

Birds of the Air **AND** *Beasts of the Field* **Animals and Culture**

BY ANDREW HOWE



Selections from Gustave Doré's illustrations for "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

I can remember with utter vividness the greatest moment of my birdwatching life. I was on a tiny boat off the coast of Wollongong, Australia, hanging on to the rail for dear life while emptying the contents of my stomach into the Pacific Ocean, on this particular day a very poorly named body of water. I'm not sure what the Australian version of a Small Craft Advisory might be, but surely the captain had ignored one before we left port earlier that morning. I had just reached the conclusion that throwing myself overboard might somewhat improve my situation when it happened. Out of the mist came an apparition, a giant black-and-white bird out of my wildest imagination: a Wandering Albatross. The first of numerous albatross we were to see that day, this bird banked right in front of the boat, no more than fifteen feet away from me, a truly impressive spectacle when taking

into consideration its ten-foot wingspan. Quite simply, I was awestruck. My discomfort was forgotten as I was treated to fresh evidence of the splendor of creation.

For the past thirty years, the enjoyment of nature—in particular, birds—has been more than just a hobby to me, but a passion. It is in the past dozen years or so that I have been able to merge this passion with my vocation as an academic, initially in my research but lately in some of the history courses I teach at La Sierra University. Despite the fact that over the past seventy years Americans have increasingly hailed from the suburbs—as a result most intimately connected to a highly landscaped form of nature—I find that today's college students have an acute sense of environmental justice, no doubt due to anxieties regarding climate change and increased media coverage of natural disasters. A

course that I piloted last year, Nature and Culture, combines these two elements: popular media and environmental history.

It has been said that we are living in the early stages of a post-literate society. What exactly that means is subject to debate, although what is clear is that each successive generation is relying more and more upon visual information when it comes to both education and entertainment. For this reason, the photographer Chris Jordan (1963–) works very well in the classroom as a point of entry into the world of politically-charged environmental commentary. After cutting his teeth as an avant-garde photographer and artist focused upon American mass consumption, Jordan turned to a project that has taken the better part of the past decade: chronicling the devastation of the albatross colony on Midway Island due to the amount of plastic in our oceans.

Jordan's photographic exhibition "Midway: Message from the Gyre" (2009) consists of a series of images of dead and dying Laysan Albatross. The historical fishing grounds of this species occur in the Pacific Garbage Patch, an enormous area in the North

Pacific where plastic material becomes trapped by ocean currents in an ever-circling gyre. The adult birds take in bits of plastic when they feed and then transfer these to their young when they return to Midway to pass along partially digested fish. The results are predictable, with birds old and young alike paying the price for human mass consumption. The images from Jordan's exhibition are striking, and not easy to view.¹ There is an undeniable, compositional beauty to the contrast between the bland colors of the deceased birds and the colorful pieces of plastic. Simultaneously, however, there is



Laysan Albatross (Photo: Bob Steele)



Laysan Albatross (Photo: Bob Steele)

the horror of realization that the soda bottle cap that caused this magnificent creature's demise may have come from a beverage the viewer once held in his or her hand. The evocative duality in these photographs resonates with the Enlightenment concept of the "Sublime," an aesthetic notion that some aspects of nature are too grand or elevated for humanity to fully relate to, often encompassing competing qualities such as beauty and terror.

Jordan was so deeply impacted by the Midway project that he spent the next eight years working on a follow-up



Woman with snowy egret “plume hat”

documentary called *Albatross*. Even though I have been looking forward to this film since Jordan’s 2012 Kickstarter funding campaign, I have not been able to bring myself to watch it since its June debut. I have seen the four-minute trailer a dozen or so times,² on each occasion coming away emotionally drained. It’s sort of like committing to watch *Schindler’s List*; one has to be in the right mood, and I have not been able to muster the emotional reserves necessary to sit through it, despite its important message. I do plan to screen this film the next time I teach *Nature & Culture*, however, as the plight of the albatross not only indicates the dangers of mass consumption and pollution, but also illustrates a tenet of globalism. Everything in this world is connected, and the abrogation of moral responsibility—even in things as simple as decisions made while shopping, or recycling practices—can have an impact elsewhere.

