RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Bald Coot and Screaming Loon

Niall Edworthy

About the Book

You don't have to be a dedicated birdwatcher to be a bird lover. Millions of us love the sight and sound of them and delight in the fact that wherever we are in the world, even in the desert or the Arctic, we are surrounded by birds. And yet even the most educated among us know very little about their remarkable behaviour, incredible diversity and the story of their evolution. While worthy tomes provide information about habitat, appearance, feeding, number of eggs laid and so forth, very few have succeeded in conveying the magic and mystery of birds.

Why is it that only male birds sing? . . . If birds have such small brains, how come they know where to go when migrating thousands of miles? . . . Are birds really descended from dinosaurs? . . . How do birds have sex?

This handbook sets about answering every interesting question there is to ask about birds. There are over 10,000 species in the world, including over 500 in Britain, some rare and endangered, some bizarre and beautiful, others common and familiar. As this captivating and often humorous handbook reveals, all of them are fascinating when we stop to peer into their truly curious world.

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BALD COOT AND SCREAMING LOON

A Handbook for the Curious Bird Lover

Niall Edworthy

eden project books

To my godchildren,
Hope Farquhar
and
Charlie Barnett

Among those [bird lovers] I know of are a Prime Minister, a President, three Secretaries of State, a charwoman, two policemen, two Kings, two Royal Dukes, one Prince, one Princess, a Communist, seven Labour, one Liberal, six Conservative Members of Parliament, several farm-labourers earning ninety shillings a week, a rich man who earns two or three times more than that every hour of the day, at least forty-six schoolmasters, an engine-driver, a postman, and an upholsterer.

BRITISH ORNITHOLOGIST, NATURALIST, BROADCASTER AND AUTHOR JAMES FISHER (1912–70)

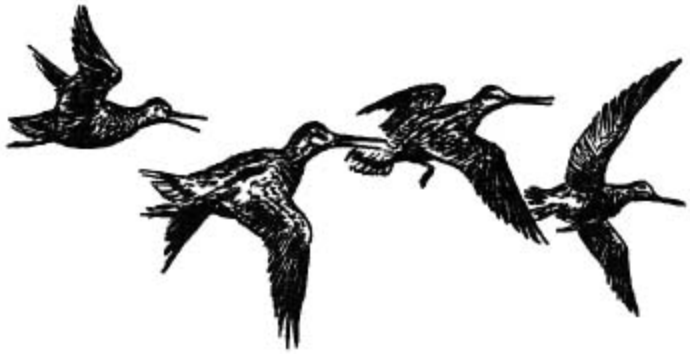
I hope you love birds, too. It is economical. It saves going to Heaven.

US POET EMILY DICKINSON (1830–86)

INTRODUCTION

AS A YOUNG TEENAGER in the late seventies I spent the entire school holidays one spring living in the shrubbery of my garden, painstakingly capturing images of dozens of different species of birds. Using my dad's 1959-vintage Kodak Reflex S with 135mm telephoto lens, for two and a half weeks I snapped shots of all manner of finches, tits and other commonplace garden birds, and occasionally slightly more exotic visitors such as nuthatches, tree creepers, a couple of black-caps and a green woodpecker, which was a rare sight even then.

Day after day I tiptoed and crawled among roses, camellias and lilac, caked in mud and streaked with thorn scratches, in search of the perfect image. I saw myself as a cross between David Bailey and David Attenborough, a martyr to the twin causes of art and natural history. I had found not one hobby but two, and it was exciting to be able to combine them in one major project.



At the end of the first week, I carefully opened the camera to remove the 72 precious exposures . . . and saw that I had forgotten to put in a roll of film.

No problem, these things happen, I thought – even to professionals. The captain of the *Titanic*, after all, was no

amateur. I went back to the undergrowth to continue my communion with nature and set about capturing a series of even more stunning images than the ones that, sadly, had been lost to future generations of art and nature lovers.

For a further week or so I worked the shrubbery – the trampled tulips sacrificed for the wider cause – searching for the perfect angle from which to secure sometimes thoughtful, sometimes playful but always exquisite images of blue tit families on peanut feeders, thrushes pulling worms from the moist, warming soil and cocky robins sitting on the fence waiting to peck out the eyes of their neighbourhood rivals.

