

ABOUT BOOKS

A John Ford “Wannabe” Channels Konrad Lorenz and Shows that Sometimes the Bird in the Bush *Is* the Same as the Bird in the Hand

Mark Lynch

Winged Migration. 2001. DVD release 2003. Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud, and Michel Debats, Co-directors.

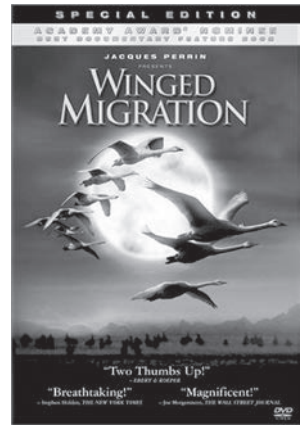
“Call it my women’s intuition, if you will. But I’ve never trusted neatness. Neatness has always been the form of very deliberate planning.” — Leonard in *North By Northwest*.

“**special effects (SP-EFX, FX, SFX).** Artificially devised effects used to create illusory impressions in a motion picture.” — pp. 1282, *The Film Encyclopedia*

The gushing was relentless and unstoppable. “Have you seen *Winged Migration* yet?” every birder I met would ask me with the look of a cult devotee. They would then launch into endless rhapsodic appraisals of this “documentary” film’s amazing footage of bird migration. The hyperbole in reviews was also extreme. As Jim Verniere of the *Boston Herald* wrote, quoted on the back of the DVD: “It is enough to leave even Matrix fans staring at the screen, gaping in awe.”

In many reviews of the film it was often conspicuously mentioned that the film used “no special effects.” This was touted as proof of the directors’ amazing luck and tenacity at getting those perfect shots. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the film, in the title sequence, there is even the quote: “No special effects were used in the filming of the birds.”

Folks were certainly swept away by calendar-perfect cinematography that seemed well nigh impossible to have filmed. There were endless dramatic and extremely close shots of birds in flight. Birds were filmed in extraordinary and bizarre situations: alighting on a ship on a storm-tossed sea, landing in the polluted muck of a factory, or flying by the Eiffel Tower at dawn. A pair of Common Cranes is shown walking on the burning sands of the Sahara. Canada Geese are seen in the last place you would look for geese: a picturesque painted desert of canyons and buttes right out of the movies. “How did they ever get those shots?” folks wondered. Missing in all the buzz about the film’s visuals was a more serious and critical appraisal of the film’s structure, its hidden agendas, and what the film was actually showing. Lastly, no birder I talked to ever mentioned the ditzy soundtrack.



My initial reaction on viewing the film was not at all positive. I found the structure a mess. The camera moved from one far-flung location to the next with little reason, to the point of confusion. Locations were often not identified, and viewers were left wondering if that desolate icy location was in Iceland, Alaska, or the Kamchatka Peninsula. One moment we are looking at a Hyacinth Macaw escaping its captors on the Amazon (identified by a simple title as such); the next moment we are following albatrosses soaring over the angry seas of the southern hemisphere; and then we are looking at penguins, first at Rockhoppers, followed by Kings. Scenes that seemed to have nothing to do with the main theme of the film were inserted as if for no other reason than that they were “entertaining” breaks from those ponderous never-ending shots of geese flying. In one place we are following Snow Geese in flight, and in the next scene we are looking at Clark’s Grebes performing their prenuptial mating dance on the water, or Sage Grouse booming on a lek. Both avian events are well known to anyone who has watched the Discovery Channel. Neither scene added anything to the film’s purported theme to focus on the migration of birds.

The weirdly sporadic narration by actor/director Jacques Perrin made me long for the halcyon days of Jacques Cousteau getting wet and tan aboard the *Calypso*. For no apparent reason, Perrin’s Gallic tones are suddenly heard invoking such hoary lines as: migration is “the story of a promise...a promise to return” with all the *joie de vivre* of a haughty waiter reciting that night’s specials to American tourists. Perhaps Perrin can be forgiven his dull recitation, since his resume includes acting in such signature films as *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (French title: *Le Pacte des Loups*) and lots of French TV.

Many individual scenes are cringingly pat and trite, yet designed to still get a primal emotional rise out of a nature-loving audience. Out of nowhere, again for no reason, we are shown a phalanx of large wheat combines menacingly approaching a ground-nesting quail, which stays in place as the soundtrack plays a poor man’s version of Star Wars “menace” muzak. The film then cuts before we see what happens. Where were we? Why were we just shown this scene? We never see another quail in the entire film. In another tearjerker segment, caged Canada Geese are shown honking up at passing “wild” Canadas. Perrin et al. have carefully edited scenes to further this Disneyfied and anthropomorphic attitude toward the natural world. A Giant Petrel is shown grabbing and possibly eating a young King Penguin. The actual kill is not shown, only the getting of the chick and then a close-up of the Giant Petrel’s bloody maw. The very next scene is of penguins, which may not have even been the adults in the scene, slowly raising their beaks to the skies and then lowering them as if in mourning. There is likely no actual connection between the two scenes; the film is just edited in such a way to get that kind reaction from the audience.

