

The evolution of *The Unfeathered Bird*

Katrina van Grouw

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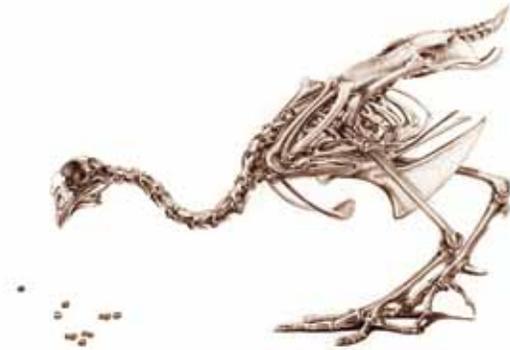


Fig. 1. Red Junglefowl: skeleton.

“Just who is Amy, anyway?”

It was a passive inquiry. My inquisitor simply imagined the mystery muse as a family member, old friend, or childhood mentor; someone who had inspired the idea for the book, perhaps, or nurtured it through the twenty five year struggle from start to finish. My answer took him by surprise.

The Amy in question—the object of the dedication in the front of *The Unfeathered Bird*—was, in fact, a dead duck. She was never even a live duck. By that I mean that she was nameless until the day I picked up her fresh but lifeless corpse on the beach and decided she was a suitable subject for my next project.

I was an undergraduate Fine Art student of 22 with a passionate interest in natural history in general, and birds in particular. My college artwork was large, Audubonesque, copper plate engravings of dramatic birds doing dramatic things. I'd thrown myself with gusto into ornithology: trained to be a bird ringer; taught myself taxidermy and prepared bird skins as a volunteer at my local museum; all to kindle the flame of inspiration for my pictures of living birds.

What I was looking for that day, down on the beach, was a bird I could dismantle in stages, make drawings of, layer-by-layer, bone by bone; strip down and then re-assemble again as a skeleton.

Now, if you're going to spend several months intimately involved with a dead duck, it's got to have a name.

So I christened her Amy. The drawings of her and other early specimens were bound into a book with a

professional-looking title embossed in gold on the cover: *The Anatomy of Birds*. Little did I realize what this humble collection would evolve into.

I would love to say that I spent the intervening years researching, writing and drawing the illustrations for the book that was to become *The Unfeathered Bird*, but reality is seldom so neat. It didn't take shape all at once and remained a long while an ugly duckling before it finally developed into a swan. What I ultimately wanted to do was combine the beauty, the attention to detail and sheer artistry typified by the best historical illustrations with up-to-date, jargon-free text that relates birds' structure with their lifestyle and evolution, making it more a book about living birds than dead ones. Not half art and half science, but 100% of both, and definitely not a textbook.

The first hurdle was to convince a publisher that there would be a niche for such a book. Science publishers pointed me in the direction of arts publishers, gave me a shove and slammed the door. And arts publishers directed me back to the science lot.

It was 2008 before the dream finally became a reality and work would begin in earnest.

Of course, there's no point in producing an anatomy book about living birds if the drawings don't show birds engaged in natural behaviour. Textbook diagrams use the obligatory pigeon in side view with one wing lifted, but I wanted my woodpeckers clinging on to vertical tree-trunks, cormorants diving, and game-birds scratching at the ground. Articulated skeletons in museums are usually mounted in static or inaccurate positions, and are often slightly worse for wear. No, wherever possible I needed freshly made skeletons made by someone, like me, familiar with the outside of birds as well as their internal workings. Someone who could assemble a skeleton in any position I chose, leaving me time to draw them and write the text. A search finally yielded just the right man for the job: the young, handsome and single curator of birds and mammals at the Natural History Museum of The Netherlands—Hein van Grouw.

So I married him.

