



BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL 100 KEYNOTE, 15 September 2022

Christian Cooper's Keynote speech - Anniversary dinner

I've been on a bit of a journey, and I'd like to take you with me on that journey—one I have to subtitle "Wendy Paulson Was Right". Wendy is here in the audience—hi, Wendy—and the reason I mention her is because she got me volunteering in the New York City public schools teaching children about birds. One thing we did early on with a new group of students was ask them to write down on a piece of paper **one thing** they would like to know about birds; these were young students, maybe 9 or 10 years old, so we'd get questions like "What's the biggest bird?" or "How many feathers does a bird have?"... and then one day, young José hands me a piece of paper with a question written on it asking *why birds eat while they're having sex*.

This 9-year-old is looking at me, innocently expecting an answer! I have no idea where this is coming from, what to say to this child without getting myself in big trouble, when suddenly it clicks—

The exact words he'd written on the page were:

Why – do – birds – eat – in [I-N] – sex [S-E-X]

Why do birds eat insects?

There are a couple of lessons embedded there: The most immediate, as I let out a huge sigh of relief, was that I need to keep breathing no matter what these kids throw at me out of left field!

A second lesson, though, is to make sure you always understand the real question. And interestingly enough, behind these questions, whether it's "what's the biggest bird?" or "why do birds eat insects?", there's a more fundamental question coming from these children, many of them Black and brown, sometimes articulated in words or maybe in just a bad attitude:

What do I care about birds.

It's hardly even a question, more a dismissal. Put another way, the question is: *Why* should I care about birds?

That's a great question, especially from these children, some of them from families that face daily existential challenges like poverty, hunger, homelessness; and even when they aren't confronted with those struggles, they face a sterile sea of concrete

outdoors and a wasteland indoors, the wasteland of seductive pixels that's just as sterile, from all the devices they're tethered to.

Answering that question—why should I care about birds?—for the coming generations is the great challenge for all of us. Over the last 100 years, BirdLife has done an INCREDIBLE job with HOW we should care about birds—in other words, the **science** of bird conservation. The hands-on work of BirdLife and partner organizations provides the essential data on where various birds stand at any given moment: You OWN the Red List, and without that list, there is no real starting point for building a successful future. You OWN the identification of Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, the IBAs, and the Key Biodiversity Areas, the KBAs, efforts that zoom out from the Red List to take in the big picture and determine the highest priorities. And for 100 years, the partnerships between BirdLife and local groups have put boots on the ground to act on your scientific insights. Whether it's bringing the Azore's endemic bullfinch, the Priolo, back from the brink, or creating a new national park out of the Mar Chiquita salt lake in Argentina, tonight we're gathered here quite justly to celebrate all your successes. With how you've helped steer the course of conservation, you have earned this victory lap.

Here's the problem: nobody cares about science.

By “nobody” I mean most people outside this hall. I know in my country, the United States, we have a particular problem getting people to pay attention to science, and

it's a growing problem there. Everyone wants to have their own facts. And on top of that, not just in the States but pretty much everywhere, facts aren't what motivate people; when they go to the ballot box, if they bother to show up at all, they don't decide how to vote on the basis of facts; they decide based on how they FEEL. Emotional connection is key if someone is going to bother about something, take action about something. And fostering an emotional connection to nature is where we too often fail kids like José.

Look, making sure everyone has the opportunity to appreciate birds and nature is simply the right thing to do. But FORGET that! I'm boring myself just by saying it; I mean, eating your vegetables is the right thing to do, but it doesn't make a plate of peas any less boring. Yes, it IS the right thing to do, but put that aside for now.

Understand it this way: Expanding a love of birds to new people, to different people, is essential because **otherwise there won't be a constituency for the protection of birds and their habitats.** It's that simple. If we want to guarantee a healthy diversity of birds in the world's future, then there MUST be a healthy diversity of PEOPLE who value the birds.

Demographic change is here, today: In the UK, from 2001 to 2011, the percentage of the population of England and Wales that was White British decreased from 87.4% to 80.5%, while the percentage of the population from a Black African background doubled. These trends are not reversing in the foreseeable future.

And yet, we don't see that reflected in the birding community, and I'll give you a very recent, very personal example: A couple of us skipped out of morning BirdLife events a few days ago so that we could trek out to Snettisham and go birding in the Wash in East Anglia, an enormous tidal mudflat that for centuries has been one of the most outstanding coastal habitats in Europe. It was perfect weather, no rain, not too cold; it was right around the full moon, so the high tide we were about to witness would be even higher than usual; and the time of year was just right to catch the migration of Red Knots and other waders or shorebirds. In short, conditions were perfect to attract not only a whole bunch of birds, but a whole bunch of birders...and sure enough, in the course of the morning, people by the dozens came and went to witness a fantastic display from some 70,000 birds...and aside from me, the Yank from across the Pond (so I don't count), every single one of those birders was white.

Demographic change is even more marked where I come from. In the United States, the white population declined, not just in proportion, but for the first time ever in real numbers, according to the 2020 census; and the percentage of white people dropped below 60% nationwide. When you look at the cities, the change is even more dramatic. My home, New York City, is now majority non-white. And yet birders of color, while increasing in number, are still very far below our proportion of the population.