And, yes, there are obviously “special effects” in the film. There are several enhanced scenes of birds flying high over computer-generated topographic maps of Africa and Europe. Similarly, altered images of birds are shown flying against stars, from inside an observatory, and in silhouette against the end credits. If all of these are not “special effects,” then I need an updated copy of my *Larousse de Poche*.

The music? Well, suffice it say that if the Ray Coniff Singers went to their first Burning Man Festival and took Ecstasy, the results probably would be “*la même chose*.” The music is intrusive and distracting in many scenes.

The cinematography is impressive on the surface, but suspiciously too perfect. My gut reaction on first seeing the film was that there was quite a collection of nearly impossible shots. Lighting, background, and circumstance all seemed to miraculously have come together time, and again, as if staged to create that perfect moment. To get any one of those shots would have been a coup, a stroke of extraordinary luck. Like the villain Leonard in Hitchcock’s masterpiece *North By Northwest*, I found so much “neatness” deeply suspicious. To have so many perfect scenes in one nature film seemed impossible for a “documentary.” I don’t care how many years and folks were involved in the project. And I was right.

I was waiting for the DVD release of this film because I was hoping that it would include some additional material, as do many contemporary DVDs, that would enable me to learn more about the filming of *Winged Migration*. Indeed, among the “Special Features” of the DVD release was a documentary section described as “Incredible “Making-of” goes behind the scenes in revealing how this extraordinary film was made.”

“Of course there’s conscious manipulation! Everything about a movie is manipulation...if you like it, it’s an interpretation. If you don’t like it, it’s a lie, but everything about these movies is a distortion.” — Legendary documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman.

Much of the beginning of the “Making of...” documentary deals with the intensive program of imprinting hatchling geese, swans, pelicans, cranes, and ducks that occurred in Normandy over the years in preparation for the filming of *Winged Migration*. The imprinting techniques and writings of Konrad Lorenz are given as the director’s guide and inspiration. Consequently, most of the shots of geese (Bar-headed, Canada, Greylag, Barnacle, Snow, and Red-breasted), White Pelicans, Whooper Swans, and Common Cranes seen in *Winged Migration* were of captive-reared and extensively trained birds. These domestic birds were raised from the egg to follow the ultralights, paragliders, motorcycles, and even hot air balloons used to film them in flight by responding to the constant beeping of a horn. These birds were raised to be totally dependent on humans. This required a lot of personnel, which included young veterinarian students and what the film describes as people found “through the unemployment office.”

The birds were then crated up and shipped with the film equipment to whatever site Jacques Perrin had determined would make a good scene on film. Thus, tame Bar-headed Geese born and raised in Normandy, France, were then trucked to the Himalayas and dumped out into the snow, ice, and cold, which they had never experienced before, to be filmed. Barnacle Geese were sent on board the French warship the Loire and filmed flying over heavy seas beside the ship and eventually, following the horn, landing on it. The tame European-raised Whooper Swans were shipped to Vietnam, where a crew flew them over and over a rice paddy to get that

one perfect shot of them flying behind the oxcart with the tethered ibis — which they also lugged in from a nearby location. Every single time those perfect shots were just setups with living props.

Several of these situations detailed in the “Making Of...” were particularly troubling:

*Canada Geese were trucked in Penske vans to the desert’s Monument Valley, Utah. The narrator describes the area as the “land of legends, westerns and road movies.” The director declares his wish to film the geese against “scenery out of a John Ford movie.” The old truck on the road that the geese are seen hanging around is also towed in because it makes a good prop. In the meantime, the poor geese are led hither and yon over the desert floor by workers beeping their ever-present horns. It is obvious that this is all about “the shot,” not really showing any kind of reality of Canada Goose migration. Do geese even occur here at this spot naturally with any kind of regularity? Would you see them at this time of the year? Or would they be flying high overhead?

* Common Cranes are brought to the Sahara Desert in Libya and filmed in temperatures, which are described as “exhausting,” ranging from +45 degrees to 0 degrees Celsius. Cranes do cross the Sahara in migration, but soaring on thermals high over the desert. I doubt that healthy cranes with a desire to live would hang out walking on the burning sands for any length of time as these cranes are forced to do.