This time there were no silly technical errors regarding the installation of the film roll and, just to be on the safe side, I took the package of film to the pillar box myself and sent it off to Happy Snaps, or whatever they were called, to be developed.

A few days later, the postman handed me a large colourful envelope containing my 72 brilliant prints . . . Only there didn’t appear to be any. I turned the envelope upside down and shook out its contents. Leaflets, brochures and pre-paid envelopes tumbled onto the doormat, but no photos. The imbecile envelope-licker at Crappy Snaps had failed to lick the envelope properly and the photos must have fallen out en route! (He was probably too busy licking the windows in his office.) No wonder Britain had recently become the first Western country to apply for a loan from the International Monetary Fund. We were a nation of incompetent fatheads.

In that one moment of awful disappointment, my interest in birds and photography vanished.

By the end of the day, I had returned to what teenagers did best back then, namely beating up my brother, admiring Kevin Keegan and watching *It's A Knockout*. Birds were just stupid. They could keep their fancy colourful plumage, extraordinary flying capabilities and magical migration skills – the sad, ironic truth was that they didn't have brains big enough to realize that they were just, to quote my disillusioned teenage self, 'peanut-eating arseholes', one up the food chain from the insects.

If all 10,000 of the world's bird species had become extinct over the following 20 years, I can honestly say I don't think I would have noticed. I buried birds deep down in my consciousness, imagining, so help me God, that they would never take wing in my life again. I don't have a single memory of an encounter with a bird during that time. They were just there, flapping and fretting about in the background, no more or less interesting to me than the trees in which they perched or the skies in which they flew.

As for the people who wasted their lives watching and recording the silly creatures, well, they were just plain weird. A twitcher was just a trainspotter in slightly superior rainwear and like his cousin, the flasher, he sported Dark Age quantities of facial hair and spent an unhealthy amount of time skulking around in the undergrowth of large municipal parks, beauty spots and coastal paths. He was an ‘enthusiast’ and, as such, a crashing bore to be avoided at all costs. I have since discovered that the term ‘twitcher’ is used disparagingly by the true nature lovers within the birding community to describe the highly competitive box-ticker – a sub-species of the trainspotter – who drops whatever he’s doing and drives very fast to the other end of the country upon news from the ‘twitcher-telegraph’ that a Kentish plover has been spotted in a puddle in Suffolk. To the twitcher, a rare bird is not a creature of uncommon beauty and curiosity but a name and number to be logged and shown off to rivals.

Quite how I came to rediscover a love and fascination for birds is more difficult to explain than how I went into denial about them as a spotty teenager almost a quarter of a century earlier. There has been no single trigger, no heart-stopping encounter with a golden eagle, no sighting of an exotic hoopoe or bee-eater in my back garden, just a gradual reawakening to the magical enigma of these remarkable creatures.

A major factor was certainly moving from the city to the countryside. The garden of our city home comprised 16 patio slabs, three high bare walls and a plastic sandpit. Ants and rats were the only wildlife in residence. The garden of our new home, though not large, is filled with trees, shrubs and plants and backs onto a large field that stretches north up the slopes of the South Downs. The wildlife abounds. I see it and hear it all day long. It is a special kind of fool that moves to a new world and fails to be curious about his surroundings; it’s been impossible not to take an interest in

the creatures with which I share my plot of land. Thus mild curiosity turned to passing interest; passing interest swelled into mounting fascination and mounting fascination ballooned into a child-like enthralment bordering on obsession. Next stop, divorce and the madhouse.

Today, our garden is full of feeders, bird tables and baths; I have two pairs of binoculars – one upstairs and one downstairs – and over 100 books on birds, including a handful of pocket guides which I leave on windowsills for quick identification. I squint into hedgerows and stand motionless in fields and woods like a man who has forgotten what it is he is meant to be doing. My friends are baffled. My wife looks on sympathetically, wondering what on earth has happened to me.

What is it about birds? How has it come to pass that the RSPB, Europe's largest conservation charity, has over one million members on its books? (And there are millions more Britons who consider themselves to be bird lovers but are not members of a dedicated society.)

For me, it's not so much the great beauty and variety of birds – although that is undoubtedly some of the attraction – nor is it that these creatures can fly, although that too will always be part of the magic. Nor is it that twice a year, every year, billions of them migrate thousands of miles, using the stars and the sun, the earth's magnetic field and changes in the weather to guide them to exactly the place to which they and their forebears have been travelling since prehistory – although that too will for ever remain one of nature's great dramas and mysteries.

