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Scarlet Experiment

Jeff Karnicky

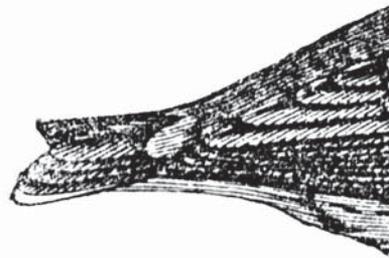
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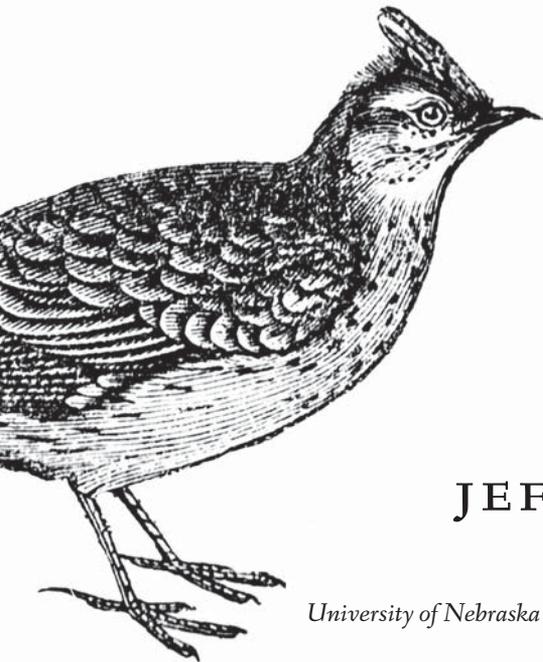
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Scarlet Experiment

Birds and Humans in America



JEFF KARNICKY

University of Nebraska Press LINCOLN AND LONDON

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For the birds

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INTRODUCTION

Split the Lark

This is not a birding memoir. I am not writing about how birds have impacted my life. I am not writing about a wild bird I took in and befriended. I am not writing about what I have learned from studying extinct birds. I am not writing about what I have learned from a life of bird-watching. There are already a lot of these books out there. I like them and I am haunted by them: their narratives; their personal revelations; their memoir-like qualities; their calls for conservation. But I have never named or lived with a bird and my experiences watching birds have been rather pedestrian. I do not believe that hope is the thing with feathers. I do, however, believe that humans have been conducting a “scarlet experiment” on birds in America for at least the past two centuries.

HOPE IS NOT THE THING WITH FEATHERS

Christopher Cokinos used Emily Dickinson’s famous line as the title for his 2000 book *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds*. Cokinos writes with poetic detail of the decline and extinction of six American birds: the Carolina parakeet, the ivory-billed woodpecker, the heath hen (technically a subspecies of the greater prairie chicken), the passenger pigeon, the Labrador duck, and the great auk. These birds, along with the Eskimo curlew and the Bachman’s warbler, have all become extinct since the mid-nineteenth

century, mostly as the result of human action, and mostly because of overhunting and habitat destruction. Cokinos is a poet, not an ornithologist; he calls his book “a personal chronicle, in which I weave together these accounts with my attempts to understand them—which led me to visit the places where these birds once lived and died.”¹ As a result, he “resolved to grapple with hope in this environmentally complicated time.”² While he never explicitly discusses Dickinson’s poem, the notions of hope and birds interconnect throughout his text. Cokinos writes about extinct birds with a mix of hope, guilt, and despair, for the futures of both humans and birds. In this way, Dickinson’s poem seems a fair representation of what he writes, as the “hope” of the poem “perches in the [assumedly human] soul.”³ For many birding memoirists, then, the human soul of Dickinson’s poem learns from birds, and what has been learned often becomes the writer’s focus. For instance, Cokinos and his wife “perform the rote chores of the perpetually guilt-ridden” and decide not to have children because he “cannot imagine explaining to a child of mine what the Loggerhead Shrike *used* to be . . . or what the song of the Hermit Thrush *once* sounded like.”⁴ Birds become a means of learning about the self, and what it desires and what it despairs about. Nonetheless, hope remains, as Cokinos writes, “on good days, I believe in our capacity to heal, to form communities of concern and action, to recognize loveliness and protect it. On good days, I smile to hear the caroling of a Carolina Wren and know that we are capable of adoration.”⁵