Due to their migratory nature, birds in general prove to be fitting “canaries in the coal mine” when analyzing global environmental trends. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of examples I have been able to bring into the classroom, involving such issues as deforestation, energy production, and urbanization. The decline of some bird species, such

as the Cerulean Warbler, is due to their migratory nature. Populations of this tiny sapphire of a songbird, immortalized in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010), have long been in decline due to deforestation in its wintering grounds in Central and South America. During the past twenty years, however, the species has additionally faced deforestation in its breeding strongholds in Northern Appalachia, ever since coal companies discovered that it was easier to just remove the tops of mountains, trees and all, rather than tunnel for coal. Other species, such as the Spotted Owl, are also in trouble due to deforestation (in this case, in the Pacific Northwest), but instead due to the fact that they do not migrate. Still other species, such as the Snowy Egret, almost went extinct due to fashion trends, in this case with late-nineteenth-century hats decorated with feather plumes.

Birds are not the only class of animal that I have brought into my classroom in order to explore social or political issues. The re-introduction of the Gray Wolf into the Great Basin region in the 1990s provides a fascinating platform for examining land use, allowing an examination of historic anxieties involving state rights vs. federal mandate (extending back through the American Civil War to the Federalist Papers and the formation of the Republic), but also highly specific episodes such as the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s. When one adds personal property rights into the equation, particularly the concern that ranchers have about livestock loss, the case of the Gray Wolf becomes even more complex. Finally, the additional complication of indigenous land makes things even more convoluted. Wolves often cover twenty-five miles in a day, in so doing finding themselves on different parcels of lands where they are either actively hunted or unequivocally protected. The Gray Wolf thus serves as a powerful introduction in the history classroom to a debate regarding governance and property rights that has waxed and waned for nearly 250 years.

One specific environmental metaphor resonates particularly well with students, and that is biological invasions. We live in a time in which each passing year introduces new biological bogeymen—most often in insect or reptile form—that in some fashion pose a threat to our wellbeing, usually on the local or regional level. The framing of such invasions in the popular media often contains overtones of anti-immigrant sentiment. This distinction is particularly true, and especially relevant to the modern classroom, when the invasive threat has Latin American origins, such as the spread of the

Africanized “Killer” Bee into the American Southwest during the 1970s. Much of the media coverage of the bee at that time echoed anti-immigrant attitudes commonplace during the era: brought across the border in the back of trucks, will devastate the agricultural industry, will out-compete the native worker (ironically, the Italian Honeybee), etc.

This fear was notoriously satirized in a skit that aired on Saturday Night Live in January 1976, with Elliott Gould, John Belushi, and other actors dressed as Mexican bandito bees—replete with sombreros and bandoliers of ammunition crossed diagonally upon their chests—invading an urban apartment and menacing its two white denizens. Last year, this clip and the readings on the Killer Bee that were assigned resulted in a far-ranging class discussion about the proposed Border Wall and other aspects of contemporary immigration. The Killer Bee is far from an isolated episode. Indeed, the symbolic attachment of topical anti-immigrant anxiety to an invasive insect extends back to the very origins of the United States, with the infestation of a European fly shortly after Hessian mercenaries arrived in New York in August 1776. This fly, a pest that preyed on wheat and barley crops, was described in American newspapers in terms that were thinly veiled metaphors for the unpopular German troops brought in by the British to help secure order. The colonial propaganda campaign was so successful that forty years later, when the fly was first fully described by a scientist, it was given the name Hessian Fly, a moniker that is still in use today.

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1798 poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” involves a vessel that encounters hardship when one of its sailors kills an albatross, a senseless act of violence against nature with unforeseen consequences. Over 200

years later, Chris Jordan voyaged to Midway Island to document the destruction of the Laysan Albatross at the hands of mass consumption, a subject that was so emotional for the photographer that it would dominate the next decade of his career. The Book of Genesis presents two very different views of how humans should relate to nature, the so-called “dominion” and “stewardship” models. Dominion must be viewed as our tarnished legacy, one that has seen large portions of the natural world destroyed and numerous species driven to the brink of extinction, the knowledge of our complicity in this loss the proverbial albatross around our neck. However, mere stewardship is not enough: we must celebrate nature and all it has to offer. As Chris Jordan notes, we must allow ourselves to feel, to be awed and inspired by the beauty of the natural world, moved by the horror of environmental destruction and, armed with a strong sense of ethics, dedicated to the preservation of the cathedral of nature for the generations that come after.

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Further Readings

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Ohrem, Dominik, ed. *American Beasts: Perspectives on Animals, Animality, and U.S. Culture*. Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2017.

End Notes

1. www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/midway/
2. vimeo.com/218502282.



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BOB STEELE is one of the leading bird photographers in the United States.