Many bird species are under grave threat of extinction in the coming decades and the urge to help them survive is a powerful one, but again that is only part of the appeal. So too is the knowledge that there are dozens of species out there, most of them in what remains of our rainforests, that have yet to be discovered.

As we live in the so-called Information Age, the impression has been put about that there is little today that human understanding has not yet grasped. Yes, there are hundreds of problems facing civilization and the environment, but it's a lack of will and resources that prevents us from solving them. Ignorance isn't the issue. Birds, however, continue to be something of a mystery and this inscrutability certainly explains some of their charm. Birds don't give up their secrets easily. Wild birds are difficult to study as their natural behaviour cannot be observed in captivity. To understand a bird, you have to study it in its wild home and – as they are flighty creatures – that can be difficult.

Until I began to read up on the subject, it was my understanding that the boffins had cracked all the riddles of the natural sciences, including the strange habits of birds that had so intrigued our ancestors over the centuries and had fired the imagination of so many of our poets, musicians and artists. The mystique of these creatures, I'd thought, had been laid bare by scientific research. Not so, it turns out. It has been a thrill to discover that there is plenty about birds that scientists still cannot explain and plenty more of which they are only half certain. It's exciting that there are still many things about our world we don't understand, that not everything has yet been conquered by human progress and scientific endeavour. There are still outposts resisting the advance of knowledge.

Unlike most other animals, birds play out their lives right before our very eyes, from birth to death. This year I have watched a pair of collared doves raising their chicks in an alarmingly scruffy and unstable-looking nest in the little satellite dish screwed onto the eastern wall of the house. I have watched sparrows and finches mobbing a piratical magpie in a frenzy of flapping and screeching and, when they appeared to be losing the Battle of the Bird Table, the two doves swooped down from their nest and drove off the invader.

I have seen the breathtaking spectacle of a pair of red kite, a species recovering from the brink of extinction in Britain, soaring above the field behind. A little egret, another rare species making a comeback, lives by the small river a few hundred yards from the front door. Kingfishers live or visit there too and every now and then I catch sight of one of these shy, jumpy creatures as it darts for cover in a blur of turquoise and orange.

Death stalks a bird throughout its life. Only a modest fraction of our common garden birds survive into a second year, most of them falling prey to starvation, injury, disease or predation. In one spring day, I saw a young wood pigeon

taken by a sparrowhawk and an overconfident robin snatched from mid-air by a cat. And yet the effort they put into their lives, the urgency to live, is astonishing and uplifting. Just watch blue tits making hundreds of trips in a single day to and from the flower beds to build their nests for the breeding season.

In the late winter and spring, I am woken every morning by the insane chatter of the dawn chorus, with so many songs and calls filling the air that if I close my eyes it's easy to imagine that I have woken up under the rainforest canopy. These are the sounds of love and war as the males burst with song to attract the females and see off their rivals for the territory.

Two or three years ago, I would have seen but not noticed, heard but not listened to any of these remarkable performances of nature. They are not laid on for our enjoyment, but they are there if we want them.

If you take an interest in birds, then you must take an interest in their habitat – the world in which they live – and if you do that then you have assumed a curiosity and concern about the wider environment. To be interested in the environment is to be interested in our own habitat, and once that starts to hold your attention you have become interested in the future. You have become interested in life itself. Birds, for me, have confirmed that ours is a life worth living.

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Dinosaurs in Disguise?

HOW BIRDS CAME TO BE

Are birds really descended from dinosaurs?

The answer is somewhere between very probably and almost certainly, yet there is still some debate because the evidence about how and when birds evolved is not conclusive. To some ornithologists, on the other hand, the mystery is not whether birds are descended from dinosaurs but whether they *are* dinosaurs.

The bird–dinosaur debate began with the discovery in 1860 of a fossil in a limestone quarry in Bavaria that astounded the scientific community of the day. The 145-million-year-old fossil is a crow-sized skeleton covered in feathers and it has been so well preserved that even from a picture you can see that the creature was part bird, part reptile. It was dubbed ‘Archaeopteryx’, meaning ancient wing, and it is considered to be one of the most important fossil finds ever. The feathers, which are unique to birds, are obvious but the skeleton is very unbird-like with its long bony tail, teeth in place of a beak and claws on the wings, giving it a strong resemblance to the running lizard dinosaurs. If there had been no feathers with Archaeopteryx, it would have been wrongly classified as a small dinosaur, just as five previous finds had been. One was displayed in a museum as a running lizard dinosaur for decades before it was realized it was in fact Archaeopteryx.

