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BOOK REVIEW

Rare Birds: The Extraordinary Tale of the Bermuda Petrel and the Man Who Brought It Back from Extinction

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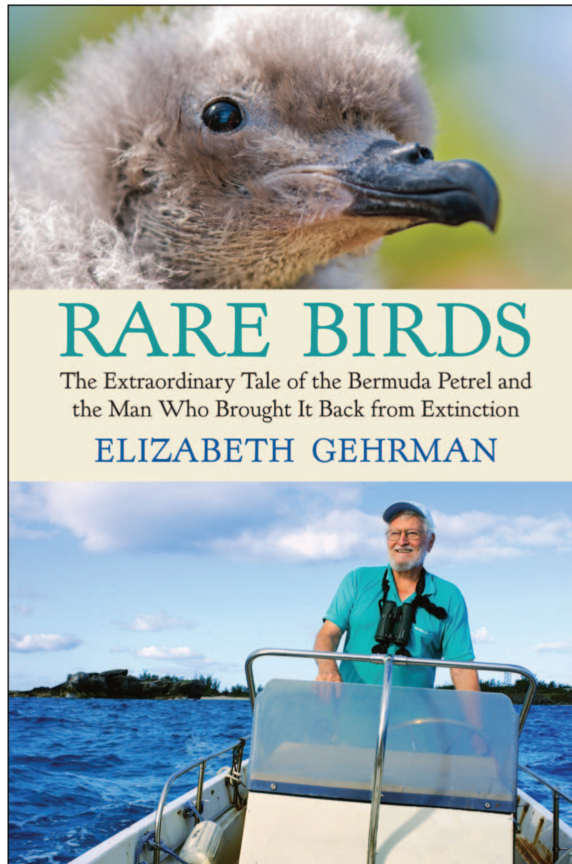
Rare Birds: The Extraordinary Tale of the Bermuda Petrel and the Man Who Brought It Back from Extinction by Elizabeth Gehrman. 2012. Beacon Press. Boston, Massachusetts. xi + 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-8070-1078-5. $26.95 (hardcover), $19.00 (paperback).



"Imagine if a dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) were to suddenly stride out from under the forest canopy of the Indian Ocean Island its ancestors once occupied," Elizabeth Gehrman, the author of this engaging book, asks her readers. Recalling the public, scientific, and government uproar in response to recent propositions that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) might persist, what a sensation it would cause. The equivalent happened on January 28, 1951, when a party led by Robert Cushman Murphy discovered on a small rocky islet an active nest of the Bermuda Petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), a species thought by most to have been extinct for three centuries. Supported by philanthropist Childs Frick, who had a home in Bermuda, Murphy and Louis S. Mowbray of the Bermuda Aquarium had brought on their field trip a couple of younger legs in the form of 15-year-old David Wingate, a local youth who had sufficiently demonstrated his devotion to birds to be invited along.

For some time there had been hints that the Cahow (as the petrel is more familiarly known) might still exist. Local fishermen had long reported hearing their cries, the origin of their name, but their tales were summarily dismissed by more-knowing British naturalists until William Beebe procured a juvenile specimen in 1935. But then World War II intervened, and a massive American airfield was built on top the birds' habitat; the fate of any remnant Cahow was clearly not a high priority. Eventually, conservationist Richard Pough piqued the interest of Frick and Murphy, and the trip was undertaken, thus beginning the Cahow's road to recovery and Wingate's life work. After gaining his zoology degree at Cornell, Wingate eschewed proffered higher degrees to return to Bermuda because, in his words: "Bringing back the Cahow is what I was meant to do." His efforts were to be a burden he willingly shouldered for some forty years by whatever means he could. The birds' recovery, now being led by Wingate's successor Jeremy Madeiros, as of 2016 had reached a population of more than 100 breeding pairs (J. Madeiros, personal communication). Some of these pairs are a result of Madeiros' translocation of fledging birds to Nonsuch Island, Bermuda, the site of Beebe's field station, Wingate and family's

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long-time home, and the location for one of Wingate's other great conservation ventures, turning Nonsuch into a living museum of pre-colonial Bermuda.

