

# *The Antigoniish Review*



*Poetry Fiction Literary Insights*

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# ***The Antigonish Review***

Volume 49, Number 194



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## Volume 49, Number 194, Summer 2018

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Printed by Printer's Corner, Blockhouse, Nova Scotia.

*Subscription Rate, Digital Edition:* \$30 per year, \$45 for two years.

*Subscription Rate Print Edition:*

Within Canada: \$75 per year, \$140 for two years.

For subscriptions to the United States and International destinations, additional shipping is charged.

*Individual issues:* Print \$20. Digital \$10.

*Submissions:* Accepted online only at: [www.antigonishreview.com](http://www.antigonishreview.com) using Submittable.

*Author's Guidelines* for manuscript preparation can be found on our website.

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ISSN: 0003-5662

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Bill Montevecchi

## **Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds**

by Bernd Brunner (Greystone Books, 2017, 304 pp. \$39.95)

This beautifully produced Greystone Book could have been sweeter still with some simple editorial vigilance. The initial intriguing photo on page VI is of a man with a British tit on his finger that is feeding on a meal worm in his mouth, but with no figure caption one wonders -who? where? when? After some searching, the List of Illustration (page 274) notes “Man with bird. In Ernest Harold Baynes, *Wild Bird Guests and How to Entertain Them*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1915.”) Adding inconsistency, some figures have brief captions and images are often mismatched with adjacent text.

Scattered interesting snippets about birds and people were attention-grabbing, though they lacked a coherent integrated fabric. It felt at times like the author is taking the reader on a free-association tour of interesting bird stories. *Birdmania* is an avian obsession, infatuation and compulsion not limited by logical presentation.

The book rises above these foibles. Some tall, exciting and insightful tales raft the reader over the degrees and extremes to which bird enthusiasts go to pursue their obsessions and adventures. Owing to background and to his credit, Brunner offers a rich historic fabric of German bird art, artists and aficionados.

Birds were the purview of the aristocratically endowed, and it was the upper European crust that germinated the bird collectors of the 17th through the early 20th centuries. Regardless of position or more likely owing to it, considerable ego was attached to the collections and writings as manifested by misappropriated and altered specimens and false claims uncovered by subsequent researchers.

Collectors were an impassioned lot and often endured considerable risk and hardship in their expeditions to South American, African and Middle Eastern sites. Intrepid determination was not limited to males. Emilie Snethlage – the first woman to earn a doctorate in Germany – stood out for her courage and resolve in her birding expeditions. In the early 20th century, she collected birds in the Amazon, where she contracted jungle fever, and when no one else was willing, had the grit to self-amputate the middle finger of her right hand that had been mangled by piranhas. Also during this period, the first fully dedicated female ornithologist came on the scene. While raising four daughters, Margret Morse Nice was a late bloomer. She detailed the behavior at the nest, breeding success and life histories of Song Sparrows in ground-breaking investigations. Her long-term studies of individuals and families were novel in orientation and focus. She composed compelling organizational reviews of the development of bird behavior, and in a real sense Morse opened the field of professional ornithology for women.

Among collectors, the most elaborate skullduggery was evident among the oologists – the egg collectors. Some huge collections with rare specimens were amassed by men of means such as Lord Walter Rothschild. In the early 20th century, egg collectors fell out of favor with ornithologists who considered them “men who plunder nests and murder their owners.” When the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds condemned the practice at the annual meeting of 1922, Lord Rothschild felt slighted and split off from the society and helped found the British Oological Society. Today Rothschild’s enormous egg and nest collection and ornithological library is housed in part of the old family estate at Tring, Hertfordshire in the U.K.

Most readers have likely heard about Robert Stroud, the “Birdman of Alcatraz”, though how many knew that he carried out research with birds only when he was in Leavenworth Prison in Kansas? His in-house avian lab with about three hundred canaries also provided the opportunity to brew alcohol. And it was the latter activity that earned him a one-way ticket to Alcatraz sans canaries.

