



BOOK REVIEWS

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Hope is the Thing with Feathers.—Christopher Cokinos. 2000. Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York. 368 pp. ISBN 1-58542-006-9. \$24.95 (cloth).

As species after species becomes threatened and predictions of ecological disaster proliferate, it's easy to start thinking that things couldn't be worse. But you'd be very, very wrong. Just how wrong is poignantly detailed by Christopher Cokinos in this unnerving and engrossing book. Cokinos, a poet at Kansas State University, may lack an ornithological background, but more than makes up for it with compelling writing and an inspirational degree of investigative rigor.

This is no small accomplishment given that most of the stories told in this book have punch lines that are forgone conclusions. We all know that the Midwest used to be the home to incredible numbers of Passenger Pigeons (*Ectopistes migratorius*) and that Great Auks (*Pinguinus impennis*) were exterminated from islands off Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence by the end of the 18th century. More recently, the last stand of the Heath Hen, one of two races of the Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), on Martha's Vineyard, and the last recorded nesting of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) photographed and studied by James Tanner and Arthur Allen in Louisiana are well known 20th century ornithological events. Although most of us know less about the details surrounding the extinction of the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) and Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*), it's no secret that both have failed to show up on Christmas Counts for a long time.

What more is there to be said once the axe of extinction has fallen? That the losses were due to negligence accentuated by apathy, petty political squabbling, and a breathtaking degree of anthropocentric arrogance? That we should never take for granted the diversity of nature or the swiftness with which it can be selfishly decimated? That the "tragedy of the commons" is real, and that government intervention, despite inevitable glitches and frequent uncertainties, is to be applauded if we are to preserve anything, and I mean anything, for future generations? In case you weren't sure, reading this book will clarify that the answers to each of these questions is an emphatic and unambiguous "yes."

Cokinos is to the vanished birds of North America what Bill Bryson is to travel. Both enliven what in lesser hands would become little more than clichés with their own intensely personal thoughts and explorations. Although many of us might be able to come up with a good guess as to the who, when, and where of the last known Passenger Pigeon (Martha, 1 September 1914, Cincinnati Zoo), Cokinos goes beyond these dry facts and devotes extensive attention to the history of the Cincinnati Zoo (which also housed Incas, the last surviving Carolina Parakeet), the travails of the facility within the zoo where Martha spent her final years, and the fate of Martha's body, which was

carefully packed on ice and escorted to the Smithsonian. Cokinos weaves these fascinating tales in and among informative discussions of topics ranging from the potential for cloning extinct species back into existence (not likely, as you no doubt suspected) and the extraordinary failure of ornithologists and aviculturists to establish and maintain captive breeding populations of Carolina Parakeets or Passenger Pigeons when they had the chance.

But these stories and discussions pale in comparison to Cokinos' elaborate attention to tracking down details concerning otherwise forgotten milestones in the last days of these species. Among other things, he takes the trouble to visit the precise site in Elmira, New York, where the last known Labrador Duck was shot on 12 December 1878. And consider, for a minute, the case of Press Clay Southworth, who in 1900 shot Buttons, the last known wild Passenger Pigeon, in Pike County, Ohio. Where, exactly, was Buttons shot? Whatever happened to Southworth? Did he ever realize what he had done, and how did he feel about it?

Indeed, how would *you* feel about it if it had been you? (And please don't, even for a second, flatter yourself by pretending that you wouldn't have eagerly made yourself similarly notorious if you had been a 14-year-old boy growing up in rural Ohio at the turn of the last century.) Southworth is no villain, any more than the trio of Islanders who killed off the last nesting pair of Great Auks on the island of Eldey on 3 June 1844. But then, neither, really, are the men who devastated the last major nesting site of over a billion Passenger Pigeons in the vicinity of Petosky, Michigan, in 1878, or the settlers who cleared land, suppressed fire, and overhunted Heath Hens in the Northeast throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, ultimately restricting their population to a small island off the coast of Massachusetts. I'm less sure about those in charge of the Singer Manufacturing Corporation and the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company who made no bones about their total and complete indifference regarding the destruction of what was most likely the last stronghold of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker near Tallulah, Louisiana, during World War II. Regardless, Cokinos's book succeeds in part because he neither condones nor vilifies the players in these dramas. And this is as it should be. After all, we are but products of our times, and Cokinos's book will make you appreciate the degree to which attitudes toward wildlife have changed in what is really a very short time.

This is a good book. It's engaging, educational, and encourages personal reevaluation of the state of the world and one's role in it, especially with respect to the fate of the species we study and care about so dearly. And make no mistake about it: environmentalism has come a long way, but there is no cause for complacency. For one thing, whether by design or negligence, there are those who do their best to destroy any and every vestige of the natural world in the name of progress and profit whenever the opportunity arises. And, as most of us know all too well, it only takes one

loss to irrevocably undo a long string of environmental victories. But the problem lies deeper. Whether we admit it or not, there is lurking within all of us the potential to clearcut old-growth redwood forests, harpoon endangered whales, and even club baby fur seals. We must be ever vigilant, not just to slow down the extinction of species in our own back yards, but to ensure

that we personally aren't the ones to pull that final trigger. *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* reminds us of our darker selves, and by doing so, spurs us into not letting history repeat itself.—WALT KOENIG, Hastings Reservation, University of California, Berkeley, 38601 E. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, CA 93924, e-mail: wicker@uclink4.berkeley.edu