

Flight Lines: Tracking the Wonders of Bird Migration

Author: Mabey, Sarah E.

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BOOK REVIEW

Flight Lines: Tracking the Wonders of Bird Migration

Reviewed by Sarah E. Mabey

Environmental Studies Department, Hiram College, Hiram, Ohio, USA
mabeyse@hiram.edu

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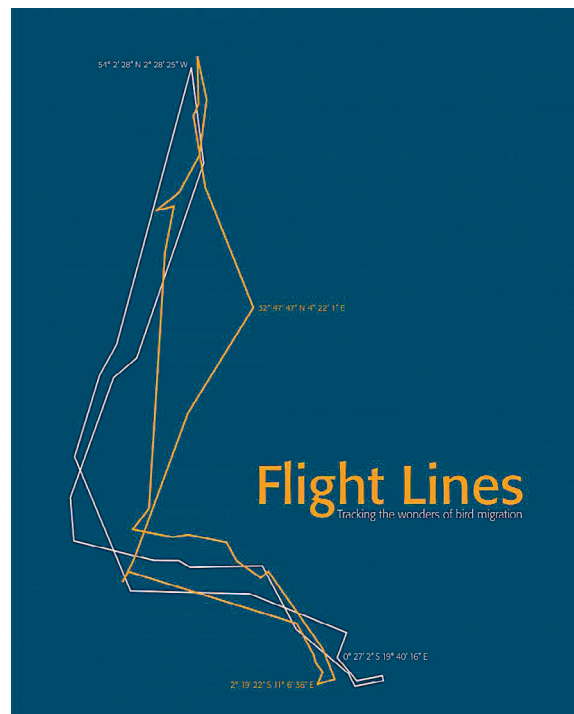
Flight Lines: Tracking the Wonders of Bird Migration by Mike Toms. 2017. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford, UK. x + 224 pp., 76 color plates. Hardcover, £25.00. ISBN 978-1-908581-77-8.

At a time of continued declines in biodiversity (Ceballos et al. 2017) and increased alienation from the natural world (Soga and Gaston 2016), a hopeful love of birds somehow persists. Within the United States and across Europe, birdwatching remains a popular pastime. More than 45 million Americans watch birds, making this the single most popular wildlife activity in the United States (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017). In the United Kingdom, a strong tradition of birding is being kept alive by an increasing number of millennials (Jordan 2016). A passion for birds is an expression of a broader affinity for nature and presents an opportunity to connect birdwatchers with science, conservation practice, and policy. That is precisely what Mike Toms accomplishes in this book.

Flight Lines is the result of an ambitious collaboration between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Society of Wildlife Artists (SWLA) to relate the complex lives of Britain's beloved migratory birds. Paired with the beautifully reproduced work of more than a dozen SWLA artists, Toms's captivating narrative weaves together volumes of foundational and ongoing research to provide a detailed yet holistic picture of the challenges inherent in a migratory life. With welcome simplicity, *Flight Lines*

conveys a rich sense of wonder for what it means to be a small bird traveling across continents.

Flight Lines is more than a synthesis of scientific information. It is a story of interwoven connection between birds, places, and people. Toms's narrative begins at "home" in the late summer British countryside, unfolds through the process of stop-over in southern Europe, and filters into Africa where complicated patterns of nonbreeding migrant behavior are revealed. Looping back to Britain for the nesting season, Toms emphasizes interactions across the annual cycle and reminds us that while we count on familiar birds to mark the seasons across the hemisphere, we experience but a narrow patch of a vast, dynamic migratory system. Case studies of specific migrants such as the Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*), Eurasian Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*), and Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) highlight details that influence annual survival and reproductive success. Diverse species accounts illustrate the many ways in which ecological pressures and climate variability interact with age, sex, and geographic distribution to create intricate life history patterns that shape dietary preferences, fattening and molt regimes, and social behavior. Toms reports on population declines, some particularly precipitous like those of the European Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*),



and changing migration patterns arising from human activity and altered landscapes.

