

Midwestern Birds and their Mythologies

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## Introduction

When I was six years old, my house in the Chicago suburb of Naperville, Illinois had a big wide backyard with a swing set in the middle. One summer day, my mother called me over to look out the window. "It's a hawk," she said. And there, sitting atop our swing set, devouring a mouse, was the Red-Tailed Hawk. It was much bigger than the little toy plastic hawk that fit in the palm of my hand. This real, live animal had a wingspan as big as my own. It was so close to me, maybe thirty feet away from the window. I could see the feathers on the back of his neck stick up as he leaned forward to rip pieces off of his prize. I was intrigued by his piercing, nearly angry gaze. He probably could not see us through our window because of the glare, but I kept wishing I could catch his eye. I watched his yellow gaze track the fence across the yard, the neatly trimmed bushes near the deck, and the yellow slide of the swing set. He was torn between scrutinizing every inch of our yard, and tearing into the flesh he was holding in his talons. He sat in our yard for nearly ten minutes before he took off and disappeared over our roof.

The world is filled with the sounds of bird calls. Descended from dinosaurs and found on all continents, birds have permeated virtually every available habitat since the cretaceous period. Fossil records tell us that it is likely all birds were descended from a single ancestor, but today nearly ten thousand separate species wander all seven continents. Characterized by feathers, eggs, and beaks, birds are easily distinguished from other animals. Because of their ability to inhabit just about any place that humans do, birds are often the first animal a child will see when venturing outside his or her home. They inspire human design by lending us their bright colored fashion and their favored mode of transportation. In turn, our designs on the landscape and ecosystems shape the lives of birds in return.

Birds have captured the human imagination since the beginning of history. From our ancient ancestors' admiration of the eagles and ravens, to Darwin's fascination with the evolutionary malleability of finches, we have been fascinated by their flight capability, their sociability, and their bright calls and colors. I love every kind of bird, large and small. In elementary school, I was a big fan of a book series about owls and their societies. Since then, I see birds, especially raptors, as intelligent creatures with their own interests and motivations. Each bird species has taken a different route in life and has found a niche in an ecosystem that suits it exactly. These species each form their own stories and mythologies, full of ups and downs, triumphs and defeats, in which the only constant is change and growth.

This is a story about my obsession with birds. With that obsession comes my interest in their stories. I wonder what truth lies between the Great Blue Heron's mystique, how the European Starlings find a place for themselves, and why the White Pelican wanders thousands of miles to find just the right current of water. The eclectic birds of the Midwest might have the most interesting mythologies of all. I plan to follow these birds along their journeys to better understand where they are going, as well as where they come from. Every bird has a unique history that has led them to where they are now, and as investigate the myths that have brought the Great Blue Heron, European Starling, Peregrine Falcon, White Pelican, Monk Parakeet, Sandhill Crane, and Barn Owl to thrive in the Midwest, I unexpectedly learned more of myself in the process.

This is the story of my quest to understand Midwestern birds and the myths that follow them.

**“Say, will the falcon, stooping from above, Smit with her varying plumage, spare the  
dove?”**

- Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*

## Peregrine Falcon: The Wanderer

A Peregrine Falcon in flight moves with unfathomable speed. Their angular wings cut through the air with a precision unmatched by any other animal or machine. When hunting, they spy their prey with eyes that far outperform our own, hover as if they are weightless, then dive. If they catch their prey they will fan their wings out to cover their prize and hide it from other predators. They are about the size of crows, but have white barred chests and dark blue and gray wings and backs. They pick their prey apart with ease and enthusiasm, employing their long, hooked beaks that have a special notch designed to break the neck of a small animal in an instant. This is not simply the falcon's livelihood- it is their sport, and with each bird they rip out of the sky, you can see how much they relish hunting.

Since Peregrine Falcons are nowhere to be found in the suburbs, I was excited when I moved to the city, one of their favorite habitats. Flying at speeds exceeding 200 miles per hour, falcons are the world's fastest animal and the most skilled hunter. Everything about a peregrine is sharp- his talons, his beak, his wingbeats, his gaze. True to their name, "Peregrine", which is synonymous with "wanderer", they travel hundreds of miles across a variety of habitats, hunting anywhere and everywhere. However, their wanderings bring them back to the same nesting sites year after year, mostly with the same mate. In medieval times, when falconry was a common means of survival, having falcons was a privilege reserved for royalty. Their speed, size, and broad wandering range can make them nearly impossible to find in the wild, unless it's nesting season.

Peregrine Falcons naturally live and build nests on cliffs, so rooftops in cities like Chicago are perfect homes for them. They like to nest a cozy 25-1,300 feet off the ground. Some residents have welcomed Peregrine families by building nest boxes, because they will patrol the

place for pigeons and keep them off of windowsills. On the other hand, if birds move in and nest on a building, owners sometimes take an adaptive approach. They might add a structure to improve a nesting site, or isolate the area to make the birds more comfortable. When the Peregrines settle in so close to human beings, we can have an intimate look into their lives.

Peregrine Falcons are pretty famous. Many people know something about peregrines, and birds of prey are generally admired, especially in America, since our symbol is the bald eagle. Peregrines catch people off-guard with their forward-facing binocular vision, making their intense gaze seem intelligent. They were one of the stars of Rachel Carson's conservationist novel, *Silent Spring*, which highlighted the decline of the species due to DDT, a harmful pesticide that made eggshells crack prematurely. They were on the endangered species list for decades, but populations have risen significantly in Illinois thanks to conservation efforts, and there are currently about twelve breeding pairs of Peregrines in the Chicago area. If you want a true sense of how many people are interested in these birds, just look at their Instagram accounts (@officebuddha).

