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Birds and mammals

Birds have already been discussed as wildcards in wetlands, some as efficient predators, others arriving in large groups and by their sudden presence changing the entire ecology of a place. They have also featured in many other different roles in this book, and although I have cautioned against evaluating the success of a wetland purely in terms of the birds it draws, and highlighted the problems caused by excessive populations, they are also an important part of the beauty and fascination of wetlands.

I never grow tired of watching black swans taking off, or a V-formation of pelicans coming in to land like a great, gawky flock of pterodactyls. And though I like to think I have a reasonably orderly and rational mind, if a crane crosses my path I know it is a good omen for the day to come. The very nature of these three examples also tells us that the term 'waterbird' does not define a tidy and closely related animal group – waterbirds are as ecologically diverse as the fishes.

Swans are herbivores which feed in the open shallows or over grassy flats near water, able to migrate great distances with their powerful flight, mating in pairs for life and defending mounded nests of vegetation built out away from shore. Cranes are cryptic creatures lurking and nesting among dense vegetation and feeding on invertebrates, shoots and perhaps seeds, running rather than flying from cover to cover. Pelicans don't care much for vegetated waters as these interfere with their communal fishing tactics, and nest in groups on open islands or peninsulas preferably far from shore, working hard to take off but able to glide effortlessly for hours once they are airborne.