Bird study has at times intersected with the horrors of humanity. Günther Neithammer wrote his doctoral thesis on the interactions of birds and crops at Auschwitz. After having served as a camp guard, Neithammer was responsible for ornithological work in the area. His 1941 report on the birds of Auschwitz is illustrated with idyllic images of the Sola River that flows just outside the concentration camp, but Neithammer only pointed his camera in one direction. His 1974 obituary written by ornithologist Klaus Immelman reads “Everybody who knew Neithammer admired his charming personality, his constant cheerfulness ...his great hospitality”...[<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1474919X.1975.tb04230.x/pdf>]. Well, maybe not everybody. How soon we forget or try to.

A question that long intrigued ornithologists was whether the most aerial of birds, the swifts, can copulate on the wing. After investing a couple of years of intense voyeurism, Hans Arn, a Swiss ornithologist, observed that flying copulation was effective though ever so brief. With that breakthrough in hand, Arn aimed at the question of whether swifts could sleep on the wing. Indeed they can, and what might a swift do following a flying fornication? Swifts can apparently remain airborne for up to two hundred days at a stretch, so it is inevitable that there must be time for dozing.

During the late 1800s, a regime shift flipped the ornithological world on its head. The siting of birds down the barrel of a gun took a very abrupt turn and was replaced by sighting birds with binoculars and shooting them with cameras. New York financier and bird enthusiast, Frank Chapman, lived the paradox in all its gore and glory. Frank got a hankering for the brilliantly plumed Carolina Parakeet – the last of the North American parrots. At the time a small precariously threatened group had taken refuge in Florida. It took Chapman two years of searching but he found his quarry and dispatched fifteen of them. A few decades later the species was extinct – erased from the continent, removed for perpetuity.

Remorseful or not, Frank Chapman was soon to do penance. From the Manhattan financial office where he was working in 1886, Chapman spent two afternoons counting birds while walking down Fifth Avenue. He compiled an impressive list of forty species with some unusual and rare birds, including Laughing Gull, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Virginia Rail, warblers, Pine Grosbeak and Snow Bunting. The most interesting aspect of the exercise is that the list was based entirely on feathers and parts of birds on the elaborate hats of society ladies. Of seven hundred hats that Chapman observed, three quarters were adorned with birds. It did not take long until a nation-wide campaign began to stop the killing of birds for ornamentation.

In 1900, Chapman published *Bird Studies with a Camera* which also had major influence on bird conservation. Chapman however made one other massive step for the protection of birds. For some time, what was referred to as a “side hunt” had been a Christmas tradition in which teams competed to kill the most species.

To counter the kill, in 1900 Chapman initiated the first Christmas Bird Count during which observers tally all the birds they observe in a circumscribed area in a twenty-four hour period around Christmas Day. The initial count in 1900, involved observers in twenty-five locations, mostly in the heavily populated northeastern US, though also including Canada and California.

Today the Christmas count is a global event with thousands of locations and is the most comprehensive ongoing wildlife census in the world.

With the title of his book by the same name in 1901, the British ornithologist Edmund Selous is credited with coining the term “bird-watching”. What Selous was, however, referring to was activity focused on egg and specimen collections. Like Frank Chapman and many ornithologists of his day, as his field experience developed Selous felt more compelled to watch and less compelled to shoot birds. And as is often the case when someone experiences a radical switch in a belief system, converts are often the most ardent adherents to new perspectives. Such was Selous’s conversion, “For myself, I must confess that I once belonged to this great, poor army of killers, though happily a bad shot ... But now that I have watched birds closely, the killing of them seems to me as something monstrous and horrible.” During the last thirty years of his career, behavior was his focus, including mate selection and flight dynamics.

A pair of storks in East Croatia exhibit the power of monogamous pair bonding. For well over a decade, the male has been flying to the same roof top in a small village from Africa eight thousand kilometers away where he spends the winter. His mate, who was wounded by a hunter, cannot fly and a villager keeps her in his house over winter. Each spring she is released to the roof top where her partner returns and they raise a brood of young.

As bird study was gaining traction, a simple device and insight revolutionized the study of bird migration. Hans Mortensen, a Danish school teacher, improvised the bird band in the 1890s. By attaching lightweight bands with unique alpha-numeric codes, individual birds could be identified in different places and at different times. As the information cumulated, new insights into avian longevity and extremely importantly banding provided a means of understanding the mysteries of bird migration. Dead birds and live ones recovered and seen in distant locations soon patterned global migratory movements and new vistas of the seasonal pulsation and geographic expanses of the world of birds came into view. Until the relatively recent inventions of satellite and electronic tracking devices, bird banding was the primary source of migratory information, and well over a century since its first use, bird banding still serves as a major tool of ornithologists the world over.

