

Taking Flight: A History of Birds and People in the Heart of America

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Book Reviews and Notices

Taking Flight: A History of Birds and People in the Heart of America, by Michael Edmonds. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018. 293 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$28.95 paperback.

Reviewer Lori Vermaas is a writer and independent American Studies scholar. She is the author of *Sequoia: The Heralded Tree in American Art and Culture* (2003).

“We see only what we’re prepared to see” (6) when we look at birds, admits Michael Edmonds, a recreational birder and Wisconsin Historical Society staffer. Referring to his reliance on an iBird app while contemplating a tundra swan that’s alit on a distant shore, Edmonds argues in *Taking Flight* that our perceptions of avian creatures, whether mediated by high-tech references or other rhetorical influences, are the expressive result of the beliefs, desires, and values bequeathed by a diverse array of ethnically, culturally, and chronologically distinct ancestors. Curious to track humans’ regard for birds in the landscape and written record, Edmonds embarks on a congenial survey of “the changing ways in which people have thought about and acted toward birds over the last twelve thousand years” (2) in what today forms the American Midwest.

The meaning of birds for midwesterners ebbs and flows between two basic values: the spiritual/emotional and the scientific/utilitarian, or from “magic and mystery” to “reason and science” (116). By conducting a chronological tour of past communities and cultures, Edmonds fleshes out the themes. As revealed by their integration of bird symbols into earthworks, sculpture, pottery, ritualistic clothing (including head-dresses), or utensils (especially the calumet, a sacred pipe), or to inspire sacred ceremonies, native societies like the Adena, Hopewell, Cahokia, Oneota, and those of various nineteenth-century American Indian tribes regarded birds as mystical beings, whose role was culturally crucial. Birds mediated the spirit and earth worlds, often as messengers, helping to ward off anomie. With Euro-American settlement, a more scientifically based worldview began to predominate, with the written record its main expressive form. Detailed descriptive reports of bird sightings, penned by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explorers and soldiers, coupled with studies by nineteenth-century naturalists (such as John J. Audubon and Thomas Nuttall), privileged a cosmology in which birds served as wondrous evidence of a more systematic, organizing view of nature.

Yet “scientific knowledge didn’t immediately supplant faith, magic, and folklore” (160) among the general public. Many midwesterners, those whom Edmonds terms “ordinary” (151), retained mystical perceptions of birds, which he makes clear by including copious examples of naming practices and folk beliefs distinctive to different midwestern regions and cultural groups, including African Americans. In his last chapter, he engagingly wraps up his tour with an examination of late nineteenth-century commercial bird hunter accounts and the subsequent extermination of many birds, such as the passenger pigeon.

Anthropological methods inspire Edmonds’s approach, yet *Taking Flight* triumphs as a descriptive history. Its lengthy timeline also provides an opportunity to consider the cultural meaning of birds in America, a subject ripe for further academic study. In fact, not many scholars have actually written about the meaning of birds in America in general, nor have they presented a book-length cultural study of a specific bird, though some, like Jennifer Price and, more recently, Jeff Karnicky, have offered chapters or a case-study approach. Mark Barrow’s examination of the ornithological profession and Scott Weidensaul’s account of bird watchers are helpful, yet the paucity of study on this general subject is astonishing, particularly since other nature topics, such as trees, have attracted more interdisciplinary analyses. Aren’t cultural historians yet prepared to identify and tackle subjects like the cardinal in America? The raven? The starling? The sandhill crane? The common sparrow – or why not the eagle? These are subjects that chirp crisply for cultural scholarship. In the interim, Edmonds’s work provides a congenial overview, a gentle introduction for the nonspecialist, and preparation for those nature historians ready to take on the challenge of this yet novel subject of investigation.

Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley, by Rob Harper. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. xvi, 250 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer William H. Bergmann is associate professor of history at Slippery Rock University. He is author of *The American National State and the Early West* (2012).

Even though *Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley* is a relatively short book (178 pages of text), Rob Harper offers his readers a masterfully researched, granular examination of how American expansionism played out in the Ohio valley from the end of the Seven Years’ War through the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. Building on the observation that the “escalation and de-escalation of hostilities correlates