

The History of British Birds.

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Source: The Auk, 127(3) : 724

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2010.127.3.724>

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The Auk 127(3):724, 2010
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 Printed in USA.

The History of British Birds.—Derek W. Yalden and Umberto Albarella. 2009. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom. vi + 263 pp. ISBN 9780199581160. Paperback, \$49.95.—Alden and Albarella undertook a very ambitious project in writing this book, which is nothing less than a comprehensive history of the avifauna of the British Isles from the Mesozoic to the present. Similar works have been published about other European countries in recent years, and more are in preparation, a sign that avian zooarchaeology in Europe has now reached a point where there is enough data to make large-scale syntheses worthwhile.

The book starts with a general chapter describing some of the basics of avian osteology, chronology, and the nature of the fossil and archaeological record of birds. The rest of the book is devoted to describing the avian record in broadly chronological order. Both authors are archaeozoologists and not paleontologists, and the second chapter, which covers the interval from the Cretaceous to the Last Glacial Maximum, is rather superficial; however, once the Late Glacial is reached, the treatment broadens. Subsequent chapters describe the subfossil record and the changes in the avifauna that it indicates in roughly chronological order, though there are

sections on the archaeological record of domestic birds and falconry as well. There is also a very interesting effort at a quantitative and qualitative reconstruction of the avifauna during the Mesolithic, at the Holocene climatic optimum (~7,000 BP), before the introduction of farming.

One somewhat unusual and quite interesting chapter is about “Birds in placenames.” Using placenames to reconstruct past bird distributions is a promising approach of which Yalden has been something of a pioneer. If anything should be criticized in this chapter, it is that in most cases only English and Old Norse names have been considered. There is room, therefore, for further study by an ornithologist who is familiar with Cymric and Gaelic and interested in faunal history, if any such exists.

Great Britain is fortunate in having an unusually long and rich historical record of its avifauna, going back to the Anglo-Saxon period. This means that during the past millennium or so the emphasis shifts from archaeological to written sources (including a fascinating section about Shakespeare’s knowledge of birds). The coverage of changes in the avifauna during the past few centuries is focused on the species whose status has changed most, such as the Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*), Common Raven (*Corvus corax*), and the raptors. The final chapter summarizes the current status of the avifauna and discusses possible changes in the near future. This is admirably balanced, and free of the somewhat hysterical speculation that has lately become politically correct.

The book ends with an appendix that summarizes the fossil record from the Middle Pleistocene (Cromerian), species by species, a total of about 9,000 records. Unfortunately, the information and references for the individual archaeological sites are spread out in a number of tables in the text, which makes tracing a specific record back to the source a somewhat laborious affair.

All in all, this volume is a remarkable effort and can be strongly recommended to anyone interested in the faunal history of the British Isles or the Western Palearctic in general.—TOMMY TYRBERG, *Kimstadsv. 37, SE-610 20, Kimstad, Sweden. E-mail: tommy.tyrberg@norrkoping.mail.telia.com*