

Perspective

Read the world differently

August/September 2023 | £7.99 | perspectivemag.co.uk

SUMMER SPECIAL

The making of a man

Steve Biddulph
Tomiwa Owolade
Anouchka Grose
Cosmo Landesman
Charlotte Proudman
John Niven

Ben Okri
talks to Fiona Sturges

Rob Henderson
talks to Fred Skulthorp

Bobby Seagull
From my perspective

ISSN 2634-7628
9 772634 762012

Walden

Lessons in fight and flight

By Wade Graham

Birds are survivors – they are dinosaurs after all, that came through the asteroid holocaust alive, then fanned out into an altered world, adapting, evolving, morphing into thousands of spectacular species covering every niche on the planet, thriving as no other group of animals do. Surely there are lessons there for us to glean?

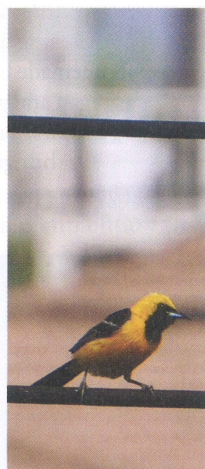
Like many people, my annual anticipation of the renewal of spring, and with it, the hope that we and the earth will survive another year, revolves around birds. As the days lengthen I scan for both the arrival of the season's migrants and the changed behaviour of resident birds as their hormones and excitement rise, ready for nesting. It's as if another world opens in the midst of the quotidian, human one: Bird World, with its bedlam of calls, plumages, displays and fights over territories, feeding, gathering, building, rearing, and often, killing.

Some of the first to get down to business are the hawks and ravens, flying in intent pairs, vying between and against each other with acrobatics and shrieks and calls, staking out territories and assembling their stick-nests, piece by piece, in the highest trees. Even more unmistakable is the start of incessant singing by male mockingbirds touting for a mate from the four corners of their chosen home plots. Their songs are loops cobbled together from bits of melodies, sounds strung together like beads, many stolen from rivals or copied from urban sounds like car alarms and police sirens, continually added to and changed like a DJ's samples and beats. Hummingbirds angrily chase each other, and anything else that dares trespass too near; they affix their tiny, feather-lined, jewelled thimble-nests to the top of a cactus or under an eave. House wrens hide theirs in a hole in a tree trunk deep in a thicket, but then give the location away with excited buzzing. House sparrows jam together wads of grass and lint under roof tiles. Great blue herons turn trees into apartment blocks with their shaggy nest-piles. Night herons and great-tailed grackles conceal twig platforms deep in tangled reed islands in the lake in the park.

The migrants come from everywhere and are going everywhere: most from south to north at this time of year, even from as far away as the southern hemisphere, but not all. Some move from north to south, some from east to west, some down from mountains to coastal lowlands, or vice versa. If you look, you'll see them: brightly-coloured warblers flitting secretively through the leaves, waxwings



Each year I quietly rejoice when I see, or as often hear, the first oriole



flying in tight, pulsing knots, small murmurations of swifts over the rooftops, or, high above the city, flocks of white pelicans soaring in circles in rising air currents, arranged wing-to-wing like airshow pilots, in slowly turning gyres. Birds, famously, have no concerns with our borders and barriers. More than that, they teach us that migration is infinitely complex, and that it is also, paradoxically, a permanent condition of life on this planet.

For me, the most special moment is when the hooded orioles arrive in California from western Mexico. Each year I wait anxiously, and quietly rejoice when I see, or as often hear, the first oriole in my neighbourhood: the male's bright flash of orange-yellow splashed with jet black, the female's more subtle yellow streaks, the chattering calls, the busy, bossy displays, the cock of the head when pausing to listen for another oriole's answer. I watch them looking through the local palm trees for the ideal place to hang their nest, which they intricately weave from the slimmest strips of palm frond into a smooth, round ball with a single opening (orioles are New World birds closely related to Old World weaverbirds, and make similar nests). Will they choose the low palm outside my front door, or a neighbour's, more remote from my spying? Will I hear the chick in the nest, demanding food, or see it learning to fly, with its anxious parents trailing behind? This spring, the male, who I call (every year) Orlando, found a mate and chose a palm farther away, a towering 80-foot tree in a nearby yard, where I can barely see them with binoculars. Still, I feel a little bit blessed.

