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BIRDS OF A FEATHER

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TAMENESS AND MYSTICAL ASSOCIATIONS OF WILD BIRDS

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One of Ron Scarlett's many engaging qualities is his boundless interest in all aspects of natural and human history. He is in no sense the narrow specialist in osteological remains; for him the living men and living birds are a constant subject of observation, interaction, and enthusiastic comment. The author received two letters from Ron describing his participation in David Cole's 1967 excavations in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. These portray briefly but most graphically individual Highlands workmen on the site and inhabitants of the nearby village, among whom he clearly found kindred spirits. They also describe some of the familiar birds and mammals of the grasslands and gardens, as observed in life, or, in some cases, on their way to the local dinner menu. In presenting this essay to him, I hope it may refresh his memories of the experiences he had then and creatures he encountered.

Landsborough Thomson (1964:802-3) defines tameness as "toleration by birds of the close presence of human beings, in some instances amounting to a positive tendency to seek such presence".

There are no really tame wild birds in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, for obvious reasons. Adult humans (sometimes only women) are prepared to eat most, and in some societies all, bird species, and even where dietary restrictions and prohibitions of a mystical kind on interference give a measure of protection, any markedly tame individual bird would still be at high risk from children, dogs and, in recent decades, cats. Furthermore, Papua New Guinea Highlanders do not share the widespread custom of the English-speaking peoples of feeding wild birds—except occasionally as a device to facilitate their capture.

Nevertheless different Highlands species characteristically show very different degrees of toleration of man. The relatively tame Pied Chats (Saxicola caprata) in the sweet potato gardens, Willie Wagtails (Rhipidura leucophrys) by the streams and around the homesteads, and Friendly Fantails (Rhipidura albolimbata) and White-winged Thicket Flycatchers (Peneothello sigillatus) in the forest, are all prepared to come perilously close to humans, whereas the Tawny Grassbirds (Megalurus timoriensis) in the grass at garden edges, Papuan Lories (Charmosyna papou) and Slatey Thicket Flycatchers (Peneothello cyanus) in the forest and Mountain Ducks (Salvadorina waigiensis) in the streams and rivers, are extremely shy.

The Kalam people of the Kaironk Valley disdain to eat adults of any of

the small insectivores around the homesteads and in the gardens, on account of what they regard as their dirty feeding habits, but there is no simple correlation between this protection and the tameness of the species concerned, since these include not only the Pied Chat and the Willie Wagtail, which are moderately tame, but the Tawny Grassbird and Schach Shrike (Lanius schach), which are not. It is, however, the case that the eggs and nestlings of the Chat and Willie Wagtail are also given some protection, for mystical reasons; whereas children are not discouraged from taking and eating eggs and young of the Grassbird and the Shrike. Conversely, the White-winged Thicket Flycatcher and Friendly Fantail of the forest are freely killed and eaten, except that a serious hunter would not normally bother to shoot at them, in part, in the case of the Fantails, because of the risk that they will disturb more shy and valuable game. The behaviour of the Thicket Flycatcher, known in Kalam as wlmeñ saky, the "Foolish (or mad) Pied Chat" (it closely resembles the Pied Chat in plumage), which spontaneously approaches hunters, seems totally non-adaptive. Yet somehow the bird survives and remains common, perhaps in part because it is only casually hunted, and mainly by small boys.

In contrast, the natural shyness of some of the forest birds most prized for their plumage or their flesh, is clearly highly adaptive. These include the lorries, especially the Papuan Lory, very highly valued for its plumes; certain of the birds of paradise; certain of the pigeons and doves, especially the fruit doves (Ptilinopus rivoli etc); and the hawks. But the chink in the hawks' armour is the boldness (which Landsborough Thomson (idem) appropriately distinguishes from tameness) with which at least some species (e.g. the goshawks Accipiter fasciatus and A. melanochlamys) return to the nest to defend their young against intruders. Of water birds, the shyness of that fascinating creature the Mountain Duck is also quite evidently its salvation; while that of the Torrent-Lark (Grallina bruijni), as compared with that of its cousin the Australian Magpie-Lark (G. cyanoleuca), may or may not be adaptive, but certainly has relevance to the special mystical status the Kalam accord it.

My thesis is that, for the Kalam, as I believe many other societies, both unusually tame species and unusually shy species, provided that they are readily identifiable, tend to be given special mystical values, which in turn affect man's interaction with them. The origins of such behaviour present interesting problems, though ones I can only speculate about in a quite amateur way. But also interesting are the human reactions and interpretations that such behaviour provokes; and the adaptiveness, for both birds and humans, of these particular avian-human interactions.

