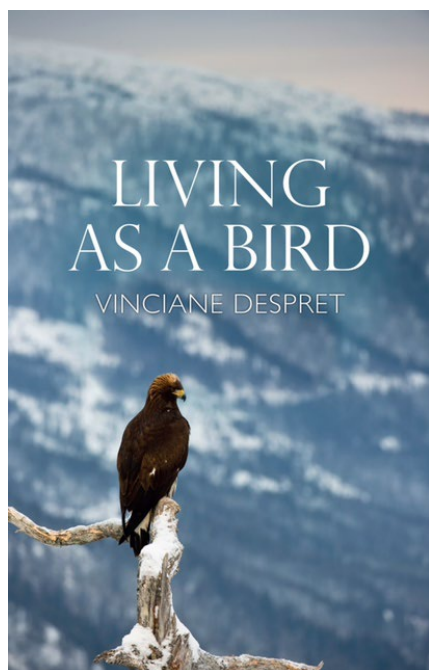


Birder's Book Review *Steve Shultz*



The book opens, “It all began with a blackbird. My bedroom window had remained open for the first time in months, a symbol of victory over winter. The blackbird’s song woke me at dawn. He was singing with all his heart, with all his strength, with all his blackbird talent... This blackbird was singing, as the philosopher Étienne Souriau would say, with all the *enthusiasm* of his body...”

What was this blackbird thinking at the time? Short answer: We don’t know. But much of what we know, or believe we know, about birds results from making observations, and then, necessarily, filtering those observations through the lens of the human mind. Does a bird exhibit aggression toward an intruder because it is defending territory or do we imagine that this is the case because a human would react in this way? We are inherently handicapped in our understanding by our very nature.

Despret looks to examine bird behavior by expertly blending current science with a philosophical view of avian life, challenging long-held beliefs on behavior, especially as it relates to territorial considerations. Often birds are thought of as the epitome of freedom, with the ability, on gliding wing, to travel wherever the winds blow, or, alternatively, to simply respond to stimuli in rote patterns. Despret demonstrates that birds occupy highly complex social structures that lead to rich and nuanced behaviors. For example, is the defense of a territory aggression, or rather might it be better defined as expression, and how can we interpret that expression? Is the goal many male birds’ colorful plumage to attract females, or instead is it to signal other males?

A popular theory on the carrying capacity of a particular parcel of land is that the quantity of young that can successfully be raised is capped by food availability. Despret questions the veracity of this line of thought: “The fact that territories are the site of far more complex social activities than these models could allow us to envisage, activities where the art of distance could also, as we shall see, be the art of finding an arrangement with others, of being attuned to them. And undoubtedly this negligence also indicates stubborn habits of thinking which shape the way in which any territory is perceived.”

Intrigued? *Living as a Bird*, with English translation by Helen Morrison, can be purchased from your favorite bookseller in electronic or hardcopy format. Published by Polity Press (Cambridge UK), the ISBN-13 is 978-1509547272.