

'IT'S BEEN A BIT OF AN OBSESSION'

The latest book by Tim Flach HonFRPS takes the viewer on a dazzling journey through the world of birds. It's about creating a sense of empathy and wonderment, he explains

WORDS: DAVID CLARK IMAGES: TIM FLACH HonFRPS



“It’s been a bit of an obsession,” says Tim

Flach, looking back over the three years he has spent photographing birds for his latest project. “To do something like this I think you probably need that obsessional process, where you get into a subject and immerse yourself in it. I find delving into something in some depth allows you to find things you wouldn’t find otherwise.”

Flach is talking via Zoom from his studio in central London, where the walls are hung with prints of his ornithological subjects, while his assistants busily work on screens in the background. Like most photographers, he has had a “less complicated diary” since the pandemic began last year, allowing him to develop his work in other ways, including reflecting on his photographic processes.

“Covid has stopped a lot of things happening,” he says, “but having fewer distractions from commissions and going abroad to do conferences allowed me to develop my post-production skills. It also gave me time to reflect back on the work of artists such as Rembrandt and Turner, and techniques such as chiaroscuro – use of lights and darks and countershading – which have allowed me to figure out how to create more luminosity.”

Now aged 63, Flach became a professional photographer after graduating from Central St Martins College of Art and Design in 1983. Although he has concentrated on commercial work for most of his career, working with agencies including Saatchi and Saatchi, since 2008 he has spent around half his time on his own creative projects. These have focused on animals, examining one single species in depth or a range of different ones, and have included *Equus* (2008), *Dog Gods* (2010), *More Than Human* (2012) and *Endangered* (2017).

Flach’s animal images are immediately recognisable. Subjects are shown in an arresting, original way, usually removed from their natural environment, and concentrate on the animal’s shape, texture and colour. One other aspect to his work, though, sets it apart – the way the images connect with the viewer, who is often invited to make anthropomorphic parallels with themselves.

“The crux I’ve been working towards is to examine what sort of depiction of animals evokes the kind of connection with nature that allows us to entertain the story,” he says. “A lot of what I do is

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‘Toco toucan chick’ from the series *Birds*

trying to figure out how to elicit empathy and emotion around stories that wouldn’t otherwise touch the hearts and minds of people and make them take action.”

Flach says his increased awareness of conservation issues continues to draw him back to animals as subjects. “You go on a journey and you begin to understand better some of the issues and debates,” he says. “When you do that it’s very hard to unsee what you’ve seen. When it comes to the kind of changes that have happened to the natural world and the pressure on those species – how some of them find themselves on the edge of extinction – you can’t really walk away from that. So, if you feel you want to do something with your medium, you’re almost beholden to have to do that as a result of being on that kind of journey.”

Partly inspired by his childhood memories of seabirds on the Cornish coast, Flach’s bird project is a dazzling journey through the ornithological world, showing exotic and unfamiliar as well as better known birds in a new light. There are birds with amazing head and tail feathers or cobalt-blue wattles, enormous ruffs or heavy, multi-coloured bills. There are feeding flamingos, dark brooding ravens, perky parrots and watchful owls. All are presented against plain



‘Toco toucan adult’ from the series *Birds*

backgrounds to focus attention on their appearance, while birds of the same species are juxtaposed to emphasise their differences.

“I am trying to show these birds close up and almost separated from nature, but ironically almost bringing them back through the fact that I’ve taken this sense of otherness to a sense of sameness,” says Flach. “So, they gaze at us and we’re compelled to look back at them.

“On one level I wanted to do something that was slightly indulgent – something that was more visual and decorative. I also had a romantic idea of 19th-century illustrators, such as John James Audubon and artists including Edward Lear, and wanted to produce something that was a continuation of that aesthetic tradition.”

Although drawing influence from these sources, Flach is keen to point out his work is not intended as a field book or bird encyclopaedia. It’s more about distilling the birds’ shape and form, and using photography’s unique qualities as a medium for capturing what 19th-century drawing and painting didn’t or couldn’t show – birds in flight, or diving underwater, or sections of plumage in minute detail.

There are more than 10,000 bird species and Flach had to limit his choice for the project to around 160 of them. The selection was made gradually over a long period.