No birds were harmed during the making of the book. I relied exclusively on the goodwill of birds dying in places

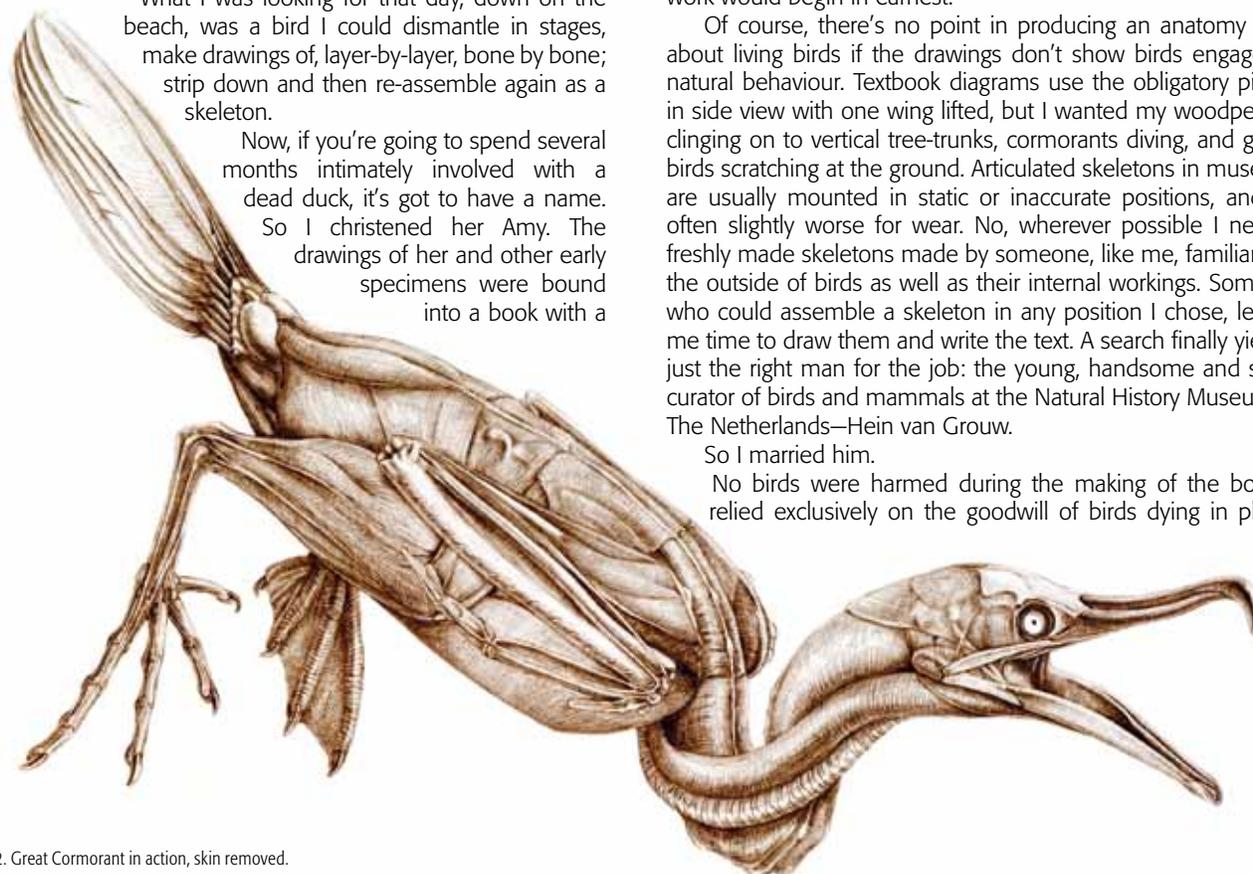


Fig. 2. Great Cormorant in action, skin removed.

where they could be found, and the goodwill of people who were willing to pick them up for me. I had a freezer full of road kill and oiled seabirds; corpses were donated or loaned by biologists, taxidermists, aviculturists, and conservation charities. The boiling began and the house was transformed. Evil smelling buckets whose contents were best left to the imagination appeared outside the back door and drying bones filled every household surface.

While the bone factory chugged away downstairs, I'd be up in my study drawing the next subject on a seemingly never ending list; craning my neck over an enormous sheet of paper to see close-up details on an equally enormous skeleton on the other side. (I have a stubborn habit of working life-sized; a ridiculously impractical habit that causes only neck ache and storage problems). Drawing the musculature of birds in lifelike positions brought a different set of difficulties and I was faced with the choice between having the moist and seeping carcass draped over my lap whilst endeavouring to re-animate it with reference to photos of living birds. Or I could rig up some complicated device of wires, pins, thread and blocks of wood—the same technique that Audubon used, with a few modifications—to make a faintly grotesque artist's mannequin.

