Photographic Essays of Place ~Birds: Masters of the Sky~

by Roy Beckemeyer

"You wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down." — Toni Morrison

We humans are very much creatures of the earth, even though there are among us those who have always looked skyward, watched in awe the creatures that have mastered that tenuous medium, longed to take to the air. For that reason alone, birds make wonderful subjects to contemplate and study, draw, photograph, paint. For those of us inclined to want to know what makes everything tick, those of us who want to understand how feathers flick air out of the way or sleek a bird's passage through atmosphere or water, how those altered chest muscles allow birds to whip lift and thrust from the stuff we others can only breathe, pictures of birds become portraits honoring the lineage of these royal potentates of the sky.

Steller's Sea Eagles (next page) breed in Far Eastern Russia, feed on salmon, and are among the largest of the fish eagles. They soar through the same air that wafts

smoke and steam from Kamchatka volcanos, that lifts spume from the Bering Sea where salty waves mix with mountain snowmelt carried down by the Zhupanova River. This eagle, taking off from its perch, knots its massive breast muscles and pushes its broad wings against the air.

Steller's Sea Eagle leaving its perch, Zhupanova River, Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia.

At its wing tips, primary pinion feathers separate and act as individual winglets, pulling the air around them in tiny vortices that help to maintain the lift of the wing out to its end. The hollow wing bones bend under the load of air pressure, and the bird lifts off with a whoosh.

Further east in the Bering Sea, the Alaskan Aleutian Island Archipelago arches westward from the New World to the Old. There, in the cold waters off Little Tanaga Island, I took a picture of a lone Horned Puffin from a bobbing Zodiac boat. To me, this picture typifies the life of northern

Horned Puffin off Little Tanaga Island, Aleutian Chain, Bering Sea.

seabirds: specks of feathered life adrift in the cold air and frigid waters of the northern hemisphere. The puffins dive and fish for food, and spend most of the year out at sea. To them, the boundless stretches of water are their home, their place.

Southern Giant Petrel with chick, South Georgia Island, Southern Atlantic Ocean.

At the other end of the world, after heading east and south from Ushuaia, Argentina for a 2 and a half day sail, we arrive at hundred mile long South Georgia Island. Here, on a misty slope we find nesting sea birds. A Southern Giant Petrel, called *stinkpot* by sailors for her ability to spit foul-

smelling stomach secretions at predators, sits quietly on her nest. Suddenly, a homely chick wriggles out from under her to see what is going on here.

A few meters away, a striking and even larger seabird is also on her nest (next page). This is the Wandering Albatross, majestic flyer with a wingspan of up to 11 feet, three times that of the stinkpot. We are seeing this bird for one of the brief periods of its life that it is on land at all. The rest of its time will be spent in the air. The Wandering Albatross is the consummate aviator of the bird world; one individual was recorded to have flown 6,000 km in 12 days. We had spent hours on our way to South Georgia watching them soaring behind our ship using the air currents over the waves to dip and dive and climb without ever flapping their wings. These birds are truly denizens of the air, spending much more time aloft than on the earth. The sky itself is the bioregion of the large seabirds of the southern oceans.

Above: Wandering Albatross on her nest, South Georgia Island, Southern Atlantic Ocean.
Below: King Penguins, South Georgia Island, Southern Atlantic Ocean.

And then there are the penguins (previous page). Here feathers take on a new role, wings become refashioned for moving them through water, and these birds, although they, too, partake of the ocean's bounty, cannot fly through crystalline skies. Rather, they are creatures of the cold sea, literally flying through that denser medium with a grace that rivals any fish. On land they appear majestic when standing, lift their haughty heads with regal demeanor. When they move on land their grace is abandoned, and they are reduced to waddling along on their too short legs. They have sacrificed flight, walking, have no pretense at any form of locomotion but the perfection of swimming beneath the sea.

