

Book reviews

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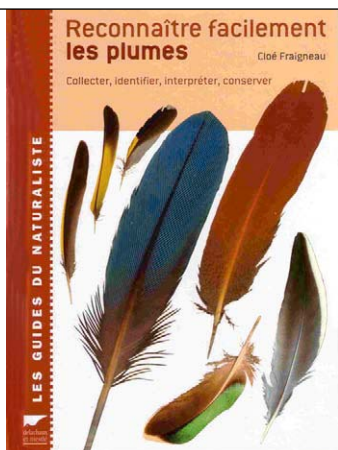
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Book reviews

Fraigneau C. 2007. Reconnaître facilement les plumes. Collecter, identifier, interpréter, conserver. Delachaux et Niestlé, Paris. ISBN 978-2-603-01-433-2. Hardback, 192 pp. Euro 25



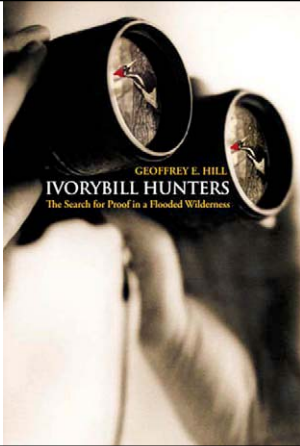
Feathers are the *summum bonum* of design. This delightful book offers a nice introduction into function and form of feathers, and the differences therein between species. For raptorphiles interested in prey choice, collecting pluckings (bones, feathers and hair removed from prey before a predator commences eating) is a basic skill in the same vein as identifying skulls found in pellets. The author, however, takes a broader view, and also gives directions where and how to find moulted feathers and dead birds (accompanied by cautionary remarks regarding avian flu, a bit too politically correct). Much work is made of descriptions how to clean, label, store and conserve feathers, including remarks on photography and how that may show feathers in wrong colours or shape (hence: not all feathers shown on the internet should be taken as showing colours correctly). This is an important section for the novice collector, as so many collections have gone awry in the course of years, either by inappropriate labelling or by moths and other feather-fond little critters (and I know what I am talking about, unfortunately).

The next chapters deal with identification of feather types (including keys that not only classify primaries, secondaries and rectrices, but also scapulars, coverts and alulas) and placement in the plumage (left/right, sequence in hand/arm/tail). For many raptorphiles an ABC, but for starters really helpful with many well-chosen illustrations. The same holds for the reconstruction of pluckings into a 'Kranzform' (in terms of Uttendörfer), not really necessary for those interested in prey choice of raptors (except for counting primaries and rectrices) but helpful when a reference collection is to be made. The last part of the book provides a number of identifications of species, grouped per family. Perhaps this is where the 'facilement' in the title originates, for most examples show species easily recognisable from their feathers like raptors, gulls, pigeons, thrushes, finches), largely ignoring species that are much more difficult to identify (pipits, leaf warblers, buntings).

This book is not the last word in species identification using feathers. However, set-up, illustrations, clarity of examples and print quality are superior compared with earlier trials like Hansen & Oelke (1973, with many later instalments), März (1987), Brown *et al.* (1987) and Busching (1997). However, each of these books has something to offer that you cannot find in one of the others, and together they show an array of species that should suffice to identify quite some birds by means of their feathers alone. But don't expect determinations to be a piece of cake, especially not when pluckings are collected (often incomplete, or mixed with other species).

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Geoffrey E. Hill. 2007. *Ivorybill Hunters*. The search for proof in a flooded wilderness. Oxford University Press, Oxford. ISBN 978-0-19-532346-7. Price hardback Euro 22



Geoff Hill certainly knows how to tell a captivating story! One weekend, two years ago, I was drawn into his book summarising a large body of research on causes and consequences of variations in plumage coloration in House Finches *Carpodacus mexicanus*. Once I had started reading, I didn't stop before the final pages of *A red bird in a brown bag* were finished. At the time, Hill surprised me with his nice mix of personal narrative and eloquent biological explanation.

Now he has surprised me again, a surprise on more than one account. First of all, who could have anticipated a Hill-book on a large and supposedly extinct woodpecker? Not even Geoff Hill himself. Secondly, the book tells about a year of secret searching for an unlikely and small, but seemingly healthy population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers *Campephilus principalis* surviving in an area of cypress swamps in the Florida Panhandle! After I finished the book, again read in one breath from cover to cover, I was convinced that 'ivorybills' indeed are not extinct.

This book describes the trials and tribulations during a 12-month period in 2005 and 2006 of a small team of ornithologists that found ivorybills "on their second morning searching in a place no

expert had ever mentioned as a good place to look." Hill headed the team, and as one who's "never been one to pass on a chance to tell a tale", he wrote down the events as he saw them unfold.

