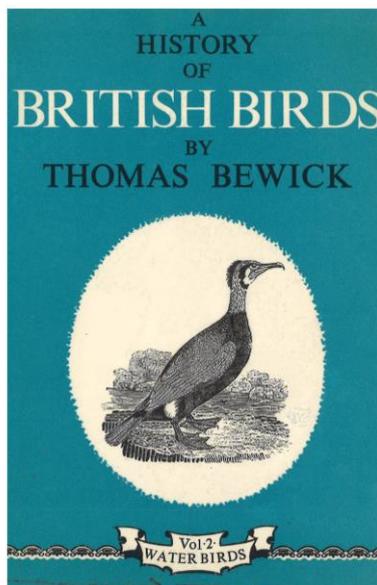


A History of British Birds

by Thomas Bewick

Volume 2: Water Birds

1826



This may well be one of those books you've been aware of and meant to get around to one day. We would urge you not to delay – it is such a delight on so many levels. You don't even have to be a bird-lover to appreciate the artistry and wit in the text and illustrations.

Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), who was born at Mickley near Prudhoe, in Northumberland, was known in his lifetime as one of the world's leading wood-engravers, having revived the art and made it his own by cutting into the wood as well as drawing onto it. He refined the skill, for instance, by shaving off minute slices from the surface of the wood so that the picture would print grey, or to convey texture, where one part of the block thus received less pressure in the press. It was this attention to detail, its potential for accuracy and delicacy, which led to wood-engraving becoming the favoured method of illustration for books and magazines until the end of the 19th century, when photography took over.

In his Preface, Bewick advocates the study of Natural History for its own sake. 'to become initiated into this knowledge, is to become enamoured of its charms...an endless fund of the most rational entertainment is spread out, which captivates the attention and exalts the mind'. In his Introduction, he describes the rewards of the 'most minute investigation', which, as we will see, is prodigious, being almost forensic in its gaze.

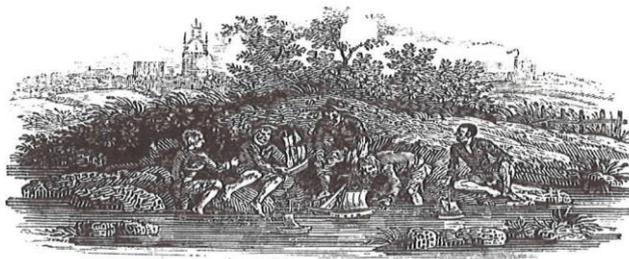
Bewick did his engravings from living or newly shot specimens, avoiding stuffed birds because of the inaccuracy consequent in clumsy taxidermy. Each bird is introduced with the engraving first, then a description of its dimensions, length in inches, girth, weight (a Kingfisher weighs two and a half ounces, the Heron, between three and four pounds) and an exhaustive account of the colours and kinds of its feathers. The colours of the male Mallard

are meticulously catalogued as follows: ‘yellowish green...a glossy deep changeable green...white...deep vinous chestnut...silvery white...rufous...brown...ash...rich glossy purple, with violet or green reflections, a double streak of black and white...pale grey...dusky’ and finally, ‘legs, toes, and webs red.’

A
HISTORY
OF
BRITISH BIRDS.

BY
THOMAS BEWICK.

VOL. II.
CONTAINING THE
HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF
WATER BIRDS.



NEWCASTLE:
PRINTED BY EDW. WALKER, PILGRIM-STREET,
FOR T. BEWICK: SOLD BY HIM, LONGMAN AND CO. LONDON;
AND ALL BOOKSELLERS.
1826.

There follow historical and geographical points of interest, notes as to habits and habitats, and many interesting mythologies, quotes and anecdotes are included. Pliny thought the Kingfisher nest looked like ‘petrified sea-froth’ and hazarded a guess that it might be made from ‘Prickly-back bones, since they live upon fish’. In Iceland, the Eider duck is treated ‘with such kindness and circumspection as to make them quite tame’. The local custom was to take eggs and down from their nests repeatedly, the down from a dead bird being no use due to loss of elasticity. Bewick comments that the down is sold ‘to stuff the couches of the pampered citizens of more polished nations’...

Whichever bird you choose to check up on, you will find something to divert you. But one of the extra charms of the book is almost incidental and would be easy to miss. Each entry is followed by a tiny extra engraving, or ‘vignette’, a tail, or tale piece, for they often seem to imply a story that has been going on behind the scenes. In a letter quoted at the beginning of the book, Bewick wrote that ‘Instruction is of little avail without constant cheerfulness’ – something his commentary, as well as his illustration, amply provides.