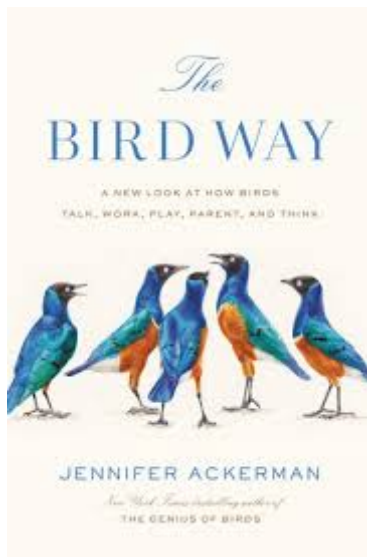


## Book Review - The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent and Think

JoAnn Hackos. 09/28/2020 :

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Jennifer Ackerman has published another tour de force on birds, following her book, *The Genius of Birds*, that I reviewed in 2018. *The Bird Way* (Penguin Press, New York, 2020) is a comprehensive review of a series of bird behaviors, all of them astonishing. She begins by asserting that birds are incredibly diverse in “plumage, form, song, flight, niche, and behavior.” That’s one of the reasons we are such dedicated birdwatchers.



*The Bird Way* highlights a wide variety of behaviors: how birds talk, work, play, love, and parent. Much of the book focuses on new insights into bird behavior produced by scientific study, all of it mind-boggling. Ackerman is amazed by the diversity of bird behaviors. Some are agile fliers, and others do not fly at all. Some, like albatrosses, spend years on the wing. Others, like the Bar-tailed Godwit, migrate from Alaska to New Zealand in a single 7,000-mile flight. They dive deep and fly high. Some are tiny, like the Bee Hummingbird. Others a huge and were once even bigger, like the extinct New Zealand birds.

*The Bird Way* is divided into sections by behaviors. The first section focuses on Bird Talk, a comprehensive look at how birds communicate. Ackerman tells us that “they talk while they court and while they fight, while they forage and while they travel, while they stave off predators and while they raise their young.” They communicate with their own species and with other species, warning of danger or giving an “all clear.” She is baffled by the dawn chorus, with everyone singing at once. Why dawn? she asks. Perhaps cooler and calmer air carries sound better. One scientist who studies sound believes that the dawn chorus permits birds to affirm their place with “mates, family groups, neighbors, and flocks.”

The section on Play Begins with Ravens. We've seen them in play ourselves, flying over Mount Evans, at times upright and at other times up-side-down. They like to frolic, even as adults. Some birds throw things. Others enjoy a good ride. Parrots hang upside down, nibbling on a flower from below. Gulls like to drop things and catch them in midair. It's a real circus out there.

One of the most intriguing chapters focuses on the New Zealand Kea, the clowns of the mountains, one of the "most playful birds on the planet." If you've been to New Zealand mountains where there are keas, you know that you have to be careful that they don't eat the windshield wipers and any other rubber on your rental car. They love to steal things. One unlucky tourist lost a wad of cash that was sitting on his dashboard. They also love to play. Here's what happens when they hear a recorded warbling play call.

"The recording of the warbling play call is heard in the background, and suddenly the birds look at each other, burst into squeals, and launch into play, becoming exceedingly silly, chasing each other, flapping up and down, picking up rocks and flinging them, playing hard for the full five minutes of the recording."

Jennifer Ackerman's writing on bird behavior is incredibly compelling. She tells us that writing the book changed the way she sees birds. She would love to experience the world as they do. The scientific studies that she describes through the book may lead you to the same point of view. To think that we are losing huge numbers of birds of every kind is even more distressing when you consider just how varied and unique they are. We have learned recently that we have lost nearly three billion birds since 1970 in North America.

Jennifer Ackerman has created an amazing account of so many bird behaviors that she makes the possibility of vast extinctions even more troublesome. We hope it's not too late to change how we treat our environment.

Please consider reading *The Bird Way*. It will change how you think of birds too.