

Spirits of the Air. Birds & American Indians in the South

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Spirits of the Air. Birds & American Indians in the South.—Shepard Krech III. 2009. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA. 264 pp., 2 maps, 181 figures. ISBN 978-0-8203-2815-7. \$44.95 (cloth).

Spirits of the Air is an exploration of the relationships between Native Americans and birds—the practical (as sources of food, clothing, utensils), the mystical, the symbolic, and many things in between. It is a book that is well researched, well written, and well illustrated. Thirteen chapters organize this complex endeavor. The first is an introduction to the diversity of birds and Native American tribes in the Southeast, a presentation of maps showing the location of major Indian mounds and towns and general locations of various tribes, and a brief summary of the nature of interactions of birds and Native Americans. Then Krech details the discovery of southeastern birds by early explorers such as John White, Hernando de Soto, John Smith, Thomas Harriot, John Lawson, and, of course, the naturalists Mark Catesby, Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon.

Subsequent chapters focus on the roles of birds in the lives of Native Americans, beginning with their use as food, then uses

of feathers and images as decoration. The discussion of the introduction of birds from European cultures (including domesticated turkeys, ducks, chickens, and Muscovy ducks) is especially interesting. For example, some groups seemed to prize chickens but would not eat them. Krech suggests they may have been viewed as “unclean” because they ate human waste. While that may be true, it doesn’t explain why they valued them. I suspect that chickens were considered valuable not only because of the usefulness of their feathers but because they control weeds, ticks, and insect pests—a benefit well-known today by those who keep backyard flocks.

Symbolism was important, often identifying members of particular clans or success in war or peace. Red was a color commonly associated with war and power, so birds that possessed red feathers were of great importance. White was symbolic of peace, so birds with white feathers also gained special significance. Although the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) is much discussed in the introduction to the book and use of its red feathers on war pipes is mentioned, curiously there are no illustrations of those pipes, nor is there mention of the red triangles (perhaps representing the Ivory-billed’s red feathers) painted on some pipes (see Fig. 4.1 in Jackson, 2006, *In Search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, Smithsonian Books/Collins, New York). Symbolism also fell into the spiritual realm, with some birds being bad omens—a calling Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) was an omen of death or sickness—and others being good omens—an Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) calling to the left or right of a path was an omen of victory for a warrior. Various tribes included birds in creation myths and other stories that were passed down from generation to generation.

The last chapters focus on changes in bird populations and conservation efforts. Krech states that no matter how many birds Native Americans killed, “the indigenous people played a minor role in the demise of the big three” (p. 188)—the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), and Ivory-billed Woodpecker. I’m sure that is true for the first two species, but I’m not so sure about the Ivory-bill. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, an Ivory-billed Woodpecker was likely difficult to kill. I suspect the power of its bill and the red color of the male’s crest—both mentioned by Krech as important symbolism for successful warfare—provided a tremendous motivation to kill the birds to obtain that power. As documented by Audubon and others, they also made the bills and scalps of Ivory-bills valuable trade items among the tribes. Once Native Americans had obtained guns from Europeans, the scales would have been tipped against the Ivory-bill. No such significant symbolism seems to have been associated with the Carolina Parakeet or Passenger Pigeon. As Krech suggests, loss and fragmentation of habitat was the major factor leading to the Ivory-bill’s demise, but the impact of Native American hunting on the Ivory-bill likely increased with the peoples’ use of guns and would have been further accentuated as populations declined.

The next to the last chapter in the book is titled “Visible & Invisible Birds,” a reference to the many species that were well known and much used by Native Americans—the visible birds—

and others, such as most of our neotropical migrants and small birds that were not really recognized—thus “invisible.” Yes, just as in our culture today, there were those “LBJs,” the “little brown jobs” or “dicky birds.”

End notes provide additional information, and a bibliography provides a gold mine of references for those who wish to explore the subject further. The literature cited includes not only a diversity of anthropological and historical sources but also 39 references from ornithological journals (*Auk*, *Condor*, *Wilson Bulletin*, *Florida Field Naturalist*), the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, and the *Birds of North America* series. Some useful items from less well-known journals and publication series were not included. For example, Walter Hoxie (1903, *A Seminole vocabulary*, Atlantic Slope Naturalist 1:66–67) provided Seminole names for many birds (including the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, *titkka*).

This is a lavish book, indeed, a luscious one, a book to dig into and savor for the range and quality of the 181 figures, most of which are in color. Krech made extensive use of the art of early explorers and colonial naturalists. Mark Catesby is represented by 35 engravings, Alexander Wilson by 25, John James Audubon by 23, John White by 15, William Bartram by 5. In addition to early bird portraits, figures include photographs of ceramic, wood, and metal artifacts that feature bird effigies, as well as drawings and paintings of Native Americans making use of or dealing with feathers and birds. Most figures are not called out in the text but are placed with relevant text material. In essence, the figures represent a book within a book—one could easily gain a great deal by merely perusing the figures and their captions.

How might this have been an even better book? Krech is also a birder, and his ornithological interpretations are sound, though his use of the common names of birds is sometimes outdated (e.g., “Green-backed Heron” instead of “Green Heron” for *Butorides virescens* and “Marsh Hawk” instead of “Northern Harrier” for *Circus cyaneus*). The index is only of moderate value. Subjects of many figures (e.g., gorgets, p. 98) are not indexed, and material in the text is indexed in a very hit-and-miss fashion. Don’t rely on the index; there are many nuggets that lie hidden and must be “mined.”

Spirits of the Air is a volume that belongs in every public library. It could be a text for an interdisciplinary course that I believe would repeatedly fill to capacity. Bridging anthropology and ornithology, this impressive volume brings together the culture and history of Native Americans and the influences of Europeans who “discovered” their world. Stirring in the subsequent history of change in the southeastern United States, the author has traced the magical and practical influences of birds in the lives of Native Americans, and ultimately how humans have influenced birds. There is much to learn—and much to do to keep those spirits flying. This book is a window to the past that provides aesthetic, cultural, and practical understanding. The view from the window to the future has been brightened and the need for conservation made more clear.—JEROME A. JACKSON, Department of Marine and Ecological Sciences, Florida Gulf Coast University, Ft. Myers, FL 33965. E-mail: jjackson@fgcu.edu.