*White Pelicans are shipped to Senegal and then Tanzania. The film documents the fact that they all get ill and have to be force-fed. The reason they are in Senegal is so they can be filmed flying over sun-baked earth. But the weather does not cooperate, so the recovering pelicans are filmed on the seaside. The reason they are brought to Kenya is simply to film them against a dramatic backdrop: Mount Kilimanjaro.

Periodically, some birds would wander off the script and the scene, only to be found again. Once, a flock of Barnacle Geese fly away from the filming area and are later found in the center of town in the police station parking lot, attesting to the fact that these birds were not wild birds by any stretch of the imagination.

There are some genuine wild scenes in *Winged Migration*. The scenes of the penguin colonies, the lekking Sage Grouse, and the alcid colonies are all wild birds in their natural settings. However, the filming of the alcid nesting cliffs is a bit troubling. You see the filmmakers setting up amazingly intrusive cranes and rigging designed to drop the cameraperson quickly down close to the side of the cliff, all the while flushing birds off nests. In most cases, these “wild scenes” have little to do with the purported concept of the film: migration. As a matter of fact, these “natural scenes,” including the cranes at the Arasaki refuge in Japan, have all been filmed before by a number of other nature cinematographers. Sad to say, many of these other more modest efforts are much better products: better filmed, more focused, and more informative.

To call *Winged Migration* a “documentary” is very misleading. In fact, at one point in the “Making Of...”, Perrin describes his film thusly: “We are making a film that is neither fiction nor documentary, just a natural tale.” I confess I have no idea what he means by “natural tale.”

I found this film to be less about the natural world and more about man making nature conform to his idea of what it should look like. It is a film rife with anthropomorphic artifice, a film about making the natural look “pretty,” and the construction of a story we think nature should tell. When I explained to friends how the birds were filmed and treated in *Winged Migration*, they often responded with something along the lines of “well, if at least it makes people interested in birds, I guess it’s all right.” I could not disagree more. To me, this is like saying of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, “well, at least if it gets folks interested in physical fitness....” You are missing some of the most important elements of a film if you only critique it on such simple terms.

For any film, especially a “documentary,” is important that it be understood from the point of view of its cultural milieu, its social impact, and the agendas of the filmmakers, as well as from its formal aspects like editing and cinematography. *Winged Migration* has become the third highest grossing documentary film of all time (*New York Times* July 5, 2004, p. B1). Why, when in reality it is not even a “documentary,” by the directors’ own admission? It was extensively marketed here in America as such. We were misled at best. People wanted to believe that all the scenes represented the real, natural world because we want to think that nature conforms to a simple, dramatic story that looks nice. What was surprising to me is how many birders, who should have known better, did not look at this film more critically, but instead just responded to the lovely scenery and close-up shots of the pretty birds.

In some ways, *Winged Migration* can be considered largely as a “special effect” film in which controlled birds were used to present a simulacrum of nature, but without nature’s chaos, complexity, and spontaneity. Perrin’s use of birds is similar to Alfred Hitchcock’s use of trained and mechanical birds in his classic *The Birds* (1963). In both films, what appears to be wild nature is in fact tamed and made to perform on cue. In one instance it is for dramatic effect, and in the other it is for aesthetic effect. The natural world presented in *Winged Migration* is often, but not always, an illusion. Not that there is anything wrong with a filmmaker making that kind of film. However, I believe most viewers here in America thought they were watching one movie when in fact the directors had made quite a different film.

Even as an education tool, this film falls short. *Winged Migration* shows migration only in the most basic, simplistic terms, with little understanding of the complications and variations of these phenomena. Shorebirds get extremely little film time and then only in the distance. Passeriformes are skipped over almost entirely, except for the European Robin that opens and closes the film. This species is mostly a migrant within Europe and a permanent resident in countries like France and Britain. Many novices watching the film will come away thinking all migrants go to the Arctic in summer and the tropics in winter, because that is what the film leads you to believe.