This sense of hope, and a companion feeling of self-understanding that Cokinos locates within his self-described “middle-class American life,” resounds through other memoirs focused on birds.⁶ In *To See Every Bird on Earth: A Father, a Son, and a Lifelong Obsession*, Dan Koeppel describes his father’s quest to see every bird species on earth. As he accompanies his father on some of his journeys, Koeppel learns about birds, but his focus shifts to his relationship with his father. “On our trip, Dad and I connected in ways that were both lovely and difficult. I saw his self-destructive side, a part of him that for years has shut out family and love. And I saw his best qualities, a man with a gentle heart, hidden by pain, but not hard to detect upon careful

inspection. The triumph of the list is the triumph of that hidden heart because it is proof not just of obsession, but also grace, and glory.”⁷ I take “grace” and “glory” here to be kin to hope; the father’s bird list of over seven thousand species speaks both to his hard work and to the beauty and diversity of bird life. Listing birds reveals the human heart and strengthens a familial relationship.

To cite just one more example, Kenn Kaufman’s 1997 *Kingbird Highway: The Story of a Natural Obsession That Got a Little Out of Hand* is about his formative years birding across the United States in the 1970s. In a book-jacket blurb, Pete Dunne, a well-known birder and author, aptly compares the book to Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Kaufman (who is now a renowned writer of essays and books about birding, and an author of numerous field guides) writes of his time hitchhiking across the country, hanging out with friends, and looking for birds, which he spontaneously follows from state to state. He ends the book in the present time, looking back on his younger self. “Now, when I look back many years later, as though from a great distance, I can still see the young man standing out on that jetty. And at least on my better days, I can see myself standing there with him: shaken by experience, perhaps, but still confident that the light will be better, that the birds will come in closer, that we will see everything more clearly at last, before the day is over.”⁸ Kaufman, as an experienced ornithologist, can surely speak to the “experience” that has shaken his faith in conservation, but he is also clearly referring to his personal life. Nonetheless, he remains “confident”; in short, he has hope that things will turn out well, for him and for the birds.

All of these books, and many more like them, share in the hope that can be found in Dickinson’s poem. These books, as personal narratives, make for great reading. Readers can learn a lot about the human character from them. Many of these books carry at least an implicit conservation message, but because this aspect is often downplayed, it remains rather vague. Cokinos writes, “The birds taught me that we can learn from these losses, take comfort in what remains, and redefine hope from ‘wish’ to ‘work.’ We can work to protect the still-astonishing nonhuman lives that have come to depend on us for patience and care.”⁹

As I have watched birds and researched how humans in America have interacted with them, I am somewhat skeptical of any large sense of “patience and care.” In turn, I am not convinced that hope is the thing with feathers, or that the things with feathers have much hope if they need to depend on human benevolence. Rather, I take my inspiration for this book about birds and humans from another Dickinson poem, not about hope and souls, but about doubt and blood.

Split the lark— and you’ll find the music—
 Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—
 Scantly dealt to the Summer Morning
 Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old—

Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—
 Gush after Gush, reserved for you—
 Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
 Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?¹⁰

I want to cite this “scarlet experiment” as a marker of all the birds killed in America since the nineteenth century as a direct result of human actions. It is impossible to determine the exact number, and many studies of bird mortality are based on small samples. Loss et al. write, “Quantification of direct anthropogenic mortality, although critical for conservation efforts, remains imprecise.”¹¹ To increase precision, they suggest that “a standardized database of avian mortality” be created. This database would be modeled on the eBird database, which has become, over the last ten years, an immense collection of information on bird populations and movements.¹² (I discuss eBird in detail in chapter 5.) Essentially, then, they are calling for a “dead eBird” interface. Even without this precise data, Loss et al. assert that “hundreds of millions to more than one billion North American birds are directly killed each year by human stressors.”¹³ Considering the role that habitat destruction and climate change play in bird mortality, the number is most likely in the high end of their estimation.

