

A field study of migration and adversity

Derek Robertson

The migratory journeys of birds can reflect the same complexity of issues that trigger and affect human displacement.

I am privileged to spend my