Mary Hennen, head of the Chicago Field Museum's Peregrine Program, gathers information from fellow falcon monitors, bands new chicks, gives presentations about the Peregrines, and checks in on the nest sites. She has been involved with the program since 1989. "The program is a countless number of people, it's the people who work in the offices, who have a building across the street, or an apartment nearby who are doing the monitoring and will update us." Most of the data is gathered by individuals in the city who are interested in the birds.

Falcons come home to the city every spring from their wandering. In the past few years, one man, Dacey Arashiba, became the center of the Chicago Peregrine Falcon scene. In 2014, Arashiba was astonished to see a Peregrine Falcon perched on the railing of his balcony, 28

stories above the Lakeview neighborhood, scoping out the empty flower boxes along the side. The falcon made quite an impression, swooping up to the balcony and landing with agility, pointed wing tips crossing over strong tail feathers. Soon after the visit, two falcons began appearing regularly on the balcony. Luckily for the falcon couple, Arashiba gave them the space, privacy and opportunity to use his balcony as their permanent nesting site. He named them Steve and Linda, after the lead singers of the bands Journey and 4 Non Blondes, and began taking pictures and videos to document the birds. The falcon couple has had three clutches of chicks at the site to date, and Arashiba has shared the progression of the family with the world. He is taking peregrine social media to the next level.

The Field Museum's Chicago Peregrine Program has six live webcams set up in Peregrine Falcon nests around Chicago that have become very popular online. Viewers from all over the world tune in to watch the falcons raise their chicks every spring. However, this is only the public face of the program- peregrine monitoring also includes putting leg bands on the birds to help keep track of which birds go where, as well as gathering data on the birds to track population trends. Monitoring the falcon population in particular can be important because any problem could be an indicator that something is out of balance with a population of species lower on the food chain. Chicago is only one in a network of programs dedicated to monitoring the falcons and their residency in Midwestern cities.

Falcons gravitate toward the high points of the landscape. In this case, cities. The denseness and constant activity of the city attracts some people and repels others. I enjoy being lost in a crowd, and listening to the noise of the L. The people here are diverse, yet American, in customs or in expectations. Chicago was wilderness, until European settlers came less than three hundred years ago and eventually erected the tall buildings and city infrastructure that we and the

Peregrine Falcons call home. The city of Chicago has been my home for nearly four years, and many streets have become so familiar to me that I recognize the unevenness of the sidewalk, the tiny local shops, the smells of restaurants. I love seeing the wide expanse of Lake Michigan, with skyscrapers pushed right up to the edge. However, as much as I love this place, I haven't been living here year-round. As a college student I travel from my hometown an hour away, to the city, frequently. I understand how the Peregrine Falcon can wander so far from home, yet always feel the call to return. The falcon hunts for its prey, and I hunt for the falcon.

**And nothing moved but thirty egrets wading -  
thirty egrets in a quiet evening.**

- Judith Wright, "Thirty Egrets"

### Great Egret: The Introverted Beauty

A large pure-white bird with a curling neck and a long, prehistoric beak, the Great Egret is a common sight around ponds and shallow waters throughout the Midwest. They are methodical, stoic birds that rarely make a sound. I think of them as the Great Blue Heron's angelic-looking yet somehow distant cousins. They are loners who hunt in solitude, seldom sharing a pond or stretch of river with another of their kind. At least, that's how I thought they usually behave. At the rookeries, the colonies where they raise their young, I learned that they also have a more sassy, rambunctious side.

In the boiling sun of late summer, am being led up an Illinois forest path by Lee Witkowski, a volunteer at the Lake Renwick Rookery in the town of Plainfield, who teaches Environmental Science. He is an older gentleman whose enthusiasm for birds is not lost through the routine of the rookery tours. This is what he does on his Saturday mornings for fun. The rookery has three levels, with Great Blue Herons at the top, then Double-Crested Cormorants, then Great Egrets at the bottom, he explains, occasionally interrupting himself to name a bird call he hears. We are moving slowly down the path since Witkowski is pulling along a wagon carrying supplies such as visual aids and displays explaining the rookery, as well as a high-powered telescope. The blue surface of the lake glimmers through the trees, as we walk right into a gazebo overlooking the large lake, outfitted with a variety of high-powered telescopes. The sight of the rookery astounds me- dozens of egrets conversing, eating, and sleeping in the same vicinity, side by side.

Waterbirds nest in rookeries and on islands because there is safety in numbers, and although grown egrets do not have many predators, foxes and raccoons are more than happy to steal and eat eggs. Countless stick nests dented by the egrets' stick legs loom around the shores of the island. The rookery itself is a series of tall, tree-like poles with many platforms for

nests, perched on an island smack in the center of the lake. There had originally been trees on the island, but they had all died from the overwhelming amount of bird droppings, and conservationists had to step in and build structures to accommodate the hundreds of birds that inhabit the island every springtime. As the result of gravel mining in the mid to late 1800s, when steam shovels hit a freshwater spring, out poured the lake.



Even hundreds of feet away, we can hear the “meep meep meep” of the birds on the island. “This is a quiet day,” Witkowski says. Toward the beginning of the season there would be even more activity, with over a thousand birds flocking to the island throughout breeding season—building nests, flying in and out with fish, feeding their jabbering chicks, and croaking back and forth to each other. An egret family bustles as their young call out for fish, their beaks pointing upward and their throats vibrating. Egrets have pouches below their beaks like pelicans do, but they are much smaller. Although the rookery is where all egret chicks are born, the place seems less joyous and more tense. The introverted birds don’t seem to enjoy living in close quarters with one another, and are often seen squabbling.