The most troubling aspect of *Winged Migration* is the treatment of the birds, which amounts to something between Lassie and a prop. Birds were forced to perform with no choice in the matter of locations for which they were ill prepared or even, sometimes, probably not even genetically predisposed to deal with. For instance, the Canada Geese brought to the deserts of Utah — were they from the European population of Canada Geese, which do not migrate through deserts? I am no animal rights activist, but certain scenes like the sick pelicans in Senegal, the cranes in the burning Sahara, the geese in the desert, and others can certainly be interpreted as possibly abusive to the animals. Especially when you realize that birds were captives being run through their paces time and again so the cameramen could get the shot right. Interestingly, two scenes that were not shown in the “Making Of...” documentary were of the Red-breasted Geese landing in the pollution and the scenes of goose hunting in which it seemed that the geese we were following were shot. What did happen in these scenes? How did the birds do afterwards? It is also interesting that no mention is made whatsoever of what became of these birds once the filming was over. Were they released? Kept in captivity? I began to ask myself: “Did birds die during the filming of *Winged Migration*?” I sincerely hope not. But these are the kinds of troubling questions that are bound to come up when a film about the natural world is created as “not a fiction, not a documentary.”

“What is not in nature can never be true.”-Voltaire. 🦅



YOUNG PEREGRINE FALCONS BY DAVID A. SIBLEY

News from the USFWS

Ducks Migrating North Found Poor Breeding Conditions

Migrating ducks returning to important nesting areas in the north-central U.S. and southern Canadian prairies this spring were greeted by dry conditions, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual waterfowl survey. Although many areas received winter snow, including a late spring snowstorm in the southern portions of the survey area, the snowmelt was absorbed by the parched ground.

In the traditional survey area, known as the Prairie Pothole region, the total duck population estimate (excluding scoters, eiders, long-tailed ducks, mergansers, and wood ducks) was 32.2 million birds. This estimate is 11 percent below last year's estimate of 36.2 million birds and similar to the 1955-2003 long-term average.

Mallard abundance was 7.4 million birds, which was similar to last year's estimate of 7.9 million birds and the long-term average.

Blue-winged teal were estimated at 4.1 million birds, 26 percent below last year's estimate of 5.5 million and 10 percent below the long-term average.

Among other duck species, only shoveler, at 2.8 million, and wigeon, at 2.0 million, estimates were significantly different from those of last year, both of which were 22 percent lower than in 2003 estimates.

In comparison with long-term averages, the 2004 estimates were higher for gadwall at 2.6 million (+56 percent), green-winged teal at 2.5 million (+33 percent), and shovelers (+32 percent), and lower for pintails at 2.2 million (- 48 percent), scaup at 3.8 million (- 27 percent), and wigeon (- 25 percent). Redhead, at 605,000, and canvasback, at 617,000, estimates were similar to their long-term averages.

Most of the U.S. and Canadian prairies were much drier in May of 2004 than in May of 2003. Total pond numbers were 24 percent lower than last year, and the change was greater in Canada, down 29 percent to 2.5 million ponds, than in the north-central United States, down 16 percent to 1.4 million ponds. Snow and low temperatures during May probably had an adverse impact on early-nesting species and young broods. Although many prairie areas received abundant rain after the May surveys, this water likely did not alleviate the dry conditions, because much of it also soaked into the ground.

The Northwest Territories, Northern Alberta, Northern Saskatchewan, and Northern Manitoba were exceptionally late in thawing this year, so the birds that over-flew the dry prairies encountered winter-like conditions, and nesting may have been curtailed. This is especially true for early-nesting species such as mallards and pintails. Late-nesters will have better success.

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Alaska birds should produce well because of excellent habitat conditions. Areas south of Alaska's Brooks Range experienced a widespread, record-setting early spring breakup, and flooding due to the rapid thaw was minor.

In the eastern United States and Canada, breeding habitat conditions generally were good to excellent. Although spring was late in most areas, biologists believed that nesting was not significantly affected because of abundant spring rain and mild temperatures.

In the eastern survey area, the 2004 total duck population estimate was 3.9 million birds, similar to both last year and the 1996-2003 average. Estimates for individual species also were similar to those of last year and the 8-year average, with the exception of ring-necked ducks, which was 67 percent above the 2003 estimate, and wigeon and goldeneyes, which were 61 percent and 42 percent below their 8-year averages, respectively.

US Army Corps of Engineers Volunteer Clearinghouse

The US Army Corps of Engineers Volunteer Clearinghouse is a national information center for people who are interested in volunteering their time at Corps lakes and projects.

People may contact the Volunteer Clearinghouse on a toll-free telephone number, 800-VOL-TEER or 800-865-8337, and on the website www.lrn.usace.army.mil/volunteer.

The Corps of Engineers is the steward of almost 12 million acres of land and water at 460 lakes across the country. Volunteers play an important role in protecting the natural resources and maintaining recreation areas.

The Clearinghouse links volunteer workers with Corps lakes and projects across the country that can use their services. Each person that contacts the Clearinghouse receives a volunteer packet with opportunities, points of contact, application, and brochure.