The real challenge was drawing lifelike skeletons from bones that were not articulated at all. I'm talking about the scientifically important reference collections kept behind the scenes in major natural history museums. The people using these collections, mostly zoo-archaeologists, need to study the articulating surfaces of individual bones. So they're not much use if they're glued or wired together. Faced with nothing but a box of jumbled bones, necessity spawned a quite brilliantly inventive solution. I would make an outline drawing of the skeleton of *another* bird already prepared in the position I wanted, then rub out and re-draw each bone in turn, with reference to the respective bone of the desired species.

Some people might wonder why I went to all the trouble of producing 385 pencil drawings when I could simply photograph the specimens. A book of photographs might have been equally beautiful and artistically stimulating, in a different sort of way. Apart from the quick answer, that I don't know one end of a



65. Great Bustard. Katrina with the skeleton and finished drawing.

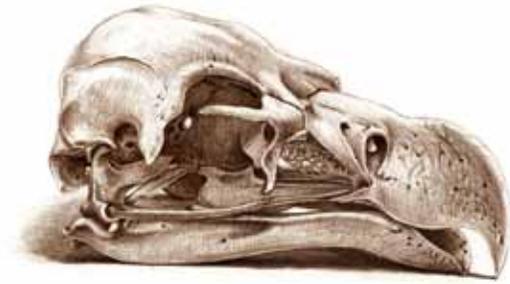


Fig. 3. Lappet-faced Vulture skull.

Artwork: K. van Grouw.

camera from the other, there's another, more personal reason.

For me, drawing is an exploration, a journey. In my opinion, you can't truly say you understand an object or a surface until you've scrutinized it with a draughtsman's eye, travelled the contours, probed deep into those pits and crevices hidden in shadow. You could almost go so far as to say that the drawing itself is just a by-product of that process of observation. Although I had a long, long list of specimens to include, and an ever-looming deadline, no quick-fix technology, no fairy godmother, could have offered me a more favourable alternative than good, old-fashioned, drawing.

I'm no Luddite, though, and not so much of a traditionalist that I'm against making some digital enhancements. One of these was to adjust the colour of the illustrations. Lead pencils may be my preferred medium to handle, but grey tones can look a bit dry and academic. And with a subject matter so steeped in preconceptions about college textbooks, that was something I wanted to avoid at all costs. I'd already decided that the book would follow the long-outdated taxonomy of Linnaeus, so a choice of warm, sepia lines against a background of pale cream paper seemed to fit the historical theme quite perfectly.

The choice of Linnaean taxonomy caused many a sleepless night. More than one ornithologist had quizzed me about which order I intended to use, and it had soon become apparent that I wouldn't be able to please everyone. Besides wanting to stay firmly on the fence in the minefield of taxonomy, I wanted to be able to *compare* the products of convergent evolution, rather than separate them. The book is about adaptations, after all. So it made sense to arrange my birds solely according to external characteristics and habits, as Linnaeus had done: similar groups brazenly sharing the same chapter without the slightest concern for their evolutionary relationship.

Using Linnaeus's divisions—Accipitres, Picae, Anseres, Grallae, Gallinae, and Passeres—I had the freedom to put cranes next to storks and herons and flag up the similarities between old and new world vultures. Of course, throughout the text I've taken pains to discuss birds' *actual* relationships including the latest theories thrown up by molecular studies, but the order of chapters remains firmly in the eighteenth century. It worked remarkably well for my purpose, only presenting the rather pleasurable challenge of imagining where Linnaeus might have put one or two birds unknown in his day; Kiwis, for example.

In my living room, the skeleton of a Mallard looks down at me benevolently from its glass case. Amy is by no means the most elegant specimen in my possession, but she has a very special place in my affections. Who would have thought a dead duck could do so much?