Hold that thought about cities, because while changing racial demographics may not be an issue outside of wealthy, developed nations, urbanization most certainly is an issue. The UN says that today, 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, and that proportion will rise to 68% by 2050. As environmentalists and conservationists we may have mixed feelings about that, but there's a grave sociological cause for concern: People living in cities often end up with little or no connection with nature. So in a growing number of countries across the globe, we are confronting more and more people who will look at us oddly when we try to communicate the importance of birds and nature: People in Lisbon who may wave us away when we ask for resources to save the next endangered bird like the Priolo; Porteños who shrug dismissively the next time we seek to protect vital habitat like Mar Chiquita, who treat their biological reserve right in their own city of Buenos Aires as nothing more than a place to go jogging. We'll be able to tell such people how to save the birds, but they'll look at us blankly and say, "Why? What do I care about birds?" Because they don't understand, deep inside, the value of the natural world.

I can't tell you *exactly* how to widen the love of birds to new audiences, because I only have a few minutes for this speech, and besides, the circumstances will be different in each locale and depending on the audience you're trying to reach. "Get them while they're young" is a good rule of thumb, something Wendy Paulson and I have been trying to do in our work with schoolchildren; and I was delighted to see a youth outreach approach taken by Tiwonge Gawa and the Wildlife and

Environmental Society of Malawi; she shared with me a booklet about Lilian's Lovebird aimed at young people. And when you hook the young people, often they bring their whole family along into a wider, winged world.

Another good rule of thumb is, "Meet people where they are." If we are facing a world with a growing number of city dwellers, well, there are birds in cities, so let's get those city dwellers started appreciating what's in their own backyard. We have an ambassador for that (and this is where Wendy is going to keel over in shock): that ambassador is *Columba livia*, the Rock Pigeon. Wendy has been trying to get me to appreciate rock pigeons for YEARS, but my attitude has long been a lot like that of maybe so many of you dedicated birders out there, turning up my nose and eager for some **real** species to look at. But I've been on a journey about Rock Pigeons, slowly coming to recognize that in the context of city pavement, pigeons pave the way to a greener world. Mark me down as a convert to the Pigeon Paradox, as Robert Dunn of North Carolina State University and his colleagues put it in their 2006 paper: the idea that with so many people now living in cities, the survival of thousands of species and ecosystems may depend on city dwellers having contact with the nature that's cooing outside their window, contact that starts them down a path of appreciating and connecting with more wild parts of the world.

I'm privileged to have seen firsthand what happens when people have that connection, when they understand why birds and nature matter. In filming the episodes of the TV show *Extraordinary Birders*, I've done a lot of traveling and met

folks like Bret Nainoa Mossman, who is fighting against all odds to save the remaining native Hawaiian birds from joining the 70% of their species that have already gone extinct. He does it with joy, with optimism, with REVERENCE, because he understands that these birds are an integral part of the native culture, of who and what Hawaiians are. I've rubbed shoulders with remarkable Fish and Wildlife conservationist Marisel Lopez in Puerto Rico, who explained to me why ordinary Puerto Ricans call her team every time they see an Iguaca, the endangered endemic Puerto Rican parrot, in their backyards in need of help: Because they identify with that struggling bird, hanging on and trying to bounce back after setbacks and hurricanes, just like the Puerto Rican people. The bird is part of the island and part of who they are. I see the efforts of Bret, Marisel, and all of you in this room--*truly* extraordinary birders—and the least I can do for as long as I have a platform on TV is back you up by fostering a love of birds in audiences of every color and every background. If we can expand that connection to nature to even a fraction more of people of all kinds, then I'll be like Bret Mossman: JOYFUL that we will turn the tide on even our most intractable environmental problems.

This, then, is the challenge for BirdLife's next 100 years: To expand an understanding of WHY birds matter, to the greatest diversity of people, just as you have made the HOW of bird conservation apply to the greatest diversity of birds

So to bring this back to young José and his question, Why do birds eat insects?

There's the simple answer: Because bugs are a great, abundant source of nutrition.

But there's the deeper answer to the real question: Birds and insects are bound together, just as we humans are bound together with birds and insects, in the incredible, dynamic ebb and flow of life on this planet—an ebb and flow that can heal us and inspire us and that is so fundamental to us all that without it, we cannot survive. And make it clear, when you answer these questions, that while none of us owns this wild world, it belongs to ALL of us, rich and poor, and regardless of race; nature is there for ALL to partake of. REACH OUT to people **of all backgrounds**, and especially young people, to help them appreciate that, to understand your passion for birds, and make sure to fan the spark of their own passion every chance you get. Show them a world where the sound of the wings of thousands of Red Knots surges in their ears as the birds surge overhead in wave after wave; or show them the miracle in their own city park, as a Rock Pigeon puffs out his iridescent throat feathers and fans and drops his tail in a courtship ritual worthy of any peacock. Do that, and combine it with the science you have already pioneered, and you will be guaranteeing the future of BirdLife and the health of this planet and all its creatures, including us, for another 100 years and more.

And when those young people, the future of conservation, throw those incredibly oddball questions at you—and they will!— remember 1.) to keep breathing; 2.) that Wendy Paulson is always right; and 3.) answer their real question in a way that will **SIMPLY AMAZE THEM** with the winged world outside their window.