One recurrent pattern that Brunner validates in many of the brief biographical sketches but does not generalize is the seminal experience that an early or pre-teen interest in birds can spawn a career, often an obsession and even a mania. As a young birder Kenn Kaufman helped change the face of bird-watching. At the age of eighteen (he had begun birding much earlier), Kenn set out to observe the most species of North American birds seen in a single year. According to Brunner, he recorded 630 species, surpassing Roger Tory Peterson’s encounter of 572 species during 1953. I have only done a bit of fact-checking on Brunner, though more may be worthwhile. In 1973 Kaufmann actually recorded 671 species well over the 630 reported by Brunner who writes with a manic enthusiasm (a good quality) with less attention to accuracy (a necessary quality). The concept of the Big Year attracts dedicated pilgrims who give their all for 365 days to tally a list longer than the last.

Beyond the competition of the Big Year, a birder’s ultimate laurel is his or her life list – a compilation of all species seen during one’s lifetime of observation. Jonathan Hornbuckle is credited with holding the record for the world’s longest life list with a tally of 9,414 of the world’s eleven thousand plus avian species!

Life-listing can consume one’s life though at other times it may save or end it. Enter Phobe Snetsinger who in 1981 at the age of fifty was diagnosed with terminal cancer and a prognosis of

less than a year to live. She rejected medical treatment, took high doses of vitamin C, became an extreme risk-taker and devoted herself to hard-core global birding. In the 1980s while traveling in Papua New Guinea, she and her guide were attacked. He was wounded with a machete and she was gang-raped. Her response to the tragedy was telling. In her biography *Life List* by Olivia Gentile, Snetsinger sums it up thusly – “I was unlucky in one way, extremely fortunate to have escaped with my life in another. I have been (extraordinarily) fortunate in all my travels. The impacts of the bastards in this world is a real threat – but it’s not going to make me stay home and cringe in fear of doing what I’ve found to be the most rewarding pursuit of my life.” At sixty-eight years of age in 1999, she was killed in a minibus accident in Madagascar, apparently with binoculars in hand. The last bird that she had seen was the Red-shouldered Vanga, a species described for science just two years before. Her life list topped out an amazing 8,674 species!

Biologist Colin Trudge has partitioned British birders in three categories: twitchers (life listers), bird watchers (those with non-academic/professional aims) and professional ornithologists. From my perspective, the biggest change on the ornithological landscape has developed through the profound expertise of bird watchers facilitated by social media, electronic bulletin boards, ebird, citizen science and the like. Professional ornithologists often prevail on the in-depth quantitative knowledge of the birders, and in many instances are birders themselves.

For me, Brunner’s heart and head are in the right place. Through all the attention given to bird fanciers who cage their animals and house them in aviaries, Brunner offers a fresh outlook – “Wild things belong in wild places.” And he does not let the collectors off the hook either – “The nonchalance with which exotic birds were dispatched up until the twentieth century is terrifying, even if it is understandable in the context of the times.”

Recognizing the millions of people who watch and work to conserve birds and their habitat today, Brunner summarizes: “We are living in a time of birdmania. Such interest is unprecedented. Although historically birds have not benefitted from the interest people have shown in them, today this interest holds the key to extricating ourselves from the situation in which we now find ourselves. We have to come to terms with the paradox that although we know more than ever about birds, we are also watching more and more species head toward extinction.” Indeed we are.

The tales in *Birdmania* are wide-ranging, engaging and sometimes horrifying. They depict the diverse, perverse and compassionate ways that we exploit birds. Brunner brings us to the present when for our own sake we must preserve that fabric of habitats that sustain the birds and with them – us.

*Birdmania*’s centennial romps through the world of human interactions with birds are informative, often highly intriguing. And for all the good, the bad and the ugly, they bear witness to the shifting baseline of our attitudes about fellow feathered creatures with whom we share the planet. And Brunner and his *Birdmania* offer us a means of seeing differently though also in many senses more clearly.