Book Reviews

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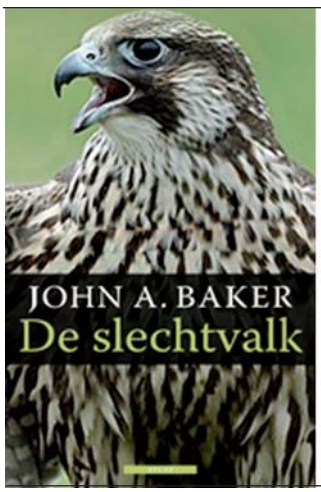
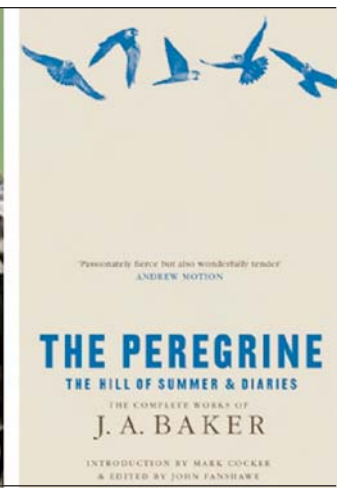
Baker J.A. 2010. De Slechtvalk. Atlas, Amsterdam. ISBN 978-90-450-8399-5. Paperback. 224 pp. Euro 18.90
Baker J.A. 2010. The complete works of J.A. Baker: The Peregrine, The Hill of Summers & Diaries. Collins, London. ISBN 978-0-00-734862-6. Hardcover. 416 pp. Euro 24.99





Imagine that you are fond of raptors, more especially the Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, you live in farmland, and it is the 1950s. In hindsight we can say that you are in bad luck: the Peregrine in decline, the farmland on its way to being modified beyond recognition. This is precisely what fits J.A. Baker, the enigmatic writer of The Peregrine. As if on cue, 2010 saw the reissue of this classic in Britain ànd in The Netherlands. The latter is a reprint of the 1967-translation by Hans Edinga (with ornithological advice from G.A. van Nie, then a well-known falconer and associated with "Adriaan Mollen"). I read this book when 13 years old, and what an impression it made. Baker was born in Chelmsford in Essex, where he lived all his life. The surrounding landscape became the focus of his ramblings, spanning an area of some 550 km^2 (according to the introduction by Mark Cocker). Not a car driver, he used a bicycle and his feet to get around, a patch-oriented birder in pursuit of a single bird, the Peregrine. Well, not just the Peregrine. He used his quest for the Peregrine to immerse himself in encounters with nature, preferably in the absence of man ('Be alone').

Written in the form of a diary, spanning an entire winter from 1 October to 4 April, the introduction by John Fanshawe – who selected some 30% of the unpublished diaries for publication – now makes clear that Baker used all his observations to produce a single winter's account. The observations were made between 1954 and 1963, and written up *after* a field day (in stark contrast to the average birder, who takes notes on the spot). The Peregrine is thus an amalgamation of impressions gained over a 10-year period, in fact a sublimation of his observations in a literary style that is mesmerizing. The lack of topographical names in the text adds a certain timelessness: his wood, estuary, fence, valley, oak and bridge can be anywhere, and so can be the birds. The style is beyond anything available in the genre: highly associative in a completely natural way (with tens of metaphors and similes per page, none of which contrived), drenched in a sensory absorbtion of the elements, often anthropomorphic yet thoroughly to the point. This prose asks for slow readers. But then, what rewards!

Take, for example, his reflection on waders, which will surely not be lost on wader lovers: 'It is impossible to compare a wader with any other species of the same size. They are so different; water and mud have changed them; they are beyond all other birds, as far out as they can go. They run, and their long legs flicker like the revolving spokes of a wheel; they fly, and their wings revolve like interrupted sunlight and their long bills shine.' This is from The Hill of Summer. This book follows a similar pattern as in The Peregrine, the text arranged in a monthly sequence and describing his encounters with nature and the elements. Again full of beautiful descriptions, even more elaborate than in The Peregrine. Although raptors figure prominently, it lacks the singular drive of The Peregrine, the obsession ('I was possessed by it. It was a grail for me.') and the slightly eerie feel associated with the Peregrine's inevitable doom ('It is a dying world, like Mars, but glowing still.'). John A. Baker died in 1987. He had witnessed the decline and near-demise of the Peregrine. He may have known of the Peregrine's return after the 'filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals' had been banned. But no more books came forward after 1969, the year of publication of The Hill of Summer. Was it his rheumatoid arthritis that prevented writing? Or was it the destruction of the landscape of his youth, which – in contrast to the Peregrine – had no chance of being restored in its former glory?