Of the various varieties of tameness, ¹ the one I find most intriguing is that of birds which show, in Landsborough Thomson's phrase, "a positive tendency to seek (human) presence". My Kalam collaborator, Saem Majnep (Majnep & Bulmer, 1977), describes in some detail Kalam reaction to the five local species that do this: the Pied Chat, Willie Wagtail, Friendly Fantail and White-winged Thicket Flycatcher already mentioned, and the Mountain Mouse-Warbler (Crateroscelis robusta). Of all these the Pied Chat is much the most important, as I believe it is quite widely in highland New Guinea. This bird is present at all seasons in their gardens and, to a lesser extent,

in the grasslands, provided that a few bushes remain there; and it is conspicuous by its visibility and by its song. It usually nests in the sides of banks and ditches at the edges of the gardens, but sometimes actually in among the sweet potato crop. Apart from the conspicuous singing of the male bird, generally from a free-standing bush or dead tree, but sometimes also delivered partly in flight, the birds also occasionally approach human beings with alarm notes or short challenging bursts of singing, when they intrude into their territory. When one does so, this is interpreted as the ghost of a dead father or brother bringing messages, either good news of impending visits of kin, or warnings of the approach of enemies. Kalam say, "It is our radio". I must stress that these approaches are not every-day occurrences. If they were, I suspect that the messages would be devalued. Unfortunately my field notes do not indicate to what extent they are seasonal and correlated with the breeding cycle, but their frequency can be gauged from the fact that I have only once in two years' fieldwork received a message from a Chat. That was on a somewhat embarrassing occasion when I was squatting in a latrine hut and a hen bird appeared on the door-screen and briefly addressed me. Having no Kalam interpreter with me, I was unable to decode the message.

Like the English Robin, the Chat feeds on insects disturbed by the gardener, and it will approach pigs closely, as well as humans. Kalam interpret this as a ghost taking a helpful interest in the welfare of the pigs. Similarly, the protection afforded the Willie Wagtail, which also associates with pigs, is in part rationalised in terms of this being a good bird which helps look after these valuable beasts. But the Willie Wagtail's repetitive song does not, it seems, lend itself to interpretation as human utterance. Both these species are very successful invaders of the man-made environment of the Highlands valleys; the Chat, which has a wide distribution in Asia, being presumably a rather recent immigrant to New Guinea. While their presence must basically reflect both species' capacity to exploit the changed physical environment, the densities of their populations in certain areas, such as the Kaironk, must, I think, also reflect human patronage. Reciprocally, whether or not these two birds really "help the pigs", they do, presumably, along with the other partially protected small insectivores in the gardens, perform a significant role in keeping insect populations, including garden pests, in some kind of equilibrium.

In the forest it is the Mouse-Warbler that has something of the same significance as the Pied Chat, rather than the Thicket Flycatcher that the Kalam call the "Foolish Pied Chat". This nondescript little brownish bird skulks in the undergrowth and does not openly approach man. However it tends to remain close, if largely hidden, and to call in response to intruders. Its buzzing calls and brief but varied bursts of whistled song (Rand & Gilliard, 1967: 338; Diamond, 1972:233) can be interpreted by Kalam either as messages from ghosts, informing them that a game mammal is nearby or caught in a trap, or as an interfering warning to game animals that the hunter is approaching.

The fantails, especially the Friendly Fantail (so named, very appropriately, by Tom Gilliard (Rand & Gilliard, 1967:387)) are even more ambiguous; their over-familiarity and alleged capacity for disturbing bigger and more important birds with their alarm notes and antics, are not welcomed, and they may be identified with witches. But their dance-like posturings and movements, with

spreading wings and tail, are admired, and their songs, in the Kalam version, are incorporated into male beauty ritual.

The poor White-winged Thicket Flycatcher has, in spite of its endearing attempts at familiarity, nothing going for it. Kalam regard its behaviour as rather pathetic, as evidence by the epithet "foolish" (or perhaps "mad" or "wild") in its name. I suspect that what the unfortunate bird lacks is a repertoire of calls that lend themselves to translation into Kalam.

In relation to humans, or at least Kalam humans, who are prepared to eat almost any form of vertebrate life from the forest, the behaviour of all these forest species seems non-adaptive. Yet the ones I have described are common. I hazard the guess that what they are doing is responding to man in the same way as they respond to other and more continuously resident large fauna (cassowaries, perhaps wallabies, and latterly, pigs) and may perhaps relate to the disturbance of insects by these creatures. I have been led to this speculation by watching New Zealand Fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) interact with cattle, by reading David Lack's (1953:195) interpretation of the genesis of European Robin tameness in the advantages forest-dwelling birds obtain in winter from disturbance of ground cover by man and perhaps other animals, and by my brief reading of the literature on the tameness of such New Zealand forest species as the New Zealand Robin (*Petroica australis*), (e.g. Buller, 1967:27-8).

The other variety of tameness that I will refer to is manifested in the classic case by the European Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), cohabiting seasonally with man, and reciprocating his patronage by a remarkable degree of indifference to his presence, though not usually approaching him or soliciting his attention. To some degree the Greater Wood Swallow (*Artamus maximus*) enjoys this kind of relationship with the Kalam. This handsome bird nests, often in very visible locations, high in the dead casuarina trees in Kalam gardens, sometimes quite close to houses. As far as I know it is not specifically protected, or restricted as food; but many Kalam men and youths are superb tree-climbers, and if motivated to do so could undoubtedly rob almost every nest. Yet they do not do so. Nor do they chop down trees to get the fledglings, as I have seen them do in the forest to get mammals and even, on one occasion, fledgling Dusky Lorries (*Pseudeos fuscata*). Their basic attitudes to Wood Swallows are very positive. According to Saem Majnep (Majnep and Bulmer, 1977:106-8) the very conspicuous family life of this species epitomises domestic virtue. Good housewives who abundantly and unselfishly provide for their families and kin are likened to this bird; and a ritual performed over a newly-married couple involves burning of Wood Swallow feathers in the fire by which they sit, and presentation to the bride of the beak and other plumage of the bird, for her to keep in her net-bag. The bird's alleged capacity to distinguish unfamiliar from familiar humans as they approach, and react with excitement to them, is interpreted as a warning of danger to people who live nearby. This also is in its favour.