“When making a choice for a project like this there are the nice-to-haves, the ones you find en route, and the must-haves, the ones people expect to see in a book about birds,” he says. The must-haves included flamingos, penguins, eagles and birds of paradise, and locating specimens to photograph was essential. However, getting images of the nice-to-haves, such as the rhinoceros hornbill or Bulwer’s pheasant, depended on whether a particular species was available, given the limitations on travel during the pandemic.

Flach was helped in both the selection and procurement of birds by the ornithological expert and ‘bird whisperer’ Daniel Cullen, who acted as producer and handler. Cullen advised him on the time of year to photograph individual species in peak condition, the design of purpose-built aviaries and turntables for the birds to sit on, and how to ensure the birds were relaxed and comfortable during the shoots.

In selecting his equipment, Flach wanted to combine flexibility of use with the capability to produce a high level of detail. Accordingly, the majority of the images were shot using a 50-megapixel Canon EOS 5DS, while a small number were taken with a 100-megapixel Hasselblad H6D-100C. While many of the birds were photographed in controlled conditions, sometimes Flach had to shoot them in different environments for aesthetic or practical reasons.



‘Atlantic puffin’ from the series *Birds*

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“Sometimes I just couldn’t get access to particular birds and ended up lying down on a zoo path, shooting with a really long lens and trying to get the bird in the middle of the wire fence so it didn’t show in the picture,” he explains. “Ironically some of those pictures were better than the highly set-up shots with studio lighting. When daylight works, you can’t beat it.”

In the case of gentoo penguins, Flach wanted to show them doing what they do best, diving underwater. Fortunately, he has a friend who is a curator at the Sea Life centre in London, which was closed to the public for several months due to the pandemic. This allowed Flach to set up lights and have krill thrown into the water to encourage the penguins to dive in.

'Temminck's tragopan' from the series *Birds*'Northern cardinal' from the series *Birds*

"I like to create images that tell you something more about the birds," he continues. "If you see penguins walking it doesn't tell you much about their evolutionary morphology, but when you see them diving and you see these torpedo-like characters whizzing through the water, you absolutely understand why they are so extraordinarily designed. Swimming is their flying, isn't it? And in a way it felt right to have them in their element. It was a unique shot to get."

One of the most difficult species to photograph was the Temminck's tragopan, a type of pheasant with a vibrant blue bib-like wattle. The only problem was working out how to get the bird to drop the wattle down and display it. Flach made five separate trips to photograph birds in the UK and Europe and only on the final one did he get the shot he wanted with the bib being displayed – just a few days before deadline.

Birds, the book that has resulted from all this work, is organised as a kind of evolutionary journey. It starts with an image of a 150-million-year-old Archaeopteryx fossil, a species which proved birds evolved from dinosaurs. Following that there are chapters on ratites (flightless birds including the emu and the ostrich), raptors such as eagles and falcons, and ending with poultry – birds whose evolution has been shaped by humans.

'Bulwer's pheasant' from the series *Birds*

'Gentoo penguins' from the series *Birds*



'Red splash Jacobin pigeon' from the series *Birds*

"This sequencing is not absolute, because they're clusters," says Flach. "What we're loosely saying is these clusters do represent what we see as the evolution of birds. What's interesting, when you see them as evolutionary clusters, is that you start seeing different jobs the birds have to do, whether they've got to get through the water or get nectar, for example."

"Evolution extends and shapes them according to the way they feed and their function. When you cluster them, you start making equivalent references between the pictures in those different groups, so I think it's quite productive."

While shooting, Flach was constantly bearing in mind how the images would appear in the final book. "There's the pagination and within the pagination there's the pace," he says. "The real difficulty is if you're turning the pages and all the images are really striking, but in some ways similar, you start to make comparisons – was that one as good as the one before? Sometimes it's really good to be ambiguous, to be confusing, to present something that's facing the wrong way or to show

an abstract, something that makes you think 'what's that?' and takes you away from a direct gaze. It's all part of organising an experience."

Although Flach's bird project doesn't have the direct conservation message of his previous book, which was about endangered species, his aim is to inspire us to value birds more by showing the kind of extraordinary creatures we will lose if the destruction of wildlife habitats continues at its current rate.

"People have become more aware of birds recently," he says, "particularly people working from home during lockdown. But this project is about showing the wonderment of nature, and giving these guys their personality and character so we empathise with their stories even more. Ultimately, I want to convey the idea that without this extended family we, as humans, wouldn't be who we are. If it was taken away, we would be diminished."

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'Splendid starling' from the series *Birds*