The majority of ornithologists contending that birds are descended from dinosaurs point out that the two classes of creature share almost 100 physical characteristics, which is far more evidence than they would need to prove their case in a court of law. And in the last 15 years or so, archaeologists have unearthed even more evidence, including dinosaurs with bird-like features and primitive birds with dinosaur-like features.

I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment, while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.

US NATURALIST AND WRITER

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

(1817–62)

The evidence, in both living birds and fossils, to support the theory that birds have evolved from two-legged, running dinosaurs is highly convincing, but it doesn’t quite clinch the argument. There are still gaps in the fossil record and other small pockets of doubt that the sceptics, like woodpeckers to a tree trunk, cling on to for the time being – if for no other reason than the sake of a good scientific quarrel. They believe that birds evolved from four-legged reptiles that lived in trees, insisting that any similarity between birds and dinosaurs is an example of convergent evolution, whereby two distinct, unrelated groups of creature coincidentally grow to resemble each other because they happen to live in similar environments.

Why not fur or scales like the rest of us?

Among the many characteristics that birds share with their putative dinosaur ancestors and with present-day reptiles, one of the most telling about their genetic relationship is a protein called keratin. The scaly skin of a reptile and the feathers of a bird are both composed of this robust fibrous compound, which strongly suggests that the latter evolved from the former. What's more, birds still have scales on the lower parts of their legs and feet. The theory is that dinosaurs (or other reptiles) with frayed scales may have had a genetic advantage because they were able to trap air and thus keep warmer than the reptiles with standard scales, which had to wait for the sun to climb high into the sky to warm themselves by lying in its rays. The frayed scales, which slowly grew in length into feathers, helped conserve their owners' energy, enabling the creatures to get to food sources first in the early morning. The sunbathers, meanwhile, will have been weaker in the morning and more sluggish in the ensuing scrap for food. Some of these latter species probably died out while their frayed and feathered cousins moved onwards and upwards.

Taking Archaeopteryx as the first bird, scientists estimate that a minimum of 150,000 to 175,000 different species of birds have existed throughout history, though some put the figure as high as 1.5 million. There are approximately 10,000 species alive today.

There are other advantages to plumage that will have added even greater selective pressure: feathers gave birds camouflage and features to display during courtship, and above all the ability to fly.

Taking the Evolutionary Express

Scientists are constantly amazed by the speed at which birds have mutated into a new form to suit an environment. Incontrovertible proof of this can be seen on the Galapagos Islands, which emerged from the Pacific Ocean floor to the west of Ecuador following a volcanic eruption roughly five million years ago (a short time in evolutionary terms). Birds began to arrive not long afterwards and, without any predators there to worry about, they quickly settled into a cosy existence, gorging on the abundant fish to be found around the islands and doing what they're programmed to do, namely reproducing to continue their genetic line, as efficiently and actively as possible. The islands' cormorants no longer needed wings and over time they grew shorter and shorter as the creatures evolved into the flightless birds we see there today.

The Archaeopteryx's Song
I am only half out of this rock of scales.
What good is armour when you want to fly?
My tail is like a stony pedestal
and not a rudder. If I sit back on it
I sniff winds, clouds, rains, fogs where
I'd be, where I'd be flying, be flying high.

Dinosaurs are spicks and
all I see when I look back
is tardy turdy bonehead swamps
whose scruples are dumb tons.
Damnable plates and plaques
Can’t even keep out ticks.
They think when they make the ground thunder
as they lumber for a horn-lock or a rut
that someone is afraid, that everyone is afraid,
but no one is afraid. The lords of creation
are in my mate’s next egg’s next egg’s next egg,
stegosaur. It’s feathers I need, more feathers
for the life to come. And these iron teeth
I want away, and a smooth beak
to cut the air. And these claws
on my wings, what use are they
except to drag me down, do you imagine
I am ever going to crawl again?
When I first left that crag
and flapped low and heavy over the ravine
I saw past present and future
like a dying tyrannosaur
and skimmed it with a hiss.
I will teach my sons and daughters to live
on mist and fire and fly to the stars.

