



FOR THE BIRDS

1900-2009

*All those clubs, all those early rifles,
those cats and rats and roaches delivered to islands
that had none. Audubon stuffing flocks of swallows
in his pockets, and still, when Darwin lived we didn't lose
more than one species every five years. Today, the pace
of loss is one thousand times the rate of natural extinction.*

A is for the Alaotra grebe, gone just after 1983.
Also the Atitlán grebe (Guatemala, 1989)
and the Auckland Islands merganser (1902).

B is for the Banggai crow, the bar-winged rail,
and the black-browed babbler, all dead from the 20th c.

C is for the Canarian black oystercatcher (did it die out
in 1940?) and New Caledonian rail (it did die out
in 1990). The Choiseul crested pigeon disappeared early
in the 20th c. while, in 1918, the last captive Carolina parakeet died
in the Cincinnati Zoo. "Recent efforts to find the birds have drawn
a blank,"
thus the expiration date of the Cuban kite has been set near 2002.

D is for duck (Pink-headed. Last seen: 1945).

Who knows what's lost to E?

A possible reprieve for E.

But then the Guadalupe storm-petrel (1910s)
and the Guam flycatcher (1983).

No one's seen the huia in New Zealand since the 20th c.
I . . . ? I hate to believe we won't see them again.

We lost the highly-visible Javanese lapwing in 1940,
while the Lord Howe white-eye left our company in 1918.

M is for the Mariana mallard, which died, finally, in 1981.

The Nuko Hiuo monarch also went around that time.

Shame to say,
no one followed up on a sighting of Negros fruit-dove
in 2002, and though there was a "thorough search in 1996"
for the short-toed nuthatch vaga,
no sighting's been confirmed since '31.

We used to see plenty of passenger pigeons, nearly a billion to a flock.
They made for good sport, they kept us fed,
until, in 1914, the last passenger pigeon was dead
(we'd kept it captive in the Cincinnati Zoo).

How many in Q?

R has seen a death or two:

The red-moustached fruit-dove didn't make it past the First World War.

The Ryukyu wood pigeon didn't make it to the Second.

Sulu bleeding-heart "has undergone a massive decline.

By now, habitat destruction is almost complete.

If not extinct, this species is very rare,

but the ongoing civil war prevents comprehensive surveys."

Ditto the Sinú parakeet of Columbia, last documented in 1940.

The threat of armed conflict complicates all counts.

The only known habitat of the turquoise-throated puffleg has been destroyed

and the last tawny-headed mountain finch disappeared during the deadly 20th c.

What's lost for U?

Though there could be some relief for V,

the Wake Island rail was declared extinct

in 1945, the white-eyed river martin

in the late 1980s, the Semper's warbler was last seen in St. Lucia

in the 1970s, and the black-lored waxbill,
officially Critically Endangered,
is more than likely extinct.

What loss at X?
What's done in Y and Z?

THE WAY WE CARRY ON

There is the sky. Sshh. It might go soon
and then where will we be? Purple
and all over with blue. This temperate sky
will not comfort you some day, I think
you told me and mine, who were, as now, crouching
stands of crocuses. Too early yet! Too early for all this
springing. Am I wrong? Who would say that
to me then? Come here. Come over here
and see what the bird's nest is doing.
There are these small eggs, all of these
small eggs, none of them cracked yet,
but the big bird's away. I told you it might go.