Twenty-first-century humans kill birds in multiple ways. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has identified “major, human-induced

bird mortality threats,” of which habitat destruction is primary. Other causes listed by ABC are:

- Climate change
- Energy development
- Pesticide poisoning
- Tower and building collisions
- Free-roaming cat predation
- Invasive species
- Fishery bycatch
- Poorly planned development¹⁴

One study estimates that between 1.4 and 3.7 billion birds are killed annually by domestic cats.¹⁵ As for the number killed by these other threats, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) “does not have an official estimate of the number of birds killed from wind turbines or other sources,” even as they note that these deaths “may for some species be causing impacts at the population level.”¹⁶ As I will discuss in chapters 2 and 4, U.S. Wildlife Services (USDA WS) kills millions of nuisance birds per year, including 1,500,459 European starlings, 657,134 red-winged blackbirds, 846,633 brown-headed cowbirds, and 23,700 Canada geese in 2011.¹⁷

Global climate change also takes a toll on bird life. The “State of the Birds: 2010 Report on Climate Change,” part of a series of yearly reports published by the U.S. Department of the Interior, asks: “How will the impacts of climate change influence our bird populations and their habitats?”¹⁸ While the report does not cite specific population numbers, it does note that ocean-going and Hawaiian birds face a high level of vulnerability, along with species that are already of conservation concern. Other birds, such as those in “coastal, arctic/alpine, and grassland habitats,” face an intermediate level of vulnerability.¹⁹

In 2007 the National Audubon Society noted that even common birds were in steep decline. Audubon defines “common” birds as those with a population of at least 500,000 and a range of at least 385,000 square miles.²⁰ According to Audubon, “Since 1967 the average population of the common birds in steepest decline have fallen

70 percent, from 17.6 million to 5.35 million individuals.” To cite just a few examples from the “top ten” common birds in decline, the northern bobwhite has declined from “31 million to 5.5 million (82 percent),” the evening grosbeak from “17 million to 3.8 million (78 percent),” and the northern pintail from “16 million to 3.6 million (77 percent).” In addition to common birds being in decline, ninety-three species of North American (including Hawaiian) birds are on the federal endangered species list (USFWS Species Reports), which means that such birds are “in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.”²¹ Lesser number of birds have been killed by scientific experimentation, collection for classification purposes, and hunting (which also serves to protect habitat and may yield a net positive result; nonetheless, millions of birds are killed by hunters each year).

The conservation movement that started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century successfully protected many species from overhunting and changed public attitudes toward birds. Legislation like the Lacey Act of 1900, which outlawed the interstate market in birds and banned the importation of bird feathers for ornamental use, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which banned the killing of most species of migratory birds, saved the lives of countless birds.²² In his history of American ornithology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mark V. Barrow Jr. writes of the success of these conservation campaigns that began to gain force late in the nineteenth century. “In a highly successful educational, legislative, and enforcement campaign, the AOU’s [American Ornithologists’ Union] bird protection committee joined forces with a second, more enduring Audubon movement that continues to this day. This fruitful collaboration resulted in not only an American public alerted to the problem of bird destruction, but also an impressive series of state and federal legislative victories.”²³

Barrow is of course right that the “Audubon movement” is still a strong voice for conservation today, but much has changed since the early days of bird protection. The risks to birds in the twenty-first century are far less visible than they were in the nineteenth century, when the focus was on ending plume hunting and changing minds

about using feathers as fashion. For many people, the sometimes slow pace of habitat alteration and climate change makes these threats seem invisible, while the threats posed by cat predation, pesticide poisoning, building collisions, and so on might be viewed as “accidental.” Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conservation movements acted against those whose intention was to kill birds. For twenty-first-century conservationists, such is not the case. Most bird kills are unintentional and even unknown.

Intention, though, hardly matters. Birds are being killed in incredibly large numbers, and these numbers have increased despite conservation laws. Since roughly the time Dickinson wrote “Split the Lark,” human understanding of and interaction with birds has changed profoundly. As birds came to be seen as beautiful creatures worthy of protection and study, they became subject to all kinds of experiments that altered their relationship with humans. Taking a wide view, the primary result of the human-bird interactions that I call a “scarlet experiment” has been the death of countless birds, whether intentionally, inadvertently, or indifferently. Since Dickinson’s time, and since the early days of the conservation movement, humans have “discovered” birds’ cognitive abilities and existence as both individuals and populations. More recently, new means of measuring and understanding bird populations with great accuracy has led to a new form of experimentation, which in turn has led to the intensified, unending management of bird life.

In short, my argument is this: In the twenty-first century, birds have become cognitive individuals and populations, subject to human governmental policy. In the interests of ‘population management,’ governmental and nongovernmental agencies regulate bird life through legislation, public policy, and scientific study. Birds are managed, then, through multiple aspects of what Michel Foucault calls biopolitical power, for better and for worse, depending on the species and the situation. Some birds, such as the European starling and the house sparrow, thrive under this intensive management; others, such as the red knot and birds on the federal endangered species list, may not.