SCOTTISH POET EDWIN MORGAN (1920–)

Evolution just a doddle

To many people, the feral pigeon, a familiar sight waddling along the pavements and squares of our cities and towns, is an ugly, unhygienic bird, a ‘rat with wings’ that should be shunned or even exterminated. But even its many detractors would have to acknowledge that the bird is one of the most successful species on the planet, with a rare ability to adapt with great speed to new environments and thereby ensure its survival – indeed increase. Such is its adaptability that the only place in the world where you won’t find the feral pigeon is on the polar icecaps. It has

colonized everywhere else, which is no mean achievement for a species whose natural habitat was a rocky coastline until man began to domesticate the bird about the time of William the Conqueror. Since then, the birds have slowly moved into our towns where the food is plentiful and where the buildings provide similar, but much warmer homes than wind-blasted cliffs. No relation of the wood pigeon that nests in trees, the ‘feral’ descended from the rock dove, but it is now extremely rare to find them living on our coastlines. Most creatures take hundreds of thousands, even millions of years to leave one environment and adapt to another, but the unfancied feral pigeon has done it in under a millennium. So next time you walk past a ‘feral’ as it plucks some cold French fries out of a bin, raise your hat and give it a nod of respect.

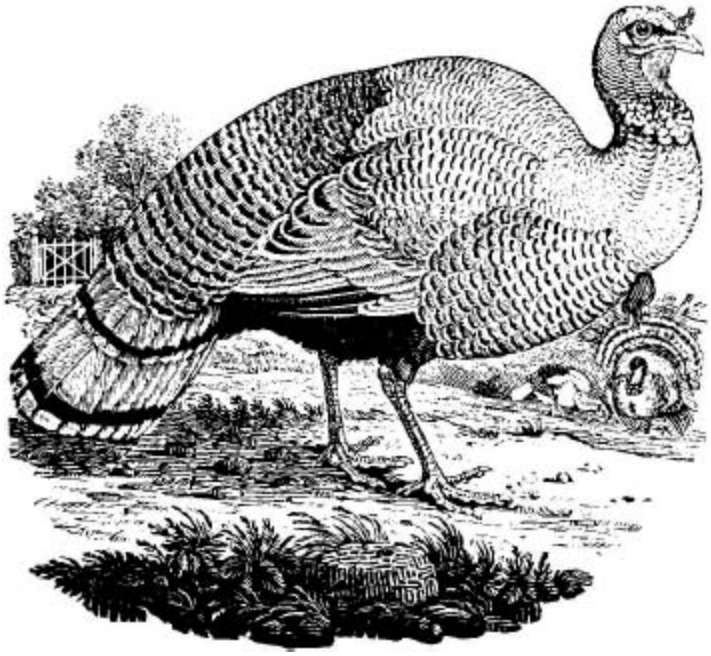
The raven and the dove are the first birds to be mentioned by name in the Bible:

‘Then it came about at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; And he sent out a raven, and it flew here and there until the water was dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove from him, to see if the water was abated from the face of the land; But the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the ark, for the water was on the surface of all the earth. Then he put out his hand and took her, and brought her into the ark to himself. So he waited yet another seven days; and again he sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth. Then he waited yet another seven days, and sent out the dove; but she did not return to him again.’

Genesis 8:6–12

***I value my garden more for being full of blackbirds than cherries, and very frankly give them fruit for their songs*.**

ENGLISH ESSAYIST JOSEPH ADDISON (1672–1719)



‘A turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels. In so far as God has partly revealed to us an angelic world, he has partly told us what an angel means. But God has never told us what a turkey means. And if you go and stare at a live turkey for an hour or two, you will find by the end of it that the enigma has rather increased than diminished.’

ENGLISH WRITER G. K. CHESTERTON (1874–1936)

Beastly Business

Bestiaries, popular in Europe in the Middle Ages, were books containing elaborate illustrations, descriptions of animals and often moral lessons to be drawn from their behaviour. Below are extracts from a bestiary from http://bestiary.ca

THE PARROT IS A BIRD *found in India that can be taught to speak like a man. It learns better when it is young, but if it will not learn one must hit it over the head with an iron bar. It can say ‘ave’ by nature, but must be taught all other words. Its beak is so hard that if the parrot falls from a height it can break its fall with its beak. Parrots are coloured green with a purple-red collar; they hate the rain because the water makes their colours appear ugly. There are two*

kinds of parrot: the kind with three toes have a mean disposition, but the ones with six toes are gentle.

