowerbirds had distinctly different colour preferences. Since aesthetic taste in bowerbirds is partly learned, the implication is that the ongoing divergence and evolution of these two populations is being driven by art as well as instinct.

Purple-crowned Fairywrens are some of the loveliest birds I've seen, and Noah spent six months at Mornington Sanctuary in the Kimberley recording their co-operative breeding behaviour. He relates this to a whole range of work on co-operative behaviour, from the classic 'Prisoner's Dilemma' through to much more

complex mathematical studies of game theory. The debate on altruism will no doubt continue, but Noah points out that despite the difficulties of measuring them, reward and fulfilment exist for all of us.

In summary, I found this a fascinating and thoughtful book, one which pointed me in many possible directions and encouraged me to follow at least some of them. Even the sources are given in narrative and eminently readable form – I found myself going back to some chapters to re-read sections that I had given less attention the first time around. I think Noah Stryker is an author worth reading.

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