It is late in the breeding season, but you can recognize the Juveniles from the way their beaks are always hanging open, hopeful for food. Adult egrets sometimes fly up to 30 miles from the rookery to find food for their young. They bother their parents incessantly until they get a treat. One egret stands over her two young, who have their wings spread and bodies low in submission. They bob up and down, the feathers on the backs of their heads spiked out, until all three of them lock beaks. It almost looks like a fight until one of the juveniles pulls away and begins chewing. The two lean in towards their mother again wanting more, but she has nothing left. She stands stoically with her beak shut, turning away from her energetic children.

The trouble began with the Great Egret's breeding season. It is at that time that male egrets grow long, wispy plumes that cascade down their backs, the very plumes that were most coveted in the ladies' hat industry in the late 1800s. Whole taxidermied birds were even worn by some. Egret plumes brought in \$32 per ounce by the year 1900. The birds were being shot in mass numbers, and even hunted on their breeding grounds. Plume hunters were relentless and brutal in their attacks- they would decimate rookeries, shooting hundreds of adult egrets right off their nests, and leaving the chicks to starve and eggs to rot. Luckily, two women saw the effects of these hunting practices, and decided to take matters into their own hands.

These two women, Harriet Hemenway and her cousin Minna Hall, led a crusade and boycott against using the feathers of endangered birds. Hemenway was the wife of Augustus Hemenway, heir to a shipping fortune. She was an amateur naturalist, and would frequently go out on birding expeditions. Upon reading an article about the horrors of the bird feather industry, she began gathering her friends and fellow high-society ladies to form a group for the protection of birds. The groups led boycotts of feathers and encouraged the use of artificial ones, and worked to pass laws protecting egrets and other endangered birds. Beginning with simple tea

parties to spread word about the cause, they rallied about 900 women to join in a society for conservation which eventually led to a national movement later to be christened with a name that many still know today- The National Audubon Society.

Women in American history have rarely been given the same weight and importance as men. But in conservation, it is hard to ignore the fact that one of the very first American conservation efforts was started by a group of women. Whether you believe that Harriet Hemenway's womanly compassion and empathy contributed to her crusade, or the fact that rich people have more time on their hands (and have historically led the conservation movement), it is undeniable that American conservation would not be where it is today without the efforts of these women. I am inspired by the little-known stories of women who defined the course of American history, and have fought to save animals and environments that make our continent so vibrant and diverse.

In the quiet mid-mornings along river shores and ponds edges, it is clear why these birds inspired such an important conservation effort. The great egret is a peaceful and serene bird. They are so skinny that you can hardly see them from head-on, they are almost exclusively depicted in profile. They are mostly silent, slow-moving and graceful, but when they spy a fish or a frog they spring into action, their beak becomes a spear and their wings are spread to steady themselves. Their grace and pure white plumage give them a heavenly look, one that will always play a part in America's story of conservation. As a young conservationist and a woman interested in science, I reflect on how the Great Egret's beauty has inspired so many before me to take actions and get involved with environmental justice, and how I might do the same.

**“Nay I’ll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but Mortimer, and give it to (the king) to keep his anger still in motion”**  
- William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

## European Starling: The Opportunist

The European Starling is a bird with an interesting history, and is very easy to come by. They are found almost everywhere in North America, from the inner city to the open countryside. They can make do with almost any environment, and love to eat crumbs of human food just as much as seagulls or pigeons do. However, they also fare well picking through grass along roadsides in the suburbs, or in rural cornfields. They appear like plain black birds from a distance, but upon closer inspection you can see that they have hints of purple and green iridescence in their plumage. They fly close to the ground with their stout, triangular wings and a determined attitude.

One hot day in early August, I walked to Montrose Beach Bird Sanctuary on the north side of Chicago, home to many species of shorebirds as well as native prairie and forest dwellers. The sanctuary has a variety of plants and trees all crammed into a small area between the beach and a nearby park, with narrow paths crisscrossing through the area. It is as dense with life as the rest of Chicago. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of black speckled starlings fly in clouds over the thick trees, pour out of the underbrush when startled, and dart between branches. The starlings move through the micro-forest in tight-knit flocks, unseen through the overlapping tree branches, but I could hear their squawking and chattering surrounding me. Their commonality does not detract from their formidable presence. An individual starling is not impressive; they shuffle around, looking for crumbs or seeds, not very intelligent or stylish.

Starlings seem to be happy in the dense trees; perhaps they are reminded of the forests of England. Planes loom large in the sky overhead, and kids play on the beach in the distance. As I listened to the starlings, I began to realize that each individual has its own voice. They are all clearly the same species, but each have a unique tone or inflection. I can throw a small piece of

cornbread and right on cue the starlings appear, ready to investigate. These birds would never miss an opportunity for a free meal, a trait which no doubt contributes to their abundance.

Although it is thought of as a dirty, conniving, and crude, there was a moment in time where one man saw them differently. In 1890, a Shakespeare fan named Eugene Schieffelin had an idea. He wanted all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare books to be present in the New World. Schieffelin wanted his home in New York City to be filled with skylarks, song thrushes, and starlings. Alas, only one of these birds was able to thrive in Central Park where Schieffelin released them. For the first 6 years, the starlings didn't stray far from Manhattan, but soon after the birds had a foothold in the area and started breeding, the starlings spread rapidly. From the 60 European Starlings that he brought over from England and released in 1890 and another 40 in 1891, millions began to populate and spread across the country, and eventually throughout North America.

Since then, European Starlings are regarded by many as a menace to North America. They are notorious for evicting native species like Bluebirds and Purple Martins from their nests. They are known for eating anything and everything. There was a famed incident in 1960 when a flock of roughly 10,000 starlings flew straight into the turbines of an airplane taking off from Logan Airport in Boston and destroyed its engines, causing it to crash only seconds after taking off. Starlings quickly gained a reputation as destructive pests.

