Bird Hand Book Photos by Victor Schrager, text by A. S. Byatt

Clayton M. White
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/wnan

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/wnan/vol62/iss2/20

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Western North American Naturalist Publications at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Western North American Naturalist by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
BOOK REVIEW


It is difficult to become overly excited about this book. The title, as I see it, is a play on words, inasmuch as the book features photographs of birds being held in hands that are themselves protruding from holes in sheets which serve as backdrops. The publishers describe this somewhat differently: “[B]irds are seen in a totally new way; the presence of a human hand, acting as a delicate pedestal, provides the reader with a sense of scale for the relationship between birds and humans, scale not present in any bird field guide.”

The actual photographed birds are usually in some contorted position, and, even after careful searching, I could not find the delicate pedestal mentioned. Some are injured captive birds, some have broken feathers, one lacks a tail, and one is a mounted passenger pigeon lying on its side. Most birds are restrained in some fashion; for example, a Brown Pelican with a distorted beak is being restrained by an arm coming out from behind the sheet. A Gouldian Finch, with only the head seen clearly between thumb and forefinger, is called a Zebra Finch. Twelve photos are of domestic poultry. I think these comments give the flavor.

If one enjoys good photography with birds as the subject, then this is not the book to purchase. But, if one appreciates a unique photography style—perhaps I could call it “new age”—then the book may have a bit more appeal. Such a book lying on a coffee table might become a conversation piece for the curious visitor.

To be sure, however, if one enjoys historical prose and poetry, some relating to birds, then the book may yet take on more interest. Byatt’s essays are a literary romp through 5000 years of bird writings. As examples, the text quotes passages from an 1850 discussion by George Eliot about how things are named, gives a sonnet by Robert Frost about a bird’s voice, discusses the relationships between birds and people during mediaeval times, explores some of the early social functions of birds to such well-known Christians as St. Francis, repeats the poetry of Death of Cock Robin opposite a picture of an American Robin, and describes material from the journal of John James Audubon.

Some biology is featured. A discussion of anatomical structures of the skeleton, information on the structure of feathers, and so forth, are opposite the photo of what is termed a hybrid pigeon. Fortified by quotes from Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, the author enumerates problems generated by agricultural chemicals.

The book has a sturdy binding and is well put together. However, with the cost of books in general and the choices of excellent reference, historical, and prose/poetry books on birds, I find this book too pricey for what one gets. Perhaps it is a book for the public library, but I cannot recommend it.

Clayton M. White
Department of Zoology
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602