

Few would deny their inherent beauty – what Viscount Grey of Fallodon called “The Charm of Birds” – a myriad of colour, form and sound. In his book of the same name he wrote, “The plumage of birds, infinite in diversity and beauty: their ways on land and water, and especially their ways in the air: their residence or migration: their mating, courtship, and care of their young: the eggs, so plain or so variously marked: the nests, so curiously made, differing so much in structure and in place chosen for them: and above all, the song of birds.” Look through any art gallery or picture studio to see birds as subjects for art. It is important that we don’t try to disguise the aesthetic appeal of birds. It is nothing to feel ashamed of. The protection of another life-form as a “living treasure” is perhaps a greater imperative than the worshipping of our fellow humans and their artifacts.

They represent freedom. Creatures which can come and go at will, their power of flight carrying them beyond the two-dimensional existence which keeps us essentially earth-bound, cannot fail to provide inspiration about freedom and power, emotions dear to the human psyche.

What Do Birds Tell Us About The World?

They tell us a great deal, often of great practical importance to human existence. For example:

- In cultures dependent on fishing, flocks of birds are important as indicators of the whereabouts of surface-feeding pelagic fish. In eastern Polynesia, for example, the appearance at sea of noddies and boobies being harried by frigate birds leads fishers to the schools of bonito and skipjack they value so much. It is a tribute to human folly that not only are we threatening the birds by invading their breeding sites, but drift-netters are looting the sea so that they can sell the tuna back to the islanders in tins!
- Birds provided us with early warnings of the potentially catastrophic effects of over-use of some pesticides, particularly organochlorines such as DDT. Over a very short

period in the 1950s and 60s, the peregrine falcon in Britain went from being common to being in dire trouble. The cause was disruption in breeding behaviour and the thinning of eggshells through pesticide contamination of their prey, particularly small seed-eating birds and medium-sized birds such as pigeons, rooks, partridges and pheasants. The chemically stable pesticide compounds were becoming concentrated as they passed on up the food chains, with the result that predators such as falcons were far more susceptible to poisoning than their prey.

In New Zealand, despite heavy use of such pesticides in some areas, our own falcon does not seem to have suffered egg-shell thinning in the same way, simply because it is a quite sedentary species. It seldom moves into the landscapes dominated by intensive agriculture, and hence it feeds mainly on prey relatively free of pesticide residues. Ironically, our most remote race of falcons, that found on the Auckland Islands, is potentially at greater risk. These falcons feed on seabirds and are therefore at the end of much longer food chains along which residues have become more concentrated than land-based ones.

- Birds are harbingers of other environmental change. In 1984, a small but stunningly ultramarine-coloured lorikeet, the pihiti (*Vini ultramarina*), was a common and locally adored inhabitant of the spectacular island of Ua Pou in the remote Marquesas group. Though the Marquesan birds had suffered terribly as a result of forest clearance and introduced animals, the little pihiti was not deemed to be particularly at risk. Besides, it was also found on 200 square km Nukuhiva Island and the smaller Ua Huka island, to which it had been introduced in the 1940s. By 1989, the pihiti was all but gone from Ua Pou, was exceedingly rare on Nukuhiva and numbered around 250 on Ua Huka. The reason? Locals at first thought that a cyclone was responsible and that the food supply might now be recovering. So we sought to nurture some local enthusiasm by helping return birds from Ua Huka

Opposite and below:
The thirty or so remaining kakerori in Rarotonga are subject to a major effort to protect them from predators.