For a lay audience, Toms also reframes the story of science beyond crisp reports of data and caveat-laden interpretation. We learn something more about science through the personal narratives contributed by BTO scientists and SWLA artists who recount stories of arduous journeys to remote locations and long days of patient watching in unlikely and uncomfortable places for the thrill of documenting the lives of migrant birds. We see that science is not just the pursuit of important truths, but also a human desire to feed personal curiosity and to fill our lives with joy. By uncovering the scale and demands of studying migrants, *Flight Lines* builds a compelling case for the value of well-coordinated citizen science programs like the Breeding Bird Survey and BirdTrack, honoring the work of both professional and avocational ornithologists who join these programs to link their passion with purpose.

While *Flight Lines* may have its greatest impact on a lay audience, particularly European birders, from the perspective of educator, migration ecologist, or conservation biologist, Toms's work is a sound, introductory overview of the complexity and scope of migrant life history and the challenges of protecting species that move freely across political boundaries. The comprehensive narrative acts as a case study of the incremental acquisition of scientific knowledge and the power of rare technical breakthroughs such as miniaturized tracking devices. By peppering each chapter with references to specific scientists and research findings, Toms opens the door for readers to discover and make sense of the primary literature. For advanced students of ornithology, *Flight Lines* provides appropriately detailed scaffolding that, if paired with a strictly scholarly take on avian migration (e.g., Newton 2010), would be a valuable aid to anyone wanting a sweeping introduction to decades of research on the Palearctic–Afrotropical migration system. Finally, as society calls on scientists to better communicate the relevance of our work, this book models careful storytelling that appeals to aesthetic and emotional sensibilities while remaining true to science and the limits of knowledge.

Toms leaves readers with important questions regarding the fate of migratory birds. From a conservation perspective, *Flight Lines* softens the edges of science just enough to allow readers to consider where avian migration sits in relation to a broader socio-environmental picture, much of which is unfamiliar—beyond our borders and beyond our control. The *Flight Lines* artists, especially, bring to life the human dimension of disparate geographies united through migration and remind us that habitat degradation and other threats arise in the context of human need and culture that we may not fully understand. What seems easy to judge harshly from a position of cultural myopia

becomes more complex and recognizably human when seen through the art of *Flight Lines* collaborators Esther Tyson (“Senegal, West Africa,” pp. 98–99), Greg Poole (“Coast at Palmarin,” pp. 120–121), Carry Akroyd (“Cuckoo,” p. 179), and others. This is an idea captured perfectly in Toby Smith's personal narrative. Reflecting on his journey to photograph Common Cuckoos in a remote area of Central Africa, he writes, “I was determined to explore, document and publish the human and geographic narratives that the birds inhabit and share in Gabon. In so doing I hope to bring this little known country closer to home and help focus a future lens of conservation efforts and study towards it” (p. 149). Here, the absence of African voices in the project is noticed most acutely. Yet *Flight Lines* deals sensitively with the conservation challenges arising within African nations, recognizing the need for African science and African solutions. The insights of the book's art and narrative prompt readers to examine cultural bias and consider the cultural barriers in conservation practice that can create adversaries rather than partners.

Appropriately, *Flight Lines* does not offer a compendium of solutions to difficult international conservation challenges. Toms does not presume grand policy recommendations and does not provide a superficial list of “10 things you can do. . . .” The book wisely recognizes that those critical discussions belong elsewhere. It assumes only that birdwatching is a gateway to pro-environmental behaviors (Cooper et al. 2015, Steven et al. 2017). It is enough for this project to remind us of the value of sound science and to prompt us to consider the diverse social, political, and economic landscapes within which conservation action must occur. It is enough for this project to ignite a desire to create socio-environmental change.

Through Toms's narrative and the accompanying visual art, *Flight Lines* expands our isolated experiences with migrant birds to shift our gaze toward the whole complex frame. The end effect deepens our knowledge of the familiar in the way learning someone's life story can transform an acquaintance into a friend. This matters because, as Toms points out, birds need more friends—true friends who will do the hard work of discovery, storytelling, and advocacy.

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- Book Review Editor: Jay Mager, j-mager@onu.edu