mucronata Royle (Thymelaeaceae) [142–143], whilst on 18 July 2013, by which time the flowering season of D. mucronata had almost come to an end, the birds were observed feeding on the flowers, and flower buds, of C. sativa [144–145].

It was fascinating to observe Yellow-breasted Greenfinch in the course of feeding on C. sativa flowers and flower buds, but on the other hand, a major concern was the effect of the chemical composition of the flowers, specifically, the pistillate flowers of C. sativa which are rich in THC (Δ9-tetrahydrocannabinol), a principal psychoactive constituent present to an extent of 10–12 percent in the plant (UNODC 2009).

THC is known to have moderate analgesic effects on humans (Elphick & Egertová 2001), and also act as an appetizer by enhancing palatability (Berry & Mechoulam 2002). But it is not known if feeding on its flowers has any consequences on the Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, similar to those observed in human beings. Therefore, it will be interesting to establish if the species preferentially feeds on hemp flowers and flower buds. Also, more studies may throw light on the effects of THC on the species.
evocative paean to the wild turkey (P. 46):

"Your aboriginality
Deep, unexplained,
Like a Red Indian darkly unfinished and aloof,
Seems like the black and glossy seeds of countless centuries."

Or the more familiar skylark-adulation of Shelley (p. 423):

"Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not."

It tells stories: How we’ve pirated the symbolic use of feathers from birds, as implements that enhance behavioural traits, and donned them as ornaments to bolster our own insubstantialities, like the use of feathered ceremonial headdresses. Our fears and superstitions are hounded by bird imagery. Our religious iconography is replete with it. Our heroic glorifications of valour are idolised by invoking birds that are at the pinnacle of food chains, consummate symbols of strength and speed.

But I do not even begin to touch the tip of the iceberg here, the true lodestone lies within its covers.

The more I browse its pages, the more I am drawn into the spell of this mesmerising one-sided relationship, because its cognitive absorption is only our privilege. The bird has no active involvement in this association, besides that of living its life; indisputably unaware of the universally overpowering effect it has had on another earth-dweller.

How many volumes would such a work from India take up, two, three? Multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural India has a man-bird association that permeates her multiplicities in all their mind-boggling diversity—documenting which would be a challenging and fulfilling project for an Indian anthropologist or ornithologist.

This volume mentions India in at least forty entries, and quotes from eight works on Indian ornithology. There are, however, just a handful of Indians listed in the authors’ acknowledgements. This is unfortunate, for the project was widely publicised, and a larger participation from India’s burgeoning fraternity of ornithologists would have brought a lot more to the authors’ table. It is immensely heartening to see a unique facet of Dr Salim Ali’s ornithological contribution eulogised in Appendix 2, “he was also alive to the human ‘story’ in the lives of birds and his observations are full of colour, feeling, wide scholarship and good humour,” (p. 534).

There cannot be a worthier ambassador, than this book, to spread the message of conservation and preservation of birds, and for its immense archival value as a chronicle of humanity’s immemorial need for coexistence with birds. It should find a place in every public and institutional library as a compendium and tool for education, for conservation, for advocacy among administrators, and as a companion for the bird-enthusiast, whatever her level of interaction with the “blithe Spirits” of the natural world, for the sheer joy of reconnecting with them in the comfortable recesses of a reading chair.

—Aasheesh Pittie

2nd Flr, BBR Forum, Rd. No. 2, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.
Email: aasheesh.pittie@gmail.com

Grouw’s Anatomy

I received a review copy of The Unfeathered Bird at a time when death in all senses—literal and metaphorical—was around me. Say, a personal ‘Ides of March’ over several months. For weeks the book lay unopened on my bedside table as I viewed it through the myopic lens of mortality—illustrations of once living avians, harbingers of joy, pared down to musculature and skeletal frames in sepia. Mentions of paperwork to fly across a decomposing pelican carcass from Africa to England in the foreword, of specimens bubbling away in preparation on the stove, stored in freezers labeled ‘meatpies’ while work on the book progressed, made the entire business sound, to me, like an avian serial killer’s fantasy. But the more the book lay around, the more familiar it began to feel, and I finally opened it to the whimsical image of a skeletal budgerigar staring at itself in a mirror. Like ‘Amy’ the dead duck that van Grouw found on a beach, leading her on to a 25 year long journey culminating in an opus covering 200 species, The Unfeathered Bird grew on me, the illustrations acquired lifelike perspective, the words drew me in.

While the human and animal anatomical forms have been highly adapted into art, birds—flighty, bejeweled creatures—have been all about their external appearance; until now that is. Much has been said about The Unfeathered Bird across publications, blogs and webzines. Truly, nothing quite like it exists in the modern ornithological canon. The closest compatriot would perhaps be Thomas Eyton’s Osteologia Avium, a study comprising line drawings on the skeletal structures of birds veering towards the academic that first appeared in 1858. Most other instances of illustrations of avian anatomy are labeled outline sketches, perhaps of interest only to serious academics and taxonomists covered in zoological textbooks.

van Grouw’s work is nowhere near the tedium of academia. Originally aimed at artists, it was later expanded in scope to include ornithologists, birders, and the lay reader alike. Layer by layer, specimens have been whittled down from feathers to musculature to bone and illustrated to give a greater sense of what makes aclock tick. A heavy Audubonesque influence the artist cites from her early years as a student of fine arts and ornithology remains apparent in the work as well, with several species illustrated in tradition of lithographs detailing the natural history of birds. As the author maintains, The Unfeathered Bird is not a work of anatomy. Nothing beneath the musculature and skeletal structure has been illustrated, and nothing of physiology or biochemistry is mentioned even in passing. All

The unfeathered bird
By Katrina van Grouw
Hardback (26 x 31 cm), Pp. i–xiv, 1–287.
Rs. 2,999/-.

Reviews