

"toward a migratory point of view" (7-9)
by Gretchen Ernster Henderson

becoming–Feral
a book of beasts

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P E L I C A N

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos

toward a migratory point of view

A common symbol in alchemy, the pelican vulns itself like a dragon, yoked with ideas of sacrifice and spiritual resurrection. Transformative as the Philosopher’s Stone, the alchemical bird with a pouch-bill migrates across centuries and continents to reveal life behind death. Consider this case: a series of natural tar seeps (“death traps” or pools of raw oil) spread from tectonic fractures in Utah at Great Salt Lake (a reputedly “dead sea”). Flying from their breeding grounds at Gunnison Island to feed at the nearby Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge,¹ pelicans frequent the lakeshore and sometimes get trapped in the tar seeps. The birds become fossils-in-the-making (akin to future stones) and leave a record of the lake’s life. Once you learn of pelicans at tar seeps, they stick in your imagination, transforming any stone into a potential philosophy.

Imagine the lake through pelican eyes: at the convergence of two of the four major bird flyways of North America. Pelicans have migrated over national and political borders, into Canada and Mexico and beyond. In Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, he described how pelicans “set wing, descending in majestic spirals” as if “landing in the geological past”.² To “think like a mountain,” Leopold illuminated a lithic philosophy through the complex web of an ecosystem—accounting for centuries of time and space, where all flora and fauna have grown in and out of one another interdependently. Unlike a mountain or plant, rooted in a particular ecosystem, a pelican does not stay in one place. Pelicans migrate.

In *Silent Spring* (a title borne of birdsong), Rachel Carson also wrote of pelicans—in the same breath as herons, grebes, gulls, and other fish-eating bird species—who imbibed insecticides like DDT; as she wrote, “Can we suppose that poisons we introduce into water will not also enter into those cycles of nature?”³ Pollutants can affect migratory birds and, in turn,

multiple bioregions. From a migratory point-of-view, to think like a pelican moves between ecosystems. A pelican's perspective crosses places, species, and seasons back to ancestral dinosaurs while traversing current-day flyways. Flight becomes a way to think and, as it is enacted, continues the learning curve of thought. Beyond "sylvan thinking" (as Eduardo Kohn describes in *How Forests Think*),⁴ a bird's wings demonstrate adaptation around air streams over generations, acting as an expression beyond language.

More communication cohabits the planet: as whales are singing (as military sonar bursts their eardrums and brains, displacing marine migrations), as stones are ringing (as geologists measure seismic vibrations and Indigenous collectives protect ossified ancestral voices), as birds continue singing and winging (as three billion bird species have gone extinct in the past fifty years). Philosophy may once have shimmered as an alchemical, smelted stone, but pelicans and other birds continually transform what has been conjured and extracted by humankind.

Even by abandoned attempts at oil drilling, near "death traps," pelicans reveal a reputedly dead sea brimming with life. If humans could perceive this watershed through pelicans' eyes, through a bird's eye view, we might better sense the lake's vulnerable life entangled with our own. Among climate-driven

migrations—avian and other—non-human species continually renew their relationships with evolving ecosystems, acknowledging what the land already knows. This is not new, but renewed and renewable knowledge. "In indigenous ways of knowing," writes botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), "other species are recognized not only as persons, but also as teachers who can inspire how we might live. We can learn a new solar economy from plants, medicines from mycelia, and architecture from the ants."⁵ Through a migratory perspective, pelicans are one bird among many that encourage renewing the planet through a bird's eye view.

Gretchen Ernster Henderson

—Migrating from Washington, DC
to Arizona, USA



Field Note: Pelican bones at tar seeps, Rozel Point,
Great Salt Lake, Utah, March 2019
Photograph, Gretchen Ernster Henderson



16. Kjartansdóttir, “The Changing Symbolic Meaning of the Extinct Great Auk,” 50.
17. Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 84.

OCHRE SEA STAR

1. Citlalli Aquino et al., “Evidence That Microorganisms at the Animal-Water Interface Drive Sea Star Wasting Disease,” in *Frontiers in Microbiology* (2021) 11:610009, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.610009>

PELICAN

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2. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1949) 1989), 159.
3. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1962), 45-6.
4. Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

5. Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Nature Needs a New Pronoun: To Stop the Age of Extinction...,” *Yes! Magazine* online, 30 March 2015. She continues, “By learning from other species, we might even learn humility.”

This entry on ‘pelican’ interrelates with my book, *Life in the Tar Seeps: Overlooked Ecologies at Great Salt Lake and Beyond* (forthcoming Trinity University Press).

PYGMY RABBIT

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