



Review Article

Birds in Archaeology

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ANNE EASTHAM. 2021. *Man and bird in the Palaeolithic of Western Europe*. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-78969-909-8 paperback £30.

DALE SERJEANTSON. 2023. *The archaeology of wild birds in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford & Philadelphia: Oxbow Books; 978-1-78925-956-8 hardback £60.

It was a pleasure to review these two books by renowned authorities on the importance of bird remains, both for interpreting archaeological sites and for understanding how human interaction with wild birds has evolved in Western Europe. Wild birds are very important in helping to interpret many archaeological sites and, when I am directing excavations, I always keep to hand Alan Cohen and Dale Serjeantson's manual for identifying bird bones (Cohen & Serjeantson 1996) and I recommend it to the students who participate. For over 60 years Anne Eastham's tireless dedication to Quaternary avifauna and her assiduous preparation, by meticulously dissecting birds to build a comprehensive skeletal reference collection, have furthered the archaeological interpretation of many Western European Palaeolithic sites.

Without a doubt, accurate palaeoenvironmental reconstruction at Palaeolithic sites is enhanced greatly by avifaunal analysis, even where fossil pollen and terrestrial microfauna are also available for detailed study. In part, this enhancement is on account of the narrow specific diets that typify some bird species (e.g. jays prefer acorns, therefore the presence of their excavated bones may imply nearby oak trees). Nevertheless, obtaining avifaunal evidence is not easy. Washing all excavated sediment over sieves with a 2mm mesh-size is required to retain the bones of small birds for scrutiny and subsequent taxonomical identification because the more easily identifiable skulls are so fragile that usually they are not found intact in archaeological deposits. We found several thousand fragments of small bones during excavations at the south-eastern Spanish site Cueva Negra del Estrecho del Río Quípar in Murcia, which is now dated to the late or final Early Pleistocene and yielded the earliest Acheulian handaxe excavated in Europe to date (López *et al.* 2020; Walker *et al.* 2020). Eastham identified more than 60 bird species in the bones from Cueva Negra and revealed that four biotopes converged at the site. Her avian list includes several species of waterfowl, including diving ducks (pochards), indicating the proximity of a long-vanished lake (Walker *et al.* 1998, 1999, 2004; Anesin *et al.* 2016). It is a pity that this list of birds was not reproduced in the book's Chapter 3 where it could have complemented the list of 19 avifaunal species from the English site of Boxgrove, which is famous for its Middle Pleistocene handaxes.

As both authors point out, there can be further methodological and technical problems in determining whether—or just which—bird remains excavated at a site are there owing to

human activities, to other predators or to neither; in that case, taphonomical studies of bird bones using microscopy may be necessary. Differential seasonal behaviour of some bird species, particularly migratory ones, has to be borne in mind; here, detailed laboratory analysis of egg-shell fragments may throw light on seasonal avian presence. Nesting behaviour, however, was often incompatible with human presence, such as frequentation by Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers of a cave or rock-shelter into which, to complicate matters, fowls or non-human predators could have brought their prey from some distance away. Nevertheless, Eastham rightly insists that the relevance of birds to archaeologists is because: "In Prehistoric times they remained part of the animal food chain and shared their lives and accommodation with other species, sometimes to the advantage of all. The, mainly winter, residences of caves and rock shelters, occupied by the hunter-gatherer settlers also provided shelter for colonies of cliff roosting birds and hibernating mammals" (p.19).

Human communities, past and present, have enjoyed a long association with birds and their eggs and feathers. In fourteen readable chapters, Serjeantson offers us an elegantly produced and richly illustrated account of human behaviour with wild birds in the British Isles, with particular reference to archaeological sites from late prehistoric and historical times. Between introductory and concluding chapters that outline the broad archaeological, anthropological and historical contexts for the book, there are chapters on crows, raptors, fenland birds, game birds, waders, song birds, waterfowl, pigeons, and hawks, and no less than three on seabirds. There are copious notes at the end of each chapter, as well as two appendices, a bibliography and a general index. Serjeantson gives an account of relatively recent archaeological evidence of wild birds and their exploitation, with their historical records amply referenced. This is complemented by, but does not overlap with, Eastham's book in which eight chapters discuss Palaeolithic birds and associated human behaviour in Western Europe. The first two dense chapters provide the reader with necessary avifaunal data and taxonomical lists that refer to many Palaeolithic sites in Western Europe. In the chapters that follow, Eastham draws attention to practices employed by the Stone Age hunter-gatherers to catch birds, their portrayal of birds on cave walls and portable artefacts (with several illustrations from the artistic hand of her husband Mike Eastham). The author also includes discussions about the inter-relationship of wild birds with some modern hunter-gatherer communities. The book is rounded off with a fascinating case-study from a late Upper Palaeolithic site in the French Pyrenees, where human practices were applied to snowy owls and their bones. Some of their bones were modified to form needles but the preference for snowy owls could imply ritual concerns. There are two indices of all the bird species cited in the book, followed by a list of bibliographical references. Both books make an invaluable contribution to propagating a scientific understanding of the importance of birds to our forebears.

Eastham reminds us that: "Very few species of birds have escaped predation by human populations. Wildfowl, game birds, waders, raptorial birds and scavengers, corvids and passerines have been hunted for meat, bone, feather and eggs, sometimes to actual extinction" (p.17). From the Palaeolithic to modern times, wild birds adapted to wetlands or coastal landscapes were much sought after for their meat, eggs, feathers, down, oil, and even bones and claws, as both Eastham and Serjeantson highlight. Migratory species that break their long flights to feed in lakes or lagoons are susceptible to capture if well-fed, and thus

sluggish, when taking wing. Eastham (p.76) comments that her tables of avifaunal taxa from Middle and Upper Palaeolithic sites indicate “that essentially the species count was found to have been dominated by aquatic and game birds. Over the long period of the Middle Palaeolithic, Neanderthal occupation of western Europe, there is considerably less certainty about any systematic use of wildfowling as part of subsistence hunting than could be inferred from the evidence on later sites.” Nevertheless, the argument continues, as in the Upper Palaeolithic birds were widely hunted, but it is not clear in which way. Nets are well known and evidenced from later times for catching birds, fish and small mammals, and were most likely already used in the Upper Palaeolithic. There is no evidence provided of when fowling began using stupeficient, sedative or poisonous substances (e.g. toadstools; noxious herbs; nuxvomica) which, by the medieval period, were thrown to stupefy their potential prey and facilitate capture. It is unlikely that any Palaeolithic ‘Papageno’ followed an extravagant French fowling practice in historical times, cited by Serjeantson (p.99) of first making mallards and teals drunk by pouring wine into water where they swam.

Notwithstanding their difference in style and layout, these books are equally deserving of a wide readership. I strongly recommend that both are read with close attention by archaeologists and their students, as well as by bird-lovers and anyone interested in learning more about life in the past.

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