

BIRDS: WALT WHITMAN'S NATURAL RESOURCE

Having studied the mocking-bird's tones
and the flight of the mountain-hawk
And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one
the hermit thrush from the swamp-cedars,
Solitary, singing in the West,
I strike up for a New World"

(From *Starting from Paumanok*)

by Maxwell C. Wheat, Jr.

When a person speaks of hearing nocturnal chip notes during the equinox periods of the year, then I am really impressed that the individual watches' birds and their mysterious ways. Although so common a phenomenon, the night-time flights of warblers, thrushes, shorebirds, etc., are hardly noticed.

But New York State's famous poet, Walt Whitman, speaks of it in one of the short prose sketches that make-up his autobiographical *Specimen Days*:

"Did you ever chance to hear the midnight flight of birds
passing through the air and darkness overhead, in countless
armies, changing their early or late summer habitat? It is some-
thing not to be forgotten."

This indicates that Whitman was a bird watcher in addition to being a stargazer, flower observer and empathetic reporter of all nature and man. The evidence is further found in his poetry as in *Song of Myself* in which he refers to

"Where the yellow-crown'd heron comes to
the edge of the marsh at night
and feeds upon small crabs. . . ."

How many out-door recreationists know the night herons other than as "big cranes" feeding in a marsh near where their boats might be anchored? On Long Island, where Whitman made so many of his observations during youthful walking and sailing expeditions, one would have to be aware of the species to realize that among the Black-crowned Night Herons might occasionally be found a 'yellow-crowned.'

Whitman uses many species of birds:

Yellow-shafted Flicker — ". . . the high-hole flashing his golden wings
. . ."

Belted Kingfisher — "The strong, beautiful, joyous creatures! Their wings
glisten in the slanted sunbeams as they circle and circle around, oc-
casionaly dipping and dashing the water, and making long stretches
up and down the creek."

Red-winged Blackbird — “. . . a flitting blackbird, with red dabs on his shoulders, as he darts slantingly by . . .”

Eastern Meadowlark — “What a stamp in advance my whole day receives from the song of that meadow lark perch’d on a fence stake twenty rods distant! Two or three liquid-simple notes repeated at intervals, full of careless happiness and hope. With its peculiar shimmering-slow progress and rapid-noiseless action of the wings, it flies on a ways, lights on another stake, and so on to another, shimmering and singing many minutes.”

Bald Eagle — “But there is one sight the very grandest. Sometimes in the fiercest driving storm of wind, rain, hail or snow, a great eagle will appear over the river (Hudson), now soaring with steady and now overbended wings — always confronting the gale, or perhaps cleaving into, or at times *literally* sitting upon it. It is like reading some first-class natural tragedy or epic, or hearing martial trumpets. . . .”

Whitman did not pretend to be an expert — saying of his observations, “I dare say the expert ornithologist, botanist or entomologist will detect more than one slip in them.”

He relied on expertise — particularly that of J. P. Giraud, Jr., author of *The Birds of Long Island*, published in 1844. Several of Whitman’s passages show apparent use of Giraud’s information. For example, note Whitman’s poem, *Our Old Feuillage*:

“Northward, on the sands, on some shallow
bay of Paumanok,
I with parties of snowy herons wading in
the wet to seek worms and aquatic plants.”

Giraud wrote the following about the Snowy Egret (which is what Whitman obviously is citing):

“In small parties, they frequent the salt marshes, mud-flats, and sand-bars, and are observed wading about in the shallow water, in search of small crabs, lizards and worms. . . .”

Whitman seemed more concerned with what he could do with objects like birds; with what he could make them mean in his work. As he declares with the affirmative beat of the liturgical:

“I believe in those winged purposes,
And acknowledge red, yellow, white, playing within me,
And consider green and violet and the tufted crown intentional . . .”

What are these purposes? Democracy is certainly one. There’s variety in both nature and a free society, Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas*:

“As the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom, the same present the greatest lessons also in New World politics and progress.”

You find the variety in the different colors he used — and in his famous “lists” of diverse people and life forms in the poem, *Song of Myself*. He included the use of birds in this poem which was essentially about our land:

“Where the quail is whistling betwixt the
woods and the wheat-lot . . .
Where the mocking-bird sounds his delicious
gurgles, crackles, screams, weeps
Where the humming-bird shimmers . . .
Where the laughing-gull scoots by the shore,
where she laughs her near-human laugh . . .
Where band-neck’d partridges roost in a ring
on the ground with their heads out . . .”

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman cited John Stuart Mill’s “two main constituents, or sub-strata, for a truly grand nationality — 1st, a large variety of character — and 2d, full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions . . .” The latter is expressed in *Song of Myself*:

“The wild gander leads his flock through
the cool night,
Ya-honk, he says, and sounds it down to me
like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless,
but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there
toward the wintry sky.”

FREEDOM! is what Whitman is conveying through the use of probably the Canada Goose.

Whitman prominently used birds to symbolize a meaning or express a feeling. There is probably no more poignant example than his use of the Hermit Thrush to express the reverence, the sadness and the tragic meaning of Abraham Lincoln’s death. This was in *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*.

“In the swamp in secluded recesses
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements
Sings by himself a song.

. . . .

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes,

I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star
 has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me."

Whitman is thought to have heard the Hermit Thrush singing among the Pine Barrens and its swampy areas on Long Island. Any birder knows (or at least knows the reputation) of the Hermit Thrush's moving song. It is easy to perceive why Whitman used this as his natural resource to express the deep inexpressible grief and tragic meaning — the latter not easily comprehended.

How often have persons, in time of sorrow or trouble, taken to themselves in some comforting setting — perhaps a vast beach or dark, green woods? Perhaps they have then come back with some sense of reconciliation and determination to do better.

There have to be aids for this. Whitman used nature — "powerful western fallen star," to represent Lincoln; "lilacs" that once "in the dooryard bloom'd" to convey a sense of the past or nostalgia, and the song or "carol" of the "gray-brown bird" to express the feeling and search for meaning:

 "And he sang the carol of death,
 and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the
 ghostly pines so still
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my
 comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit
 tallied the song of the bird."

333 Bedell Street, Freeport, New York 11520

LITERATURE CITED

Giraud, J. P., Jr. 1844. *Birds of Long Island*. Wiley & Putman, New York.

Whitman, Walt. 1949 *The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*. Louis Untermeyer, ed. Simon and Schuster, New York.