The presence of Starlings is not always considered a curse. Starlings flock with other native birds, providing increased protection against predators. Sparrows and starlings sometimes work together to chase off hawks that might pose a threat to their young. More importantly, starlings will eat insects at an intense rate unmatched by native species. However, by and large,

invasive species issues are not to be treated lightly. If anything, Eugene Scheiffelin's story is a warning to anyone who may carelessly introduce non-native species to an ecosystem.

European Starlings spend a lot of time with Red-winged Blackbirds, who frequent the same areas and eat the same foods. Whereas starlings are invaders to the Midwest, Red-winged Blackbirds are one of the most common native species around. They are a quintessential piece of a prairie scene, and their two-part call is heard constantly wherever the grass is high enough for them to perch. They are a head taller than starlings, and can be more assertive. In winter, flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, starlings and other small birds stick together and forage in groups. Female Red-winged Blackbirds in particular resemble starlings closely in size and color, although I am sure that they would be insulted by the comparison. Watching a female Red-winged Blackbird interact with a starling is exactly what you would anticipate- a squabble over food or perching places, and a snippy goodbye as one or the other flees the scene. She disapproves of the starling, perhaps knowing very well that he does not belong here.

It seems fitting that in the nation comprised almost entirely of immigrants, one more group would be added to the mix. Today, America is known for its reluctance with outsiders despite the fact that most insiders were once outsiders. In the time that European Starlings were first brought here, many peoples were coming to America to seek shelter from famine, war, and religious intolerance. The demographics of the U.S. are constantly changing, and many people who choose to come here have to make great adjustments to adapt, just as the starlings did. Compared to other aliens, starlings have done remarkably scant amounts of damage. Human European settlers have had a much larger impact on America's ecosystem than any other animal. Starlings have never caused the extinction of another species, levelled old-growth forests, or polluted waterways.

The government has undergone many projects intended to bring down or eliminate the population of European Starlings, but to no avail. Through poison, vats of grease, artificial owls, mechanical hawks, and even itching powder, starlings have thwarted every official attempt to control their numbers. They are among the most successfully uncontrollable invasive species in the U.S. I find it hard not to admire their flexibility. They thrive in climates as far north as Alaska and as far south as northern Mexico. You will see these creatures walking down Michigan Avenue, eating potato chips off the sidewalk alongside the pigeons, as well as descending on fields of Illinois corn in great numbers.

**“A wonderful bird is the Pelican.  
His beak can hold more than his belly can.  
He can hold in his beak  
Enough food for a week!  
But I'll be darned if I know how the helican?”**  
- Dixon Lanier Merritt, “The Pelican”

## American White Pelican: The Fish Gulper

It's the beginning of the hottest summer on record. My dad and I drive through the winding roads of Starved Rock State Park in Oglesby, Illinois, enjoying the air conditioning of our trusty family minivan. The Illinois River, which borders the park, is a known rest stop for the American White Pelicans on their way to their breeding grounds up north. When we step into the hot sun in front of the Illinois Waterway Visitor Center, we notice fences lining the parking lot, designating the federal land associated with the river lock. The words "U.S. Army Corps of Engineers" looms over us as a huge barge enters the lock. The water slowly drains down, lowering the boat. A flutter of black and white wings disappears over the side of the lock. We start moving along the fence, downriver.

Our destination was carefully planned. This is one of the few stops that the American White Pelican makes in Illinois on its way north to its grassy breeding grounds, mostly in Canada. The migration begins in spring from the pelicans' winter home in Florida, and late June is the very end of the migration. A few dozen stragglers are left after thousands of pelicans have already come through this stretch of the Illinois River, eating disoriented Asian carp below the dam and sleeping on the sandbars. They have been visiting this area for decades now.

The brim of my hat presses against the chain-link fence as I try to see down past the wall of the lock. Below, sure enough, there are two pelicans sit on the churning water, beaks slightly open. Their heads turn in an arc that follows the fish jumping out of the water. Their bills seem to water at the sight of the carp and the orange pouches swell with anticipation, but they don't appear willing to move very much to pursue any particular fish. The effect is like a lazy game of Whack-a-Mole. Every few moments a carp jumps out of the water toward the sharp stream of water protruding from the lock's gate. Asian Carp, which have been decimating the natural balance of this river, have a counterintuitive defense mechanism which causes them to jump out

of the water if they are upset or startled. They wiggle wildly as they fly through the air, unaware of the white birds nearby. The pelicans watch the foolish fish eagerly but do not bother to dive after the distant ones. Each of the pelicans scoops the water violently when a fish jumps right in front of them, and eventually, one of them manages to scoop up a hefty carp before it falls back into the water.

The American White Pelican is an unexpected Midwestern bird. Most people associate pelicans with ocean harbors and coastlines. However, the American White Pelicans are found right in our backyards, all the way up the Mississippi River. They are only visible here at a certain time of year. They are one of the largest birds in North America, with an enormous bill the length and width of a forearm. Their white bodies and black wing patches seem to float on the water and through the air. When they spread their wings and shake out their feathers on the water, they could be mistaken for long-beaked swans. Most people are more familiar with the brown pelican, which frequents coastlines year-round, but the White Pelican cuts straight through the heart of the country on its migration. As my mother follows me along the fence she asks, "Are these Florida pelicans?" They aren't, I think, they are nowhere pelicans, travelers with two distinct homes.

Pelicans can be incredibly awkward creatures. A pelican walk across even a short stretch of dry land is as awkward as a person try to wade through water. Their slow waddle makes them seem inept, and their oversized beaks turn from forceful tools to unwieldy hindrances. Although they can be agile, oftentimes the pelicans seem to lumber toward their target, or lose their balance while having a fight. Nevertheless, these creatures have a strong sense of loyalty and often work in teams to trap fish. They have a playbook of formations to corral fish and travel in

groups. Most of the time they glide in a dignified fashion along the river, or soar over the water, their very shadow causing carp to jump in fear.