Although this is not, I think, reported in the literature, my suspicion is that the Greater Wood Swallow also nests in dead trees within the forest. But whether or not this is so, its very successful colonisation of the garden lands of the Highlands may, I would argue, reflect human patronage as well

as the convenience of the changes man has made to the landscape.

As in many other regions, in the Highlands many more birds are shy than tame. I can here refer only briefly to the special interpretations that Kalam put on the behaviour of a few of these species. The lorries, several species of which are common in the forest but generally very shy, are in many cases just birds, but can also be the souls of men (i.e. adult males), either as they leave their bodies in dreams or, if I understand correctly, after death. The long-tailed birds of paradise, Stephanies (Astrapia stephaniae) and Sickle-bills (Epimachus fastosus and E. meyeri) are similarly, though apparently not so consistently, identified with the souls of women.

Lack (1956:110) points out that "... (European)... bird books written earlier than a century ago started with the eagle, for he was the King of Birds. But about the time when monarchs were tumbled from their thrones by black-coated republican intellectuals, the bird books followed suit, banishing the eagles to a back page as primitive and giving leadership to the crows". Saem Majnep, in his listing of Kaironk birds, gives first place to the lorries, but allows the eagle and his relatives a position of almost equal prominence, at the rear of the procession. There is no doubt that the shyness and elusiveness of both groups greatly enhance Kalam interest in them.

In contrast, two species which combine shyness with intermittent but fleeting close approaches to humans are identified as witches. These are the Torrent-lark and the Slatey Thicket Flycatcher (which is remarkably different in its behaviour from its congener, the White-winged Thicket Flycatcher). Both have loud and sometimes startling calls, so once again voice as well as physical movement is significant. People are genuinely scared by their encounters with these birds. The elusive Mountain Duck is also associated with witches and witchcraft.

Finally I must note that any bird, but especially a rare and shy bird, seen or heard in an unusual place, tends to be given a mystical identification by Kalam. When I last revisited the Kaironk, in April-May 1976, my greatest friend, Wpc of Gobnem, the old Big Man and former war leader, had died four months previously. On my first day I sadly walked up the hill, through his gardens, to visit his grave. As we came close to his settlement—he had been buried very close to his house—a bird called. My companions and I argued as to what it was. I thought it was a Shrike, for there was one in the trees below the house, and Shrikes are great mimics, producing an astonishing range of calls. No, said the Councillor, it was a kabay kl (female or immature male Superb Bird of Paradise, Lophorina superba). This seemed to me highly doubtful, as this species is not normally found outside the secondary forest, the boundary of which was nearly half a mile away, and even there it is quite rare. But later the Councillor said, "Didn't you realise, I think that was the Old Man greeting you".

There are, of course, many other dimensions of birds' behaviour which, for any particular human society, in part determine the attitudes towards them and mystical values placed upon them. In particular, as I have indicated in this paper, birds' calls and songs are very frequently given significance by man. But what I have attempted here is merely to suggest that, important

as adaption to human induced change to the material environment so clearly is to an understanding of the status of bird populations today, the remarkable capacity of many species of birds to adapt to man himself may also be a feature of some significance. And on the human side, there are perhaps general tendencies, present in many, perhaps most human societies, to respond as patrons to those birds that succeed in initiating human-like interaction with man, and to develop special attitudes and values in respect of both conspicuously tame and conspicuously shy, but identifiable, bird species (cf. Armstrong 1958).

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NOTE

1. As applied to the behaviour of wild creatures, "tameness" is a curious, anthropocentric concept, and to date its main interest to ornithologists appears to lie in the interesting problems it poses regarding the interaction of genetic factors and learned traits in bird behaviour (e.g. Huxley 1947 and other authors cited by Thomson 1964). A systematic treatment of this topic is not here attempted, but if it were, the following factors might need consideration: quality, intensity and immediate contexts of interaction or close coexistence with man; distribution of such behaviours in the species and in local populations; apparent or putative motivations (e.g. access to food or nesting sites; curiosity; defense of territory, nests or young); adaptive functions (again, advantageous access to otherwise unexploitable food, shelter of breeding sites); etiology (e.g. pristine fearlessness of many bird populations that have not previously encountered man or any human-sized terrestrial predator, or, that in certain contexts of their life, have never been forced to recognise that he is a threat; transference to man of behaviour earlier developed in relation to other large animals); extent to which, deliberately or otherwise, this behaviour is stimulated by man; and the extent to which such human patronage is elicited by the bird's own behaviour and morphological character.

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