Volunteers serve as campground hosts, staff visitor centers, conduct programs, clean shorelines, restore fish and wildlife habitat, maintain park trails and facilities, and more. A free campsite is sometimes provided for volunteers.

National Public Lands Day and other one-day events attract many individuals and groups to volunteer to make a difference at parks, lakes, and trails.

Volunteers are not paid but receive other benefits. They work outdoors at beautiful lakes, help people and the environment, meet new people, gain valuable skills, have fun, and enjoy making a difference.

Nationwide, over 70,000 volunteers contributed 1.2 million hours of services annually at Corps lakes and projects with an estimated value of \$13.5 million.

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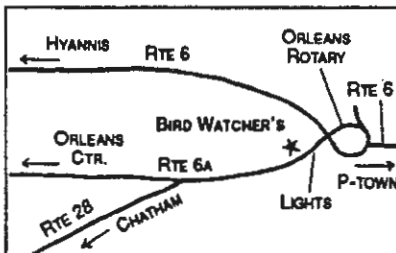
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NUTTALL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

2004 Request for Proposals

Charles Blake Fund Grants

The Nuttall Ornithological Club is soliciting proposals for bird-related projects to be conducted in 2004-2005 under the direction of organizations meeting certain qualifications (see below). Selected projects will be supported by grants from the Club's Charles Blake Fund.

Grants will support ornithological research, conservation, and education, with particular emphasis on the birds of New England and the Northeast. The Fund will support grants for research, publication, education, and other worthy ornithology-related efforts.

The postmark-date deadline for applications is September 15, 2004. Awards will be announced by October 15, 2004. All funds will be distributed by October 31, 2004.

Application Guidelines:

1. Applying organizations must be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and must not be private foundations under section 509(a). Applications from individuals will not be considered.
2. Three typed copies of a brief proposal must be submitted in the following format:
 - a) Title page: project title and brief abstract; name, address and phone number; proposed starting and completion dates; total amount requested from the Charles Blake Fund;
 - b) Narrative of up to 5 pages including a) objectives, b) brief review of what is already known or has already been done, c) methods, d) value of the project to ornithology, e) project timetable, including a submission date for the final report, f) detailed budget, including funds applied for or expected from other sources;
 - c) Brief statement of investigator qualifications and a resume; and
 - d) Documentary evidence of section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status must be provided with each proposal.
 - e) It is encouraged that the above be submitted in electronic form as an alternative to paper submission.

3. Grants will be awarded on an annual basis from total available funds. The available money varies annually, but rarely is below \$15,000 per year. Proposals may request up to that entire amount. Applications for projects expected to last more than one year will be considered, but no commitment beyond the funds available in the present year will be made.

Nuttall Ornithological Club 2004-2005 Blake Fund Criteria

4. Proposals will be reviewed by the Blake Fund Committee and will be selected for awards based on the following merits:

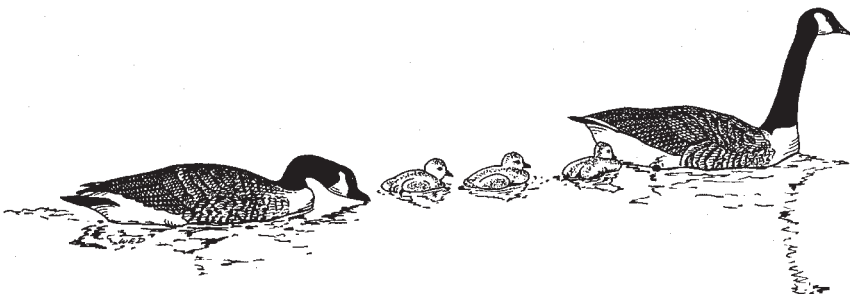
- a) Contribution to the goals of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,
- b) Conservation, management, or educational applications,
- c) Scientific merit,
- d) Feasibility, and
- e) Qualifications of investigator(s).

5. Typically the Blake Funds, along with other Club funds (when available), are distributed in grants ranging from \$1000 to \$5000. Grants requested for more than one year will be noted, but funding will be on an annual basis only. No commitments to future funding are inherent in any grant.

6. Grant payments will be made directly to the 501(c)(3) organizations, and the Nuttall Ornithological Club will retain no authority over use of paid grant funds. However, the Nuttall Ornithological Club requires that recipients prepare a report on their work and use of grant money within twelve months of receiving the grant.

Proposals should be addressed to:

David S. Deifik, M.D.
Nuttall Ornithological Club
Chair, Blake Fund Committee
C/O Dartmouth-Hitchcock Nashua
21 E. Hollis St.
Nashua, NH 03060
Email: David.S.Deifik@Hitchcock.Org



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