The pouch below his bill expands as he swallows the fish, headfirst. His bill immediately inverts, tilted toward the sky as he struggles to force the fish down into his esophagus, making his slender neck bulge. While the pelican's pouch is prepared to hold up to three gallons of water, his stomach is only prepared to handle half of that volume. He alternates between keeping his head low and neck short so that the fish reaches his gut faster, and stretching out so that it may take a straighter path through his body. He flaps his wings in victory and moves away from his companion, who looks ravenous. He straightens his body vertically, still trying to swallow the fish. The still-fighting tail of the fish can be seen pressed against the thin skin of the pelican's pouch. His body spasms as the fish inside his body slowly suffocated, still writhing for minutes after he swallowed. He waits patiently for the fish to stop thrashing, and it appears to have finally passed down to his gizzard. The pelican reaches a distant rock and retires, looking exhausted, but satisfied from the ordeal.

I've always hated eating. Days go by where I forget to make myself meals or only eat snacks. I favor foods with a high calorie count and lots of sugar, because cooking seems like a waste of time. I am prone to small stomachaches brought on my stress. Although I am not a picky eater, I rarely enjoy the taste of food, and repeat meals because it does not matter what I eat, as long as I eat something. The American White Pelicans may feel the same way. Ironically, they are well-fed here at Starved Rock, and surely must appreciate the availability of fish, but I see that for them, eating is a necessity by nature, not a preferred pastime. While other animals take their time with eating and seem to relish the activity, a pelican's experience of eating is quick and practical, if not sickening.

Pelicans eat nothing but cold, slimy fish. Before they are nine weeks old, a baby pelican's stomach will digest as much as 150 pounds of fish. Meal after meal they consume the creatures whole, gaping mouths, unblinking eyes and slick scales and all. Pelicans eat with more determination than enthusiasm, and after watching them, I realize that I do the same.

Pelicans do seem to enjoy the social parts of their lives. We know that pelicans are devoted to their young, and sometimes fly a hundred miles to find food for them. With wingspans like eagles, pelicans are at their most beautiful when they are soaring high in the air, free from land, water, and thoughts of their next meal.

**They are like everybody,  
—the parakeets—  
the ones that talk best  
have separate cages.**

- Alberto Blanco, "The Parakeets"

## Monk Parakeet: The Colorful Neighbor

It was a bright summer day when I got off of the Garfield Red Line stop on the South Side of Chicago. I walked down the street, potholes and paper bags from Wendy's flanking the sidewalk where I walked. I had not had good luck in Hyde Park. Recent reports suggested that the parakeets have been moving out of the area, perhaps moving west. Tired-looking people waited around on the street, and rap music played from car windows in front of disheveled houses. At the bus stop near a run-down gas station whose patrons startled me with sudden shouts and revving of engines, a distinct chattering sound filtering down through the large trees in across the street, on a wide strip of grassy median. I followed my ears and crossed the street, now noticing that the sound came from a huge nest, high in the tree. I had found my birds.

If you talk to local environmental enthusiasts, birdwatchers, or long-time Chicagoans, many will know about the "Hyde Park Parakeets". Many have grown curious about the loud, green birds that travel in small flocks around the city. With leaf-green backs, gray stomachs and the same long tail and downturned beak as any parrot or parakeet species, Monk Parakeets are unmistakable as birds of the Southern Hemisphere. However, Monk Parakeets have taken up residence in many U.S. cities, all flocks descended from pet birds that got loose and learned to adapt in the environment. In Chicago, Monk Parakeets began populating in the 60s and 70s, as the exotic pet trade boomed. Now, these South American natives have made Chicago home despite its cold winters. Their native range stretches from Bolivia to Argentina, and yet they have been seen roaming wild in at least thirteen U.S. states, as well as Puerto Rico, Europe, and Japan. Seeing these colorful birds flitting from tree to tree in tight-knit, noisy groups, it is easy to see why they would make good pets.

As I approached the tree, the parakeet eyed me suspiciously, chirping. The nest was huge, a double or triple-decker, since Monk Parakeets are communal nesters who build homes for multiple families to raise their young together. Although the median was extremely wide, it seemed as though the space wasn't used for anything. However, as a man slept under one of the burr oak trees farther down the median, I felt odd and exposed. I was sitting in a visible patch of land where people do not usually go, but where I could be clearly seen by passersby. One guy who was walking down the street smiled at me and waved. I made no response.

It looked like a storm had twisted a pile of sticks and whipped it up into a tree. But to the parakeets who built it, each hard-earned branch was strategically placed and orderly. Monk Parakeets are the only parrot species in the world that do not nest in holes, but construct their own homes. They are architects, as keen to close-quartered living as Chicago natives often are. Two or three of the parakeets were hanging in and around the nests.

After a while a pair zoomed away from the tree and off into the neighborhood. They always appeared to be chasing each other, playing a game of tag. One would fly to where the other was perching and the other would fly away. They travel in groups, tight-knit flocks that looked like extended families.

My family had always been a small-animal-only household. We had fish, guinea pigs, hermit crabs, and frogs. By the time I was in high school, however, I knew I wanted something more. Birds had always been a theme in my life, so my choice seemed obvious. My parents agreed to let me get a cockatiel. They are one of the more common pet birds for beginners, but have big personalities and a keen capacity for learning songs. When we first came home with my cockatiel Stella, she sat at the bottom of her cage in silence, scared stiff. We weren't sure she would ever love spending time with us try to interact with us at all. After months of gently

encouraging, she was finally comfortable sitting on my hand, and walking up my arm to perch on my shoulder, getting tangled in my hair and chewing on my necklaces. Soon, she began to whistle. I whistled back, and when she began to copy my songs, I felt like we were finally friends. The first song she learned was the Addams Family TV show theme song. Her head still bobs up and down every time she makes the two clicking sounds that substitute for finger snaps. Stella still screams when she is upset and will snap and hiss at people if she isn't pleased with their behavior, but she will also rub her head against my cheek and my fingers, and wolf whistles to greet me when I walk in the door or uncover her cage in the morning.