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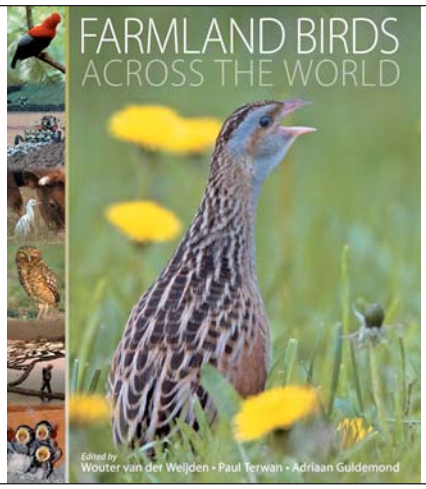
van der Weijden W., Terwan P. & Guldemond A. (eds) 2010. Farmland birds across the world. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. ISBN 978-84-96553-63-7. Hardcover, lavishly illustrated. VI + 138 pp. Euro 24



It took hominids some 7 million years of branching out before finally *Homo sapiens* entered the scene. This primate spent most of its history in Africa, and only some 45,000 years ago migrated to Eurasia where it encountered the Neanderthals with which it coexisted for about 9000 years. Nobody knows what exactly happened between the two (a possible scenario has been sketched by the vertebrate paleontologist Björn Kurtén in *Dance of the tiger*), but the outcome was that the Neanderthals vanished and modern *Homo sapiens* took over the Old World. Complex cultures developed, and by about 10,000 years ago – just after the last Ice Age – farming had become more than an incidental pastime. The explosive radiation of farming systems has led to an amazing array of habitats. Be it grasslands, arable land, rice fields, orchards, tree plantations, coffee, cacao, *Lophophora*, bananas, olives, small-scale gardens or biofuels, almost anything goes within certain geophysical limits. The present book offers a fine display of the major farming systems across the world. Each one is (or was) the scene of incredible rich plant and animal life. It's not just humans that are adaptable, as evolutionary history has proven already! In fact, the conversion of natural habitats into farmland is often accompanied by an intermediate stage of increased biodiversity or biomass. There can be no doubt that species like, for example, Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* have profited from the introduction of artificial fertilizers, geese from the introduction of highly productive grasses, cranes from the booming maize business, herons and egrets from rice cultivations, and so on. Those bonanzas can last for years, sometimes decades, to suddenly turn into their opposite when the farming system changes again. The latter has happened in the west, with a concomitant decline in farmland birds, but Asia, South America and Africa are close on our heels, as clearly demonstrated in this book.

Leafing through the chapters, and especially those detailing unknown systems on other continents, gives an idea of the prolific bird life still available. No wonder that biologists embrace this state of affairs as worthy of preservation. For each farming system, the book offers a display of threats (here called – politically correct – challenges) and 'opportunities' (what to do in terms of protection, with the idiom of the well-paid NGO, like outreach, incentives, stewardship, multi-stakeholder partnerships, ecotourism, *ad infinitum*). Undoubtedly, the proposals are well-meant and, provided a guaranteed monetary input from rich societies (unlikely), may even work. Reality is grim, though. Much aid from the western world has backfired against the local ecosystem. I vividly remember an encounter with farmers near Ziguinchor in the Casamance (southern Senegal), 3 December 2005. A large dam had been built to improve rice cultivation, but the opposite had happened. The delicate and labour-intensive local farming system, the only way to cope with an extremely hostile environment full of acids and salt, had been disrupted and the dam had a nefarious impact on production. But there it was, a mountain of obsolete concrete. The farmers emphatically repeated over and over again: "Le barrage n'est pas bon." How true.

The farmer's perspective of farmland is completely different from that of biologists and conservationists. Over the centuries, biodiversity never was, not even remotely, on the mind of farmers. Whatever biologically interesting stage erupted from farmland did so accidentally (concocted by climate, geophysics and means available), and certainly was not devised intentionally by farmers. It is therefore a myth that farmers are preeminently fit to protect biodiversity in farmland. This myth is perpetrated by farmers to ensure extra income. The farmer's motives were (and are) dictated by cost-effective production of marketable foodstuffs. If that includes biodiversity, as nowadays in the rich western societies is fashionable in the form of set-aside and other agri-environmental schemes, that is fine by farmers' standards so long as it is paid for and profitable. As soon as prices of other commodities are on the rise, this system is equally quickly discarded (see CAP and set-aside). And all the time, new threats darken the horizon, like the increasing interest in biofuels. In the end, we can say: at least, we still have the photographs. (RGB)