There are lesser bodies of water to be put to use as well. A great assortment of waterfowl wing their migratory way up and down North and Central America and visit the innumerable lakes, ponds, rivers, and bays. They seem to concentrate their existence at the interface of water and air. They float, paddle, dive and dabble. Here (next page) is a fledgling Ring- necked Duck on a high-altitude pond in Rocky Mountain National Park learning the ways of surface

tension and waves; I love the look of fragile vulnerability of the little bundle of fluff:

Fledgling Ring-necked Duck, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

Birds of prey have a special presence: penetrating and piercing eyes, needle-sharp, vise-grip claws, a form tailored for maneuverability and attack. They traverse the sky like a bolt of lightning, can make that sky something to be feared.

The South African Black-shouldered Kite (next page) works the grasslands and savannahs and specializes in small rodents and insects. This individual, natty in white

Black-shouldered Kite, Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa.

spats and its myriad tuxedo shades of gray, uses a fence post as its butcher's block, bloody bits of its prey anoint its beak, complement the fiery orange-red of its eye.

Another grassland specialist is the Prairie Falcon of the North American west, a predator of small mammals and birds. This individual (next page) wintered for several years in the heart of Wichita, Kansas, on an urban golf course bordered by the Arkansas River. Here it poses against the intense blue sky of the Kansas early spring sky as if it knew that background was the perfect foil for its delicate ferocity.

Prairie Falcon, Wichita, Kansas.

Now that we have arrived back at the grasslands, here are a sequence of photos of specialists of savannahs and prairies:

A denizen of prairie wetlands, the Yellow-headed Blackbird male in breeding plumage has a rich golden head and an exclamation mark of white on its wing. This one (next page) was riding the wind-whipped stems of cattail near Quivira National Wildlife Refuge's Big Salt Marsh in Stafford County, Kansas. I love the apparent bulk of the bird balanced on the slender plant stem.

Yellow-headed Blackbird, Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Kansas.

Co-inhabiting these marshes but usually subservient to the Yellow-headed is the Red-winged Blackbird. This male (next page) with the red and pale yellow of his epaulettes displayed, is perched in the same reed bed as the Yellow-headed, and was photographed on the same day in May at Quivira NWR. One of the first signs of winter's end in Kansas is the Red-wing's raspy song/call arising on the

cold morning air. This fellow is spreading his tail feathers and raising his crown feathers and telling it like it is!

Red-winged Blackbird, Quivira NWR, Kansas.

The Pin-tailed Wydah of Africa is a seed- eating bird

Pin-tailed Wydah, Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa.

of grasslands, savannahs, and scrubland. The male has a tail longer than his body, black and white breeding plumage, and a red bill to set it all off. The wydah is a brood parasite; it lays its eggs in the nests of finches and lets the host bird feed both its chicks and the wydah's. Brood parasitism is a character shared by the Brown-headed Cowbird and Yellow-billed Cuckoo here in Kansas.

Kansas is home to two species of meadowlarks, the Eastern and the Western. They are difficult to separate by

sight, easy to separate by song. They are ubiquitous in Kansas, their calls part of the sound mosaic of backroads in

Eastern Meadowlark, Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Kansas.

the state, and seem at times to be almost everywhere, perched on fences, fence posts, telephone wires. With his bright yellow eye shadow, throat, chest and belly, and that black chevron, the meadowlark makes a bold fashion statement.

A completely different kind of bird that is also often found perching on fence posts is the Upland Sandpiper.

Upland Sandpiper, Ellsworth County, Kansas.

Kansas and Oklahoma are at the southern end of its breeding range. This shore bird prefers upland grasslands over coastal habitats for its breeding grounds. The photo was taken along a gravel road in north-central Kansas. The male's territorial call sounds like a wolf whistle, and is often made while the bird is gliding in for a landing.

The avian community never fails to fascinate: Their varied forms, the patterns of their feathers, their myriad behaviors, their ability to migrate, to fly, swim, walk the earth, dive, their long evolution from the dinosaurs of the Jurassic—all demonstrate how birds have mastered their places: the ones here on the surface of the Earth, and the one above it.

Roy Beckemeyer of Wichita is a contributing editor of *Konza Journal*. He and his wife Pat, married for 56 years, have traveled extensively, and have visited all seven continents in their wanderings. He is author of the 2015 Kansas Notable Book Award winner *Music I Once Could Dance To* (2014, Coal City Press). He blogs at https://phanaerozoic.blog/.