Cockatiels are native to Australia, and are part of the Cockatoo family, whereas the Monk Parakeets are a part of the Parakeet family, native to South America. However they both possess qualities that people admire in animals, because they closely mirror us. These exotic birds are social, and form strong bonds with their owners. Unlike many small animals, they each have their own unique personalities, and develop their own preferences that make them fun and entertaining pets. Many people know birds as loud animals, which is true, but most of their noise is a basis for their communication. Every whistle and chirp is a message that your pet is trying to communicate or interact with you. What's more, birds enjoy attention more than any other animal. They can be performers, willing to sing and dance for their owners with the pure intent of winning affections. They are flexible animals who can be moved around, and some species can even be taken outside to enjoy some fresh air. They are less messy and smelly than dogs or cats, and have just as much love and cuddles to give their owners as any mammal.

Monk Parakeets, whether free or in captivity, are flexible, vibrant and social. If you see them in the city, they are conspicuously chipper, high-profile birds that travel between the trees like a group of excited tourists. They represent the social side of humans, and the need for

companionship that spans beyond our own species. As I returned to the red line, the relentless sunlight seems to hit the pavement in a new way that made it shine. I was elated that I found the parakeets, and I began to see the people around me differently. Any neighbor of the parakeets is a neighbor of mine.

**“On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh.”**

- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

### Sandhill Crane: The Lover

The sky is gray but bright, and thunder contemplates rain on the horizon. I am at Horicon Marsh, near the town of Waupun, one of the densest areas for birdwatching in Wisconsin. The marsh is home to a rookery where herons, pelicans, egrets, cormorants, ducks, hawks, cranes, and more species nest and raise their young in the summer months. I walk quickly down a moss path through the thick marsh with big biting flies on my tail, past a disgruntled flock of Canada Geese. Frogs are constantly jumping in the corners of my eyes, I feel as though I can't keep up with the bustle of life moving around me. I have to shout "I'm coming through," to alert the geese of my presence, I don't want to upset them. Geese have a fiery reputation, and they hiss as I pass by. "I'm not here to see you anyway." I look over the expanse of the marsh, coated in thick tawny-green grass, and wonder what wildlife it might be concealing.

A group of Double-Crested Cormorants are perching like spindling shadows on a dead tree. Suddenly I hear a great cackling trumpet sound and, although I had never heard it before, I knew exactly who it was. I am filled with longing to see the Sandhill Cranes that are producing the call. The grass hides everything. Sandhill Cranes aren't hard to find in the open fields of Wisconsin, but this dense marsh is another story. I hear the trumpeting echo again and this time see two long-necked birds coming in for a landing in a patch of pond nearby.

I find a place to watch them, only partially obstructed by the tall grass. They are perhaps three hundred feet away, but to me it feels like ten feet. I watch the two cranes wade through the water and hunt for food. They are omnivores and can eat anything from hay seeds to frogs and fish. There is a Great Blue Heron also hunting nearby, keeping a low profile, not displaying the showmanship that the cranes are. The pair of cranes move in unmistakable synchronization that comes from knowing another being intimately. They tilt their heads upward to announce

themselves, and soon another pair makes their entrance. The cranes call back and forth to each other, presumably discussing the oncoming thunderstorm. One of the couples takes flight, each wing beat in perfect unison, enough to rival Olympic synchronized swimmers. They even dip their heads in the same way. Every movement is a mirror image, seemingly effortless. They say when you spend all your time with someone, they start to rub off on you. You begin to adopt their mannerisms, and the two of you think alike. This is nature's imperative version of love.

Cranes are an iconic symbol in Japanese, Chinese and Korean cultures. They are a symbol of love, longevity, and good fortune. These slender, stick-legged creatures are incapable of perching in trees, but excel at moving through shallow water. Found around the world, cranes are often admired for their graceful flight and dancing. Sandhill cranes are the most populous of all crane species, residing and migrating throughout the United States and Canada. With an average wingspan of five feet, three inches, they are a sight to behold, especially during the massive group migrations. Thousands of Sandhill Cranes beat their wide wings in unison to softly take off from the water, their trumpets crescendoing into a great wave of sound. Alongside the flourishing Sandhill Cranes are their close relatives, Whooping Cranes, who are few in number but frequent the same areas.

A Sandhill Crane is a silty-brown bird with a red patch on its head, and bright orange eyes. Male Sandhill Cranes often spread mud on their chests to color themselves, dressing up to attract mates. Cranes have remarkable mating customs that differentiate them from other bird species. Sandhill Cranes mate for life, and often spend time 'dating' multiple individuals before settling down with a single mate. If the couple cannot produce fertile eggs, they do 'divorce' and

take another mate. Additionally, if a crane's mate dies, they will have a period of mourning, but then take another mate. Birds are pragmatic. Unlike people, they can move past their broken hearts more easily.

The dancing behavior that Cranes are known for is not a mating ritual, but more of a way to bond with others. Crane couples will dance throughout their relationship, as a way to have fun and show off for each other. Though not strictly rhythmic, Sandhill Crane dancing is an unmistakable behavior. The hopping, twirling, dips and trumpeting of the Sandhill Crane dance are very distinctive and elegant. These birds have a passion for companionship to rival that of human beings.