Regardless of the result of human experiments on birds, the ways humans interact with birds have changed radically. My claim here

roughly coincides with Jacques Derrida's claim that "for about two centuries, intensely and by means of an alarming rate of acceleration, for we no longer have a clock or a chronological measure of it, we, we who call ourselves men or humans, we who recognize ourselves in that name, have been involved in an unprecedented transformation. This mutation affects the experience of what we continue to call, imperturbably, as if there were nothing wrong with it, the animal and/or animals."²⁴ Derrida is writing here specifically about contemporary farming practices that have led to changes in how humans consider animals as food. He writes that this "unprecedented change" has happened "by means of farming and regimentation at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat."²⁵ Certainly birds—specifically chickens—are subject to these intensified farming procedures. My interest, though, is in "wild" birds, which (in ways similar to and different from farm animals) have been subject to regimentation as their populations have become objects of knowledge. Derrida writes, "No one can deny this event—that is the *unprecedented* proportions of this subjection of the animal."²⁶ The deaths of birds that I describe above differ immensely from how animals are killed within the world of industrialized farming; at the same time, the immensity of human-caused bird deaths is surely an aspect of the subjection of the animal.

Dickinson's "scarlet experiment," taken very literally, can be read as a dissection of the bird to map out its sound organs—to scientifically understand bird song at the expense of the living bird. The "gush after gush" that Dickinson writes of can stand in for Derrida's subjection of the animal and for my claim about the subjection of birds in America. As humans have watched and studied birds with greater and greater intensity through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, birds have become subject to multiple human experiments, some scientific, some literary, some governmental. "Experiment" here should be taken in multiple senses, not just the narrow scientific meaning of testing a hypothesis. More broadly, experiment can mean "the action of trying anything, or putting it to proof; a test, trial."²⁷ This meaning

resonates with Dickinson's poem, and her challenge at the end: "Now, do you doubt that your bird was true?" Of course, the implication here is that the knowledge that becomes "patent," or obvious, as a result of the experiment, comes at the expense of the bird's life. My use of "experiment" is inflected too by this idea that birds' lives are continually at stake in their interactions with humans. "Experiment" can also mean "a tentative procedure; a method, system of things, or course of action, adopted in uncertainty whether it will answer the purpose." This definition, in a sense, goes against the strict scientific definition of testing a hypothesis, but it seems more apt perhaps for many of the human/avian interactions I will discuss. Finally, I want to highlight a more archaic use of "experiment," to mean "practical acquaintance with a person or thing; experience," as a large part of my argument relies on the fact that humans have become more acquainted with birds over the past two hundred years or so (to a lesser degree, I would argue that birds have also become more acquainted with humans).²⁸ How these experiments, in all senses of the word, have affected both humans and birds is the subject of this book.

Each chapter of *Scarlet Experiment* focuses on a specific bird species; my hope is not to be comprehensive, but to use these species—the blue jay, the European starling, the red knot, the Canada goose, and the tufted titmouse and black-crested titmouse—as a means of exploring a few specific aspects of human-avian interactions. I limit my discussion to North American birds, as defined by the American Birding Association, for bird-listing purposes, as "the ABA Area": "The 49 continental United States, Canada, the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon and adjacent waters to a distance of 200 miles from land or half the distance to a neighboring country, whichever is less."²⁹ Birds, of course, do not follow these boundaries; the red knot, for instance, migrates from the Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic, with only a brief but important stop along the East Coast of the United States. The European starling has spread worldwide and thrives on every continent except Antarctica. Nonetheless, all of the birds I write about have large populations in North America.

In chapter 1, "Emotion and Intelligence: The Blue Jay," I focus on

how human interactions with blue jays in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed into an understanding of the cognitive ability of birds. Broadly speaking, nineteenth-century writers such as John James Audubon, Emily Dickinson, and Henry David Thoreau fit blue jays into (or in Dickinson's case, outside of) a Christian moral and emotional framework. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century accounts reconfigure the question of emotions, as the bird's mind is taken seriously as a site of cognition. Contemporary accounts of blue jays—scientific works, Don DeLillo's novel *The Body Artist*, and biographical writings on specific birds—strive to understand how the blue jay mind works. Cognitive ethology supports many of the artistic and literary claims made about blue jays, as scientific experimentation has proven the blue jay's ability to use tools and to make complex decisions.

