

Book Review

A beaver, eight bears and an extinct auk: species books are back

Beaver Land: How One Weird Rodent Made America by Leila Philip (2022) 352 pp., Twelve, Hachette Book Group, New York, USA. ISBN 978-1-5387-5520-4 (pbk), USD 19.99.

Eight Bears: Mythic Past and Imperiled Future by Gloria Dickie (2023) 272 pp., W. W. Norton & Company, New York, USA. ISBN 978-1-324-00508-7 (hbk), USD 30.00.

The Last of its Kind: The Search for the Great Auk and the Discovery of Extinction by Gísli Pálsson (2024) 328 pp., Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA. ISBN 978-0-691-23098-6 (hbk), USD 27.95.

We are a species, our pets are species, our meals consist of species and when we're sick it may very well be because of a species. Yet, we don't see conservation books about species so much anymore. Other important topics are top of the conservation agenda, from ecosystem services to decolonization, rewilding and climate change impacts. Of course, books about species are still being written, particularly for bird lovers, who seem to provide an inexhaustible market. But it is a rare treat to be able to review three conservation books about species.

Many of us in the advanced stages of our careers were reared on species books. In my case, I particularly remember books such as Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*, Gerald Durrell's *The Drunken Forest*, *Wild Animals I Have Known* by Ernest Thompson Seton and Jim Kjelgaard's books on dogs. It turns out that none of these books is really about animals themselves, but rather about the morality of the human actors intertwined in the story. In many ways, they are updated forms of Aesop's Fables or even medieval bestiaries, with a clear lesson the reader is supposed to learn and apply to their own life. These books are emotional—I cried at the end of *Tarka*—and left me with a deep appreciation and love of animals—or species, as I learnt to call them to hide my sentimentality.

Such sentimentality about the natural world went out of favour in my generation, but it has returned in recent years, with anxiety and grief connected to climate change, species extinctions and biodiversity loss now more widely acknowledged. Extinction in particular is often used as the framing for talking about species. The World Species Congress, held as an online event in May 2024, featured many talks on species either heading towards extinction or recovered from extinction, and

the vivid imagery and passion shown by the presenters—and expressed in many languages—was a notable aspect of the event. In her fine, short book *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age*, Dolly Jørgensen (2019) observes that 'since the Enlightenment, there has been an idea that humans should be objective and scientific in their relationship with nature but . . . I want to show how fundamental emotions are to how modern humans relate to nonhumans' (p. 5).

This interweaving of species extinction—or recovery—and human feelings characterizes two of these books in particular, whose non-scientist authors, free from restrictions placed on academic writing, craft their texts about beavers and bears with passion and emotion. The third book, ostensibly about the great auk, is in fact about the discovery of the concept of extinction, and it, too, is told with a decidedly moving undertone. Thus, although the three books offer readers a range of species, stories and writing styles—and their narratives are told in different ways and with varying levels of success—they are all about the intertwined nature of human and non-human histories, and all of them are appealing to their readers' emotions.

Delving into these books in more detail, I will start with the good news story about what may well be the most important mammal in North American history, or at least the USA and Canada: the North American beaver *Castor canadensis*. Its close cousin, the Eurasian beaver *Castor fiber*, plays a peripheral role in Leila Philip's story, which focuses on the species that, she argues in the book's subtitle, 'made America'. Long featured as a symbol of perseverance, resourcefulness and adaptability in tales told by Indigenous Americans, the beaver was the focus of more pecuniary purposes for European settlers. Beaver fur was valued for its ability to felt into a soft, yet resilient and water repellent material, and was used to make valuable hats (as it still is today for the most expensive Stetson hats).

During the early years of the colonization of North America, beaver hides were the natural resource most sought after by Europeans, and in New England they became crucial for paying debts incurred while traveling from Europe. The pursuit of beaver pelts continued to drive European settler exploration throughout the continent and resulted in the catastrophic diminishment of beaver populations. And with the loss of beavers came the loss of the key ecological role they play in dramatically influencing the hydrological conditions in the areas where they live.