The International Crane Foundation, an educational and research institute entirely devoted to Cranes, is headquartered in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The part open to the public only accounts for a small portion of the cranes on the premises, but on display are all 15 species of cranes in the world. Some of the cranes are friendly to people and others are reproachful, but all have an opinion one way or the other. It is clear that Sandhill Cranes have social needs that are as vital as eating and drinking. The cranes are only separated from humans by fences or netting, and visitors are warned not to mimic the calls or movements of the cranes because they could become agitated or confused. They always react when they see people, approaching with either a menacing or excited demeanor. They watch you, listen to you. Despite their generally gentle nature, crane beaks are strong enough to punch through a turtle's shell, and they are very territorial.

The founders of the Crane Foundation were two Cornell University ornithology students looking for a place to keep the cranes they had for research. They ended up renting a family farm in rural Wisconsin and setting up shop there. In those early days, it became apparent just how

dependent on socialization cranes are. Tex, a member of the endangered species, the Whooping Cranes, had been “imprinted” on humans, meaning that she thought she was a human herself, having been raised in the San Antonio Zoo. It was crucial that she reproduce, as the Whooping Crane population had fallen well below one hundred birds. The trouble was, Tex did not want another crane mate. Because she had only been socialized with humans, what she wanted was a human mate. One of the two founders, George Archibald, volunteered for the job. He put his bed in her little shed, and stayed by her side constantly for a month. He would dance with her in the patterns that cranes dance, by jumping, flapping wings (or in this case arms) pirouetting, and doing deep bows. Eventually Tex fell in love. George’s presence triggered Tex to begin laying eggs, and after a few unsuccessful clutches, she finally produced offspring. Throughout the process other researchers would try to replace George, but Tex wouldn’t accept them. George was her only mate until the day she died.

One of the most important reasons that Sandhill Cranes thrive in the Midwest is because they have adapted well to farmland. Sandhill Cranes eat seeds on the outskirts of hay, soy and cornfields. One of the research endeavors at the International Crane Foundation is to develop a chemical to be sprayed on crops that gives the seeds a bitter taste, so that they are repelled without being hurt. The easiest way to see Sandhill Cranes is to drive through the Wisconsin countryside, scanning the grids of crop for pairs of cranes.



**Owl bringing death silently  
looking wise  
does wisdom lie  
in bringing death  
by surprise.**

- Gillian Commerford, "Owl"

## Barn Owl: The Familiar

One day in third grade I was in the small library in the center of our school, a familiar place with short, wide shelves. I was searching for a new book when I came across a novel with the most beautiful cover I had ever seen. The wide, earth-toned face of the Great Horned Owl and its enormous yellow eye stared at me as if it had a million things to say. That book turned out to be one in a series about the lives and societies of a fictional owl world, one that I would become obsessed with for the next few years. From then on, owls inhabited my imagination vividly, as if they were my long lost friends. Yet, despite their love of the open Illinois prairies and farmlands, owls are not easy to come by.

Although Barn Owls are found worldwide in almost every habitat, their numbers in the Midwest have been decreasing. As the suburbs push out over farmland, there are fewer and fewer places for Barn Owls to nest and hunt. The nearest Barn Owl I found was in captivity at Willowbrook Wildlife Center, a facility to rehabilitate wild animals, often birds. Some of the birds are permanently disabled, and are therefore put on display for the public. As I approach the Barn Owl display I am acutely aware that a Barn Owl would be able to hear my heartbeat easily from this distance. For that moment, the Barn Owl would know me in all my slight sounds and movements more intimately than any person in my life. I strain to observe the sleeping Barn Owl huddled in the corner of a wooden box, hiding from the loud people and the overwhelming sun. His eyes open into slight slits in his white, contoured face. The bird swayed back and forth rhythmically, bobbing its head slightly up and down. It looks like a wind chime in the breeze, moving with intentional laziness. He could have been rocking himself to sleep.

Owls have been known around the world as harbingers of death, but have also come to represent wisdom. The Barn Owl more frequently plays the role of the former. With its

tendencies to nest in abandoned buildings, belfries and barns, the Barn Owl's presence led people to believe the places were haunted. Mysterious movements in the night and human-like screams would give any superstitious farmer nightmares. In English folklore, Barn Owls were the bird of death. They were William Wordsworth's death omen of choice. Many people truly believed that the screech of a Barn Owl was a sign of imminent death. Barn Owl screeches were also thought to predict that a storm or change in the weather was coming. In perhaps the most gruesome of the customs, farmers thought that nailing an owl to a barn door would protect the livestock within.

The Barn Owl is an elusive, ghostly bird with a unique look and sound. They have white, heart-shaped faces and huge black eyes like gaping holes. Aside from the white face and chest, barn owls are tawny brown, in patches that look like brown and gray cinders scattered across feathers. Their screeches, which bear a resemblance to human screams, have been spooking farmers since the first barn was built. Owls have primary feathers with soft edges to make them silent fliers, who use their razor sharp beaks and talons to catch prey under cover of night.

One morning, late into my teen years, I was stirred from sleep by a familiar and yet unfamiliar sound. Hooting, at regular intervals coming from somewhere very, very close. In my bunk bed on the second story of our house, I knew that it could only be coming from right above me- there was an owl on our roof outside. Although I was exhausted and every inch of my body resisted rising from the bed, I pulled myself up and got dressed hurriedly. I could still hear the hooting as I got ready to go outside into the dim, pre-dawn glow and cool, dew-filled air. By the time I was opening the front door, quickly but quietly, I had a feeling this wasn't going to work. The owl had heard me. I saw a shadow swoop down from our roof and the same hooting come from another tree across our neighbor's yard. As often happens, I lost myself in the pursuit of the

bird. I cut across two neighbors' yards, and my walk turned into a run as I lost track of the sound, and the shadow. Frustrated, I returned to my house.