THE OWL HAUNTS RUINS *and flies only at night; preferring to live in darkness it hides from the light. It is a dirty, slothful bird that pollutes its own nest with its dung. It is often found near tombs and lives in caves. Some say it flies backwards. When other birds see it hiding during the day, they noisily attack it to betray its hiding place. Owls cry out when they sense that someone is about to die*.

THE NIGHTINGALE HAS A SWEET SONG, *and loves to sing. It sings to relieve the tedium as it sits on its nest through the night. At dawn it sings so enthusiastically that it almost dies. Sometimes nightingales compete with each other with their songs, and the one that loses the competition often dies*.

THE HOOPOE *is said to be a filthy bird that collects human dung and builds its nest with it, and eats bad-smelling excrement. It also likes to live around tombs. It is further said that if the blood of the hoopoe is rubbed on a sleeping man, devils will try to strangle him.*

AT NIGHT, CRANES *take turns keeping watch for enemies. The one who is on duty holds a stone up with one claw; if the watcher falls asleep the stone will fall and wake him. If the wind is strong cranes swallow sand or carry stones for ballast. Cranes are the enemy of pygmies, with whom they are constantly at war*.

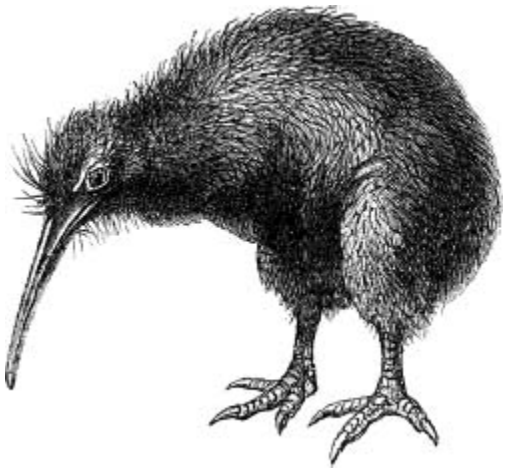
THE FLESH OF THE PEACOCK *is so hard that it does not rot, and can hardly be cooked in fire or digested by the liver. Its voice is terrible, causing fear in the listener when the bird unexpectedly begins to cry out. Its head is like a snake, its breast is sapphire-coloured, it has red feathers in its wings, and has a long green tail adorned with eyes. If it receives praise for its beauty, it raises its tail, leaving its rear parts bare. When it suddenly awakes it cries out, because it thinks its beauty has been lost. It is a bird with great foresight. Its feet are very ugly, so the peacock refuses to fly high in order to keep its feet hidden*.

AS YOUNG PELICANS GROW, *they begin to strike their parents in the face with their beaks. Though the pelican has great love for its young, it strikes back and kills them. After three days, the mother pierces her side or her breast and lets her blood fall on the dead birds, and thus revives them. Some say it is the male pelican that kills the young and revives them with his blood*.

A rare old bird indeed

The kiwi is a mighty queer creature, a fine example of how evolution will quickly dump some characteristics and

replace them with others if left undisturbed for a few million years. Once upon a time, the ancestors of this endangered nocturnal bird could fly perfectly well, but today it has more in common with a hedgehog than with its feathered cousins. Found only in New Zealand, where it is strictly protected by law, this friendly, chicken-sized bird has wings that have been reduced by lack of use to no more than two-inch feathered stumps. In a land with no mammals to prey on it – until man arrived – the kiwi, like its flightless cousins the ostrich and the emu, had no reason to fly. Spending so much time on the ground, it developed an incredible sense of smell, using its long, slender, flexible bill, which has nostrils at the lower end, to forage for insects, grubs and worms on the forest floor – just as a pig or a hedgehog does.



Unlike its moa cousins and countless other species of New Zealand birds, the kiwi managed to survive the twin onslaught of man and his land mammals for two main reasons. First, it is highly alert to possible danger and although it may look ungainly it can outrun a human being. Then, if it does fail to escape its predator, it can deliver a flesh-tearing blow with its sharp, three-toed feet that will make even the hungriest or most determined interloper think twice about having a second go.