The Cahow's fascinating conservation story is a worthwhile, yet perhaps a secondary reason to read this book. The author has, in fact, produced a journalistic gem. What she offers the reader is an understanding of a history, a people, a place, and individuals into which she seamlessly weaves one of the great conservation stories of the century just past. She clearly scoured the written record, both scientific and civic; she interviewed the available players, most now retired to their porches; she was granted access to Wingate's treasure trove of daily diaries dating from his childhood, spent time with him, and above all spent time absorbing what Bermuda has to reveal. I knew a bit of this story, having the privilege to consider myself one of Wingate's legion of colleagues (he taught me how to anchor my boat next to a rocky key). I can attest that the author got it right regarding both of the book's subjects, the bird and the man. This is no uncritical paean; it's an honest study of an ornithologist perhaps a bit more driven than most. As she describes: "Walking around a nature reserve with David Wingate is kind of what it must be like to stroll through Asbury Park, New Jersey, with Bruce Springsteen, if he were moonlighting as a polymathic college professor." (I find similes in nonfiction to be mostly forced and annoying; Gehrman's are delightful). A nature reserve in Bermuda is a tiny remnant or refurbished pocket of a sort-of natural space within a totally human-dominated landscape. And any reserve on Bermuda is a Wingate ward.

The book begins by introducing us to David Wingate who, at the time of writing, was a bit hobbled by a back injury but undiminished in spirit. The author slowly reveals his personal history and personality segueing into the Cahow's story and Wingate's role. We are reminded that Wingate had no roadmap to follow in his conservation efforts, in that ecology and conservation were very new in the late 1950s and little was known about any species of petrel. As Stuart Primm shares: "No one—or very few people indeed—had ever tried anything like this before. . . . There wasn't a manual. . . . It wasn't as if he could have gone to scientific journals and found advice on saving a species" in the wild.

The author then delves more deeply into the long human history of Bermuda and that history's intersection with the Cahow, often informed through Wingate's stories and explanations. Early Bermudians quickly ate their way through much of what was once a huge Cahow population, with pigs and rats taking care of the rest, other than those few birds that had isolated themselves on nearly inaccessible and mostly unsuitable off-shore islets. After the rediscovery, we next learn of early efforts to help the bird, first by others while Wingate was at college, and then through Wingate's painstaking trial-and-error work as he recovered the species one bird at a time. We also learn of his nearly solo efforts to turn Nonsuch back to the pre-settlement habitat in which the birds once thrived. Into this are woven stories of his life on Nonsuch with his two daughters and his willing wife, including her tragic and still haunting death. We follow his battles against burrow competitors, DDT impacts, his relentless efforts to recreate Nonsuch, and some of his many other conservation engagements. We learn more about the biology of petrels, and cannot help develop an affection for the rather endearing Cahow. (During the nesting season you can see for yourself on the CahowCam—http://livestream.com/LookBermuda/CahowCam.) We come to gain a bit of insight about life on an overpopulated island, where everyone knows one another, sometimes through multiple generations, and has learned the need to accept people as they are.

Eventually, knowing that mandatory retirement was approaching, Wingate recruited Madeiros, who was appointed his successor in 2000 as Conservation Officer in the Department of Conservation Services, Applied Ecology Section. Of course retirement is often not the easiest patch in life, especially for a life so closely linked to a species, many individuals of which one actually knows, and to a particular small patch of land, responsibilities for which had come to be assigned to the governmental position now surrendered. Once responsibility is transferred to a new generation, things are bound to change. The author handles these challenging years caringly but honestly. We leave the story in 2011, as the first translocated birds return to start their new colony at Nonsuch.

By the end, readers will feel satisfied that they've finished a clear linear story, but that is far from the case. In fact, the book journeys seamlessly among geology, paleontology, ornithology, natural history, centuries-old human history, yesterday's news and today's happenings, the scientific literature, the author's own experiences, Wingate's stories and insights, his unedited contemporaneous journals, and candid interviews, all with such skill that the book just flows along. Beacon Press over its long run has published some remarkable and socially important books; this little-known book should be added to its list of accomplishments. By all means read it and put it in any library you may influence as an inspiration to 15-year-old budding ornithologists everywhere.

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