Philip is less concerned with the biology of the species than with its role in human history. She dwells on her personal experience of beavers and beaver-ness, weaving in accounts of travels and interviews that trace various human-beaver dimensions, from the life of the fur baron Jacob Astor, her friend the beaver trapper and the culture of buying and selling skins, to business people working to install pseudo-beaver dams, and scientists documenting the hydrological attributes of areas influenced by beaver dams. She has a particular fondness for people who have welcomed beavers into their lives and homes—self-trained beaver naturalists who have devoted themselves to all things beaver and joined 'the terrain of American eccentrics' (p. 9) who call themselves 'beaver believers' and hold meetings and conferences dedicated to these remarkable rodents. Philip, a professor at a US university, places herself clearly in this category of beaver believers and brings welcome attention to the voices of Indigenous Americans and their stories of beavers. She rejoices in the details of the beaver lives near her home, which she parallels and contrasts with the story of the gradual decline and death of her mother; emotion is woven throughout the book. Elevating the spirits of Philip, and others who feel depressed by the continuing decline of the natural world, is the fact that North American beavers are now turning up in many places where they were once extirpated, some on their own and some with the aid of humans. Wherever and by whichever means they arrive, their presence has a profound effect on their surroundings, as they build dams, create complex wetlands and enrich habitats for countless other species to thrive.

In the second book, the eight species of bears are the focus of Gloria Dickie's global story. It is rare that bears are treated as a group; usually the particularly charismatic species such as polar, panda and grizzly/brown bears are drawing the attention, whereas the spectacled bear (the only bear in South America), the sun bear of Southeast Asia and my personal favourite, the sloth bear, rarely get a mention. It is therefore a welcome change for an author to write about all (extant) bears, and Dickie does so with plenty of emotion.

An environmental journalist, Dickie has journeyed around the world to visit each of her subjects, and at times the book reads more like a travel journal than an account of the bears themselves: bears are the excuse but adventure is clearly the objective. We learn about bears almost exclusively through the author's personal observations or her

conversations with people she met along the way, many of whom were studying the bears themselves. Dickie writes with the wide-eyed language of a neophyte and a tendency to hyperbolic phrasing (e.g. 'his men laid waste to that bear with ten well-placed bullets', p. 12). Her relative inexperience in biology shows in places, such as portraying the spectacled bear as being in danger of extinction because of loss of cloud forest—despite visiting a park where they live in lower elevation dry forest.

Dickie frames some stories in a curious way, as if struggling to gain the reader's attention: the sloth bear is pictured as a ruthless attacker of innocent people, with the opening story of a young woman so scarred by a sloth bear attack that she will never be able to marry. Although the reasons for such attacks are discussed in the chapter, the overwhelming sense is that the author's sympathy and understanding side more with the people than the bears; the latter are, unfortunately, described as 'irascible', 'uniquely aggressive' (both p. 50) and possessing a 'fondness for violence' (p. 52). I think the bears may have a different point of view.

A recurrent theme is bears in captivity, where they are kept to facilitate their conservation, as is the case with pandas (the author describes volunteering at a Chinese captive breeding facility), or for unpleasant purposes such as Asiatic black bears confined in small cages for repeated extraction of bile, which is used in traditional medicine. Some of the most moving—and upsetting—passages describe the truly nasty conditions in which these bears are kept, with some of their captors describing them as 'my bile bear'.

Based on the author's personal travels and experiences, North American black bears are mentioned largely in the context of conflict with humans at the urban-wildlands fringe, particularly related to garbage, and especially in national parks in the western USA. Grizzly bears also feature mostly in conflict with ranchers, and polar bears are framed in the by now familiar context of climate change and resulting negative interactions with people. The book finishes with the obligatory lament that losing bears would mean that 'the woods, and our stories, would be empty' (p. 214). Yet other than this nod towards bears as a group, Dickie never unites the eight bears into a coherent whole, and I was left with the somewhat unsatisfying feeling that I learnt more about the author than the bears.

The third book couldn't be more different from the bear volume. Written originally in Icelandic by Gísli Pálsson, an emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Iceland, this translated and expanded work is a quiet masterpiece. First off, this is not really a book about the great auk, but rather about how the

disappearance of this species almost in front of the eyes of Victorian naturalists led to development of the concept of extinction—and human-caused extinction in particular.

The story of the great auk *Pinguinis impennis*—the original 'penguin' as evidenced by its generic name—is sketched only briefly as the author's interest is focused more on its absence than its presence. A large, flightless bird of the North Atlantic, the species used to nest on islands and skerries, and has been hunted by people for millennia. But starting around the 15th century, they became a staple for sailors traveling near the American and European coasts. Crews ate their eggs, brought them onboard as living food sources and plucked out their feathers to sell to pillow-makers. They even burned their oil-rich bodies for fuel. Most believe that the last individuals were killed on an island off Iceland in June 1844.