Blue jays, like the focus of chapter 2, "Interpellation and Interiority: The European Starling," have adapted to human alterations of the environment and thrived as a result. Starlings were introduced to the United States in the nineteenth century as part of an experiment to bring every bird written about by William Shakespeare to America. I focus on starling subjectivity in this chapter to argue that starlings have their own way of being in the world. They are also the ultimate companion species to humans, as their population growth parallels human alteration of the world. Starlings can be seen as an important site for thinking about the kinds of ethical relations that exist between human and nonhuman animals. In this ethical relationship starlings have benefited as their affinity for humans has helped them to increase their range and population immensely—starlings have survived and thrived in a human-created world. From a human perspective, starlings can provide a new way of thinking about, and living in, this world. Thinking with starlings leads toward ways of thinking about animal subjectivity and animal studies. In this chapter I engage the work of Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, along with other animal studies scholarship, to look for ways of understanding both individual and group subjectivity as not just human conditions. I also write about how bird biographies—human-written stories of interactions with wild birds—might lead to new ways of thinking about avian subjectivity.

Taken together, these first two chapters argue that the cognitive abilities of birds can be understood as a form of avian subjectivity that bears similarities to, but is also quite different than, human subjectivity.

If chapters 1 and 2 argue for an avian subjectivity that brings birds into the existential and ethical world of the human, chapters 3 and 4 focus on how two species—the red knot and the Canada goose—live within a world of intensely administered human governmentality. Both of these chapters rely on Michel Foucault’s conception of biopolitical power, or biopower, as a productive force that acts on human population from within “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power.”³⁰ Biopower uses what Foucault calls a “formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses” to produce knowledge of human subjects in both the public realms of work and education, and the private realms of home and personal life.³¹ Statistics, measurements, norms, and censuses are some of the tools of biopower-driven governmentality, and while Foucault and those who follow him write about how these things affect humans, I argue that birds, in the twenty-first century, have become subject to very similar forms of management.

Chapter 3, “Capital and Conservation: The Red Knot,” focuses on the imminent extinction of the *rufa* subspecies, whose population has decreased by more than 90 percent in the past twenty years. In looking at how capitalism and conservation have become entwined for better and for worse, I follow Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s claim in *Empire* that “all nature has become capital” to argue that “all birds have become capital.”³² From this perspective, I write about how conservation measures to save the red knot have embraced both science and marketing, as I question whether endangered species can continue to exist within what Felix Guattari calls “integrated world capitalism,” a dominant form of subjectivity that places an exchange value on all forms of life.

Chapter 4, “Nuisance and Neighbor: Canada Goose,” asks a similar question of a bird whose population has increased immensely. The resident Canada goose has thrived so successfully in human-created

habitats that it now poses health risks to human populations. As Wildlife Services, a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, exterminates tens of thousands of resident geese per year, the birds have become subject to intensive population management through a series of regulations and behavior modifications of both geese and humans. Multiple community-formed groups have argued against “lethal control” of resident Canada geese, citing the complex social lives of geese as a ground for protection and ethical treatment.

Chapter 5, “Confusion and Classification: Black-Crested Titmouse or Tufted Titmouse,” focuses on the human drive to classify and organize all bird life. This chapter looks at how bird species have been “split” and “lumped,” that is, either divided into new species or grouped together in a single species as part of this drive toward the classification of all life. This chapter also looks at the emergence of eBird and other databases of bird information that have led to increasingly accurate measurement of bird populations. As birds become data points, they also become much more easily subject to governmentality. With the incredibly detailed population maps produced by eBird and other forms of data management, ornithologists, government administrators, corporations, and citizens know more about bird demographics and movements than has ever been known. What humans will do with this information is the final “scarlet experiment.” As more and more complex knowledge of bird life gets produced, the costs that human decisions will have on both birds and humans will become apparent, as I discuss in my conclusion, “The Future of Birds.”

A final introductory note: I mention above that I am “haunted” by birding memoirs. This haunting manifests itself in a brief personal narrative introduction to each chapter. These personal narratives are all quickly abandoned, though, as they cannot come close to offering a wide enough perspective for understanding anything beyond my own personal experience with birds. While I cannot deny that my personal experience with birds informs the writing of this book (and is perhaps my motivation for writing it), such experience only works as a narrow starting point for a wider experiment.