The first canoe trip through the flooded cypress forests along the Choctawhatchee River, Florida, was triggered by the announcement in April 2005 by a team from the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University (including the Dutch woodpecker specialist Martjan Lammertink) of a spectacular rediscovery of ivorybills along the Cache River in the state of Arkansas. Soon the evidence for that discovery, published prestigiously in *Science*, came under heavy attack from USA's top birders and one or two ivorybill specialists, and the intense, large-scale and partly automated search for ivorybills in Arkansas and neighbouring states, following the initial discovery, ran dry. What greater pleasure than sharing the experiences of a small, underfunded team working undercover in an unlikely place that actually amasses many sightings and a respectable amount of sound-based evidence for a thriving population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (but also fails to properly register the secretive birds on either photo or video, at least within the first year of searching covered in this book)?

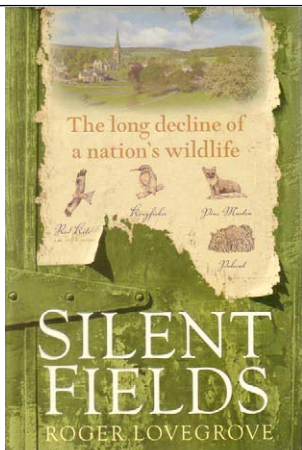
The extant Ivory-billed Woodpeckers may well owe their survival to their skills of avoiding detection by humans! Their demise in no small part was caused by the almost complete cutting down of the 'endless' and 'impenetrable' cypress swamps of the southern American states. In Hill's own words: "This orgy of consumption ran unabated from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, and it left scarcely an acre of virgin cypress on the entire continent. Greed know no bounds, and the complete consumption of the vast cypress forests in less than a century stands as one of the greatest feats of resource gluttony in American history." Adding insult to injury ("Begin Orgy of Consumption Act II"), the early twentieth-century ornithologists saw no problem in collecting all known remaining ivorybills for museum collections. Whereas these ornithologists had no problems in documenting the breeding behaviours of

these 'last' ivorybills (before collecting them by shotgun!), the woodpeckers that are still around, more than 60 years later, have an uncanny capacity to avoid dedicated and very experienced human observers. It is quite possible that this trait kept them going all this time!

The book presents a great, truly 'American' story of discovery and the nuts and bolts of birding and science. It gives an intimate resume of the complexities of working on endangered (well, supposedly extinct) enigmatic large birds standing in the centre of public attention. For the latest on the sites and the search visit website www.auburn.edu/ivorybill.

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Lovegrove R. 2007. *Silent fields. The long decline of a nation's wildlife.* Oxford University Press, Oxford. ISBN 978-0-19-852071-9. Hardback, xii + 404 pp. Euro 41



With a title like 'Silent fields' the mind jumps to pesticides and related environmental disasters as depicted in 'Silent spring', Rachel Carson's wake-up call from the 1960s. Not so. This book describes an entirely different warfare against 'vermin', the

one honed into perfection by generations of game-keepers, farmers, foresters and villagers in general, i.e. the eradication of birds and mammals supposedly detrimental to the interest of man. Although focused on England, Wales and Scotland for the past 450 years, similar stories could be amassed for no matter which country no matter where (provided a written record is available). Maarten Bijleveld's *Birds of prey in Europe*, published in 1974, bears witness to that effect. Even today, in our 'science-based' western world, exactly the same prejudices against predators are held in quite a few circles, even if the step from prejudice to action is now slightly hampered by wildlife laws in favour of wildlife, rather than against wildlife as it used to be. The data collated by the author is staggering, with a variety of primary sources like parish records and estate records. Clearly, checking all archives available was impossible, and instead 1429 English parishes were selected from which data were obtained (out of a total of 10 819), with another 146 from Wales (out of 1018). How representative this selection is, is difficult to tell. Puzzling facts remain, such as huge region-based differences in persecution, lack of vermin records in some parishes where they might have been expected (nearby parishes did control vermin), or why apparently just a single species like House Sparrow was targeted in some parishes. Similarly, the extent and range of killing, including vermin, was carefully recorded by most of the larger estates in England and Wales after the implementation of the Parliamentary Enclosure Act (between 1750 and 1870), when newly enclosed lands were developed into sporting estates. Very few of these vermin records can now be traced. The opposite is true for Scotland, with good information available after the establishment of game estates.

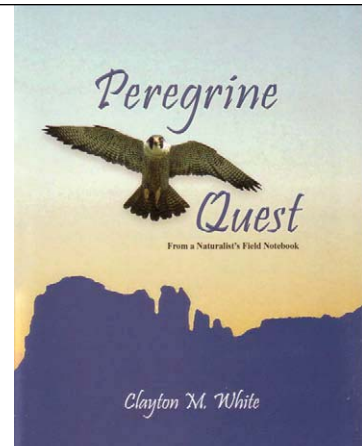
Many more questions arose along the way of this quest, but the overall picture of large-scale destruction – year after year – is glaringly obvious. The larger part of the book is a species-by-species account of exactly what this destruction signified, from Hedgehogs to House Sparrows, from rats to Red Kites. A humbling experience for several reasons, as for example the apparently much larger