I live in a neighbourhood in LA where gentrification only recently elbowed out gangs. Cars are still broken into and stolen nightly and you watch out for rough customers on the block. But Bird World is far more intense. Competition for territories can turn into multi-pair brawls. Songbirds attack hawks, ravens, even owls that might eat a nestling. Aerial dogfights break out everywhere: ravens mob hawks in mid-air complete with barrel rolls and close dives; hawks counterattack with screaming lunges that strip feathers. The tiniest – hummingbirds – by virtue of superior speed, manoeuvrability and orneriness, put rout to everything else, including falcons and accipiters that live by eating less fierce birds. The hunt for food is constant. Hawks swoop into the grass onto snakes or rodents. Owls drop onto gophers and carry them back to feed their fledglings, tearing bloody bits out of limp lumps of fur. Herons have also learned to hunt gophers, stalking the park's lawns, motionless, waiting for the small heads to pop up from underground before spearing them through. And forget about dogs eating dogs, this is a bird-eat-bird world: ravens, hawks, and even jays relentlessly hunt for nests to raid for eggs or rob of nestlings, which they carry away with the aggrieved parents in hot pursuit; hawks target smaller birds in the thickets. Nature is indeed red in tooth and claw.

Birds adapt to the human-altered world. I see ravens sorting through trash, peeling roadkill off the asphalt, and eating french fries or tacos ▶

Walden

discarded on the sidewalk by last night's drinkers. All-night lights, loud cars and helicopters disturb their sleep and drown out their calls. The worst indignity is fireworks: the Fourth of July in my neighbourhood sounds and looks like 24 hours on the front line in eastern Ukraine, with less senseless loss of life but no less senseless detonation. And cats, both house pets and feral, prowl. My own cats periodically appear with lizards or birds, sometimes still alive. These are difficult moments, but I've chosen not to lock them inside, in part because they were born feral, outside. And because they are also part of this hybrid Nature, daily facing the mortal threat of coyotes. I've already lost a loved cat, and many neighbours have, too. We've all seen them being carried away in the mouths of coyotes. "Lost Cat" signs are regularly taped to poles and street signs – each one a posting of deep, sad loss for a person or a family.

One morning a few weeks ago, my tabby, Muffin, brought a dead oriole to my back door. Its limp body was streaked with yellow feathers – a recently-fledged juvenile. I felt guilty of murder, and of betraying my special friends. But, the same day, outside the front porch, I heard the familiar chittering, and saw, in my low, close palm tree, a flash of yellow, then the male oriole – was it Orlando, or another? – followed by the female flying out from under a frond. I peered under it, and there, attached to the underside, was a nest! I felt a relief that only parents can – even though these weren't my babies.

But nothing stays the same for long in Bird World. The next morning I was awakened by the sound of ravens squawking too loudly in the front yard. Rising to investigate, I saw frenzy: a big raven exploded from the hedge, chased by angry birds – two mockingbirds and the male oriole. In its beak something dangled. Flurries of wings beat around each other in a dark scrum, before the raven, covered by its partner, settled in a tree and began to rip apart its prize – a nestling. The other raven perched on a power pole nearby, taking the brunt of more attacks that went on for what seemed like forever, until the first finished its meal and the two departed. I was frankly relieved that it was the mockingbirds' loss this time. There are incalculably more mockingbirds hereabouts than orioles – a pair staking its territory around nearly every house – whereas orioles are rare.

My orioles go on: chittering, feeding the chick, back and forth with their incessant task. Soon, the nestling is fledging, making its exploratory flights through the trees. It will have to avoid the ravens, hawks – and yes, cats – that wait for it. And then, in a couple of months, it will have to fly hundreds of miles to its species' other home in Mexico, and hopefully, return to my neighbourhood in a year or so to start the cycle again. *Cuidate, amigo*. Take care, friend.

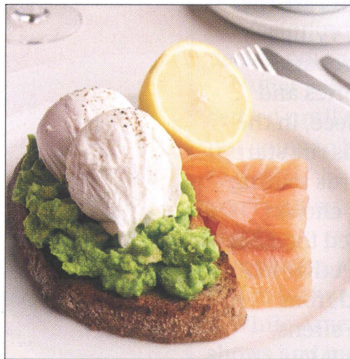
Wade Graham is an author, environmentalist and academic. He lives in LA

FRANCO'S

Est. 1945



One of London's finest Italian restaurants



Franco's offers both continental and cooked breakfasts with classical favourites as well as more contemporary dishes. The lunch and evening menus offer a range of delicacies which include our homemade bread and fresh pasta, a variety of fish and meat as well as vegan and gluten free options. Head Chef Stefano Turconi draws inspiration, flavours and ingredients from all regions of Italy bringing them to the heart of St James's in London.

MAKE A RESERVATION



francoslondon



francoslondon.com



020 7499 2211