

A Beautiful Book on Birds

Reviewed by Marion Robb

Richard Slaughter's beautiful book on *Birds in Bermuda* is a landmark – or if you like, a high water mark – in the catalogue of published lore about our waters, woods and wildlife. It is a book to read through in an hour, to leaf through frequently for its remarkably intimate colour photographs, and to ponder over a lifetime for its thought-provoking message. In a nutshell this is that Bermuda's very survival, both as a unique tourist resort, and as a pleasant place to live in, is linked with that of the flying creatures and the imperilled environment that supports them.

During six years of teaching in Bermuda, Mr. Slaughter learned both to love the beauty of this avian heritage and to fear for its future against the relentless pressures of population and building needs. Perhaps only a so-called expatriate could have felt such a fresh reaction and developed such an objective view.

It is true that the author was tutored by Bermudian David Wingate, to whom the book is dedicated, and who calls it in a preface 'the story of one man's gradual awakening to a full appreciation of the wonders and beauty of the natural environment.' Further, he writes, 'It is a story told in the tragic context of an oceanic island whose primeval character has been transformed through human colonisation from a virgin wilderness teeming in seabirds, into a noisy, congested midocean metropolis in which the survival of the original bird life is now at stake.'

The book is titled *Birds in Bermuda*, rather than *Birds of Bermuda*, because so many of the island's frequenters are migrants, skimming over thousands of ocean miles to winter in a warmer climate. Mr. Slaughter notes that 'Today a few scattered patches of woodland and marsh, all that remains of the primeval forest, support many of these birds. Tomorrow these may give way to urbanisation. I believe that such an environment would soon become as unfit for human life as for other creatures.'

Life in Bermuda led him to this conclusion, just as life at Walden led Thoreau to write, as quoted in the introduction: 'We need the tonic of wildness ... We can never have enough of nature.' There is nothing sentimental about Mr. Slaughter's text, which is grounded in research and careful observation. The vivid colour pictures stem from days and nights of patient watching by an artist's eye. His camera has caught revealing glimpses of a saw-whet owl peering from a tree, a ground dove and chicks in their haphazard nest, a Chick of the Village (Bermuda's only endemic land bird) about to drop a worm into one of four gaping beaks, tern and longtail on the wing against blue skies, longtail chicks in a cliff hole and a cahow chick in its low-ceilinged burrow.

By contrast, the black-and-white photographs of nature reserves and settled areas look pale and grey. The most encouraging of these is one of Scouts clearing litter at the Gilbert Reserve. Aware that conservation cannot succeed without involving the young, Mr. Slaughter asks 'What better place to start than in school?' The book's three sections deal with The Migratory Birds, The Impact of Man on Primeval Bermuda and Conservation Measures. Under this last head, the pregnant question is 'Turning the Tide?' On the plus side, the author traces the first steps toward a conservation movement in the 1960's, the Plant a Tree campaign in 1974, as well as decisions to make Nonsuch Island a living museum of original

flora and fauna. Upsetting the balance along the way have been such imported 'pest birds' as sparrow and starling, crow and kiskadee, and lately exotic caged birds that escape into the wild.

Mr. Slaughter has a good word for golf courses, which preserve green space and attract migratory birds to their ponds. And he appeals to householders to leave corners of their gardens in a natural state for the benefit of birds, who can hardly raise flocks on smooth lawns. A useful appendix summarises the nesting habits and survival status of birds breeding in Bermuda, with estimates of the present population of some species. May their numbers ever grow less, a reader feels on putting down the book.

Sharing credit with the author for the handsome paper-bound publication are the Bermuda Book Stores Ltd. as publisher and The Bermuda Press Ltd. as printers.

Royal Gazette, September 18th 1975.