populations of species presently rarely encountered (in those days landscape relatively unspoiled, human density smaller), the reasoning behind the extermination campaigns (how little has changed, except for what is regarded a pest or not), or variations upon the destruction-theme inspired by greed (cutting tail off squirrels before releasing them, to cash the payment without endangering the continuation of the local stock, to name just one). The latter also hints at one of the reasons why - grosso modo - the bounty-system hardly ever led to extermination: villagers had nothing to gain by wiping out a source of extra income. Extermination was mainly effectuated by gamekeepers, who were paid to do just that: kill off anything conflicting - imaginary or not - with the landowner's interests. Indeed, it is somewhat bizarre to notice that species deliberately eliminated in past centuries nowadays are of highest conservation concern at considerable cost. It is even more bizarre to know that nothing really has changed. Only very recently were House Sparrow and Starling removed from the 'pest species list', to be put on the Red List. The leniency with which other species are still regarded as pests, also by the author, speaks volumes of the misinformation propagated for centuries by farmers and game conservationists. Moreover, both pressure groups have had, and still have, an enormous impact on the rural landscape, reshaping it such that selfish interests are best served. The costs to restore damage are tremendous, and paid by society in general. This situation to continue verges on criminal neglect, and does not in essence differ from damage done by vermin control (or usage of persistent pesticides against better judgment, as in the 1960s and early 1970s). Not to mention illegal persecution. The attitude of gamekeepers in particular is still fraught with historical baggage, and the examples given for England (for example, publication of a list of protected species describing them as 'voracious predators', stating later that it is not to advocate illegal killing) are closely mirrored by statements of meadowbird protectionists in The Netherlands. But overall, protection is better now than it used to be for a very long time. A pity that

the concomitant reshaping of the landscape turned out to be much more devastating, more lasting and costlier to undo (if possible anyway).

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White C.M. 2006. Peregrine quest. From a naturalist's field notebooks. Western Sporting, Ranchester. ISBN 978-1-888357-09-7. Hardback, xxvi + 390 pp. \$32.95

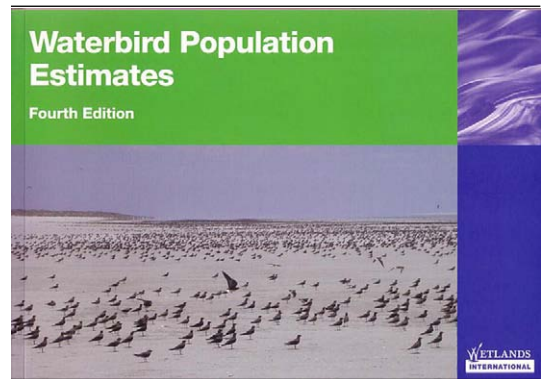


The recent decade has shown a spade of memoirs from the generation of raptorphiles involved in safeguarding the Peregrine Falcon from extinction in the USA, including Bill Burnham's *A fascination with falcons* (1997), Morley Nelson's *life with birds of prey*, by S. Stuebner (2002), the multi-authored *Return of the Peregrine* (2003) and Jim Enderson's *Stories of the Blue Meanie* (2005). All these stories show much overlap, and so it is with White's *Peregrine Quest*. The latter's narratives are mostly centred around surveys of Peregrines (and some other falcon species) in various parts of the world, from Alaska to the Aleutians, Tasmania, Australia, Melanesia, Central Asia and South America. Although the pressing need of information on abun-

dance, range and breeding performance in the 1960s and 1970s, when the species was seriously threatened by contamination from pesticides, is understandable, the question remains unresolved (and is apparently not often addressed in the USA where captive breeding and reintroduction seem a *conditio sine qua non* where protection is involved) whether taking adults and chicks from the wild, breeding them in captivity and releasing the offspring into the wild again, is an effective (or necessary) way of protection. Examples abound of species where no such attempts have been made, but where all the same the species involved bounced back to previous population levels (or beyond, as also happened in many Peregrine populations) as soon as the cause of decline was removed. What then is the point in removing free-living Peregrines from the Fijis, where the species is in trouble for unidentified local reasons, only to return 13 (out of the 35 produced, what happened to the rest?) captive-bred birds through 1998. What good will that do, when food scarcity (circumstantial evidence) is at the root of the problem. Also, why taking Orange-breasted Falcons or Taita Falcons from the wild, when it is abundantly clear that these species occur in very low densities anyway and preserving habitat is the panacea for protection. Of course, some of these projects have accumulated new data, produced scientific publications or started public awareness programmes (but efficiency of the latter has hardly ever been quantified and long-running prospects are often doubtful; several such failures are described by White, but the list is endless). But if all that warrants the present industry of captive breeding, is doubtful. What remains is a life-long passion for a bird, and through that bird for wilderness. There can be no doubt that this generation of raptor-philosophers made an imprint on society.

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Wetlands International. 2006. Waterbird Population Estimates – Fourth edition. Wetlands International, Wageningen, The Netherlands. ISBN 978-90-5882-031-0. Paperback, 239 pp. Available at NHBS Environment Bookstore (www.nhbs.com). Euro 37



This book, compiled and edited by Simon Delany and Derek Scott, updates the previous version from 2002. Worldwide, 2305 biogeographic populations of waterbirds are distinguished in this work, and population estimates are presented for 79% of these. A comprehensive source of information for all involved in the study and conservation of waterbirds and wetlands.

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