The main character of the book is a set of unpublished manuscripts known as the *Gare-Fowl Books* (gare-fowl being an early name for the great auk), written by John Wolley and Alfred Newton, two 19th century naturalists. When they set off for Iceland in 1858, they hoped to study the rare great auk—unaware of the fact that the species had already been hunted to extinction. Led expertly by Pálsson, we revisit, through the manuscripts, Wolley and Newton's vain attempts to collect great auk specimens from their last redoubt off the coast of Iceland. We learn where they stayed, what horses they rented, who accompanied and who helped them, and other day-by-day details of their frustrated endeavours to get out to the island where great auks were previously known to nest.

Newton in particular deserves greater attention: he is largely unknown today but can be seen as the major proponent of the idea of there being two kinds of extinction—one natural and one as a result of human actions; he also recognized that the latter could be prevented by humans themselves. This is why, as Pálsson writes, 'it is vital for us to attend to the historic journey of John Wolley and Alfred Newton to the Reykjanes peninsula in the southwest of Iceland in 1858' (p. 17).

Prior to the killing of the last great auks, extinction was either seen as an impossibility or trivialized as a supposedly natural phenomenon. Linnaeus thought living species could never disappear, and most everyone believed that all species of the living world had been created once and for all, and that existing organisms could not vanish nor that new species could appear—there was no term for the loss of a species. Rich with irony is the fact that the final blow in the extinction of the great auk was dealt by naturalists eager to have their own specimens of the adult birds or their beautiful mottled eggs.

Wolley and Newton's trip is set with erudite details of the study of natural history in Europe: the arrival of Darwin on the scene, the sociology of science, the privileged position of most scientists, the debates over whether extinction did take place, the importance of stuffed specimens, and why birds draw more attention than other groups of species. We learn of Wolley's untimely death and the career of Newton, who Pálsson credits not only for recognizing human-caused extinction, but more importantly for the imperative to try to intervene and stop such extinctions. Post great- auk Newton became a key figure in pushing for bird protection in Britain, for example as a founding member of the British Ornithologists' Union.

This is a personal and emotional book. The author reflects on his own childhood in Iceland, his own habit of egg collecting and his anthropological work in the same area where the last auks were killed. His writing is informed by perspectives on gender roles, power structures and the influence of history. He does not shy away from the troubling fact that naturalists had to cause the extinction of a species to recognize the existence of extinction. One of the images that appear early on in the book is a photograph of the hearts of the last two great auks.

A number of years ago I was leaving my job at a large conservation NGO for the day when a colleague asked me 'why can you be going home early, don't you recognize there is an extinction crisis?' Another colleague published a study making the case that those working in the environmental fields may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as their work is 'emotionally laden because of the struggle on behalf of ethical positions and the daily experience of loss and frustration' (Fraser et al., 2013, p. 70). Yet emotions are often considered to be out-of-bounds for the professional conservationist, despite the fact that the soaring flight of macaws at sunset, the speckled flank of a whale shark or the smell of lilies of the valley in the spring woods are all emotional experiences that fuel our motivation to continue our work. So too, a couple of centuries ago, was owning a stuffed great auk or one of its treasured eggs.

Leila Philip and Gloria Dickie are open about their emotional responses to the subjects of their books: Philip simply loves beavers, and Dickie is alternately scared by, deeply sorry about, or thrilled by the world's bears. Their books appear to have done very well, with numerous accolades printed on the dust jackets and glowing reviews in all the best places. And Pálsson, too, is forthright about his emotional connection to the great auk and its loss. So, it appears that the public has a healthy appetite for books about species and our emotional connections with them, yet we conservationists are trapped by the

perceived need to be objective and data-driven despite our recognition that this is not what drives us to continue in our exhausting work. Maybe we have this wrong, a point clearly made by Dolly Jørgensen (2019): 'emotional frameworks matter deeply in both how people mentally understand nature and how they interact physically with it' (p. 5) and 'the way we see a species can impact its stand-

ing on the planet more than anything covered in ecology textbooks' (p. 6).

References

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