Many people assume that a Barn Owl's strongest asset is their sight, since they have forward-facing (binocular) vision that is very sensitive to light and movement. It is true that Barn Owls have huge eyes, taking up so much space in their skull that their eyes do not rotate at all inside their head, but are fixed facing straight forward. However, their real strength is their incredible hearing. Their ear openings are asymmetrical, one higher on the skull and one lower, so that they can easily triangulate the sound of their prey. Their disk-shaped faces are specifically adapted to collecting more sound waves. It is thought that a Barn Owl can hear a mouse's heartbeat from 30 feet away. This is how they locate their prey in complete darkness. Every inch of them is built to hunt. The Barn Owl is known for the bloodstains they leave behind after killing their prey.

In reality, Barn Owls are not a carrier of evil spirits, but creatures with extraordinary nocturnal hunting abilities. They are indeed a symbol of death, but mostly to field mice. Before owls were symbols of death, they were symbols of wisdom. The ancient Greeks associated owls with the Athena, the goddess of wisdom. This is how we know them today, in cartoons and children's TV shows. They are schoolteachers, sages, or scholars. There is a shelf in my bedroom dedicated to little owl statues wearing caps and gowns that I received from friends and family upon high school graduation.

My father encouraged my interest, and often took me to the forest preserve that bordered our subdivision to look for owls. We would go at dawn and dusk, when owls are often active. We would follow owl-like sounds up to treelines, but they would always slip away. These were my very first birdwatching experiences. It wasn't long before I was keeping track of other birds too. I remember walking through my neighborhood at night with a friend, a few years later, and seeing an unmistakable brown bird fly over my head, making a brief dip under a streetlight before hitting the indistinguishable dark of the trees. I couldn't believe how lucky it was. I will forever have the image in my mind of the owl just beneath the fluorescent light, flying silently across the twilight sky.

Owls will always remind me of my lifelong passion for birds. They are an essential part of who I am, as clear as my DNA. I can conjure their shapes and movements in my mind as clearly as I can conjure my friends and family. I see the swivel of their necks, the liquid appearance of their feathers, the curl of their talons and the beats of their wings. They haunt me, and I wish I could haunt them.

The Barn Owl represents more than death or wisdom. It represents the power and mystery of the natural world. It evokes the ancient fears of our ancestors, trying to ward off death and darkness, as well as the promise of knowledge and enlightenment. Life and death are both within the territory of the Barn Owl, but I learned that their territory in Illinois is receding. These creatures may reside in nightmares and daydreams, but in reality they will always be barely out of reach. The idea and the reality of the Barn Owl are quite different. What I thought of as familiar is really not familiar at all.

## Conclusion

My passion for birds has shaped my life's journey. I have learned so much from birds throughout my life, and they have given me a sense of peace and wonder that I couldn't achieve otherwise. At the beginning of the summer I took a bike ride through the forest preserve near my house with my binoculars, not intending to search for any of the birds I wanted to write about, but to accustom myself to observing birds. As I watched sparrows and blackbirds flit back and forth between trees, I was filled with inspiration, creative energy, and excitement for the future. Simply being in nature and in the presence of birds is a way to reset myself, and help me focus on writing. When creating this project I simply followed my instincts and wrote about the most interesting and inspiring characters I know- Midwestern birds.

Birdwatching is a meditative experience. I never got a chance to do it properly as a young person because every time I went to a forest or bird-friendly nature preserve with my family, we focused on hiking. I would have to either keep up the pace or be left behind. Birdwatching is best done without a set destination or route, using only your eyes and ears as a guide. There is no incentive to stay on the path. The further I wander into the wilderness, the better. In the Midwest that sometimes means crossing a field to reach the line of trees on the other side, or move further downriver where the shore is overgrown. I move deeper and deeper into nature until I can't help but hear its inhabitants. Suddenly, I see birds everywhere- a heron creeping by on the lakeshore, or a group of white pelicans I had mistaken for glimmers of sunlight on the rippling water. What used to be the wind rustling the leaves becomes the flapping of wings.

My whole life I have grown up with birds around me. Not just any birds, but those of the Midwest, mostly coming in earth tones: brown, grey and navy blue, with the occasional red and white. In some ways, I feel, they reflect the stereotypical human resident of the region- practical,

amiable, and humble. You will not find birds who have complicated mating dances or extravagant colors like those in South America, or the commanding, regal presence of the large birds in Africa. Instead you have birds leading simple lives, like the quiet but dignified Great Blue Heron, or the loud, cheerful Red-winged Blackbird. Sandhill Cranes, who migrate through the Midwest in spring and summer months, enjoy visiting the rolling fields of soybeans and corn, before the plants burst forth from the ground in green. They congregate along rivers, and at prairie edges. Their dark, sandy-grey streaks of feathers align with the vertical grasses native to the Midwest.

This project gave me an opportunity to use my last free summer to the fullest. Now that the chill of autumn has arrived, I am grateful that I was able to spend so much time outside. I was able to pursue interesting birds, some that I didn't have a lot of experience with, and learn about them. Seeing the homes and habits of Midwestern birds helped me reflect on the end of my college career, and the new beginning I face when I graduate. I work to find my voice through writing, and learn how to balance my creative muse with skills that I will need in my career. I believe that my writing changed over the course of this project, and so has my view on the birds I encounter. My changed views on the birds in turn changed my view of the world. Humans are not the only creatures on earth that have communities, neighborhoods, languages, and social conventions. These traits have roots in the natural world, and through the birds I was able to take a step back from humanity's version and see the bigger picture, the similarities and the differences. I saw myself from a bird's eye view.