

Book Review

Albus, Anita. *On Rare Birds*. Translated by Gerald Chapple. Vancouver: Greystone, 2011.

This German author and artist, Anita Albus, has produced a rare book on rare birds. Her writing and pictures go well beyond rare birds to implicate all birds. This book is an English translation by Gerald Chapple that flows smoothly enough in most parts to belie the translation process. It is divided into three parts. Part 1, "Birds Extinct," explores the fate of four species, namely the Passenger Pigeon, the Carolina Parakeet, the Great Auk, and several types of Macaw. Part 2, "Birds Threatened and Endangered", covers the Waldrapp, Corncrake, Nightjar, Barn Owl, Hawk Owl and Kingfisher. Part 3, the afterward, constitutes the final part of the book and consists of two pieces. The first piece is a commentary on the lessons of species loss for humankind. The second piece is an English translation of a 1770 discourse on birds by the Frenchman Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. The transnational coverage of birds starts in the New World with the Passenger Pigeon and ends in Europe with the Kingfisher.

This book is a testament to the significance of our relationship with the avian world. It is clearly a labour of love on the part of the author. The nineteenth century paintings of Audubon along with Albus's own paintings are tastefully in accord with the historical theme of the book. She has also combined science, natural history, investigative reporting, mythology, and art into a tour de force on behalf of the birds. On occasion the main points the author is trying to make about a species such as the Ibis become confounded by the historical or mythical treatment, and the reader is left uncertain of where fiction ends and fact begins.

Albus attributes the demise of the Great Auk to large trading companies that recklessly harvested the bird along with its eggs until it was too late. She indicates that volcanic action near Iceland contributed to the loss of the species but that it had little impact next to human greed.

Birds-for-profit is a reoccurring theme in the book. For instance, in the case of the Hyacinth Macaws she states: "The rarer the bird, the higher the profit. The poorest of the poor can have no scruples. If you owned little more than a small hut but could now drive a brand-new ATV to go catch birds, then you wouldn't have any qualms about it" (p. 35). Efforts to protect the birds by law often seem to drive the price of these rare birds even higher on the black market.

The profit motive joins another theme repeated throughout the book – the devastating impact of habitat destruction on these birds. The disappearance of fenlands due to farm consolidation, irrigation, and drained farmland has contributed to the dwindling numbers

of the European Corncrake. The consumption of Licuri palm nuts by the Lear's Macaw – she cites that they eat up to 350 nuts a day – is undermined by the thinning of the palms leading to fewer and fewer breeding pairs. The resulting rarity drives up the price, and those few birds left are sought by trappers for the black market. For the birds, it is an agonizing downward spiral, made more complex by the state of the people who cohabit their land. Albus describes the attempts to preserve the Blue-Winged Macaw: “It was evident that even the most beautiful bird of all was beyond help as long as the people around it were starving to death . . . Concern about the Macaw thus became concern over the people around it” (p. 53). In this way, quality of life for humans is closely connected to bird survival.

Unfortunately the book has no index of key terms, and so the reader is left with only the table of contents and an index of names to locate noteworthy ideas. Occasionally, I was overwhelmed by the author's tedious, behavioural detail such as in her description of the mating behaviour of the barn owl. Clearly such descriptions are no substitute for a live performance. The overall tone of the book is a sombre one, in light of the permanent loss of species that has already occurred and the potential loss of more. Albus clearly places the blame on uncaring, human intervention. Presumably it is humans who can prevent further loss; Albus's treatise highlights the considerable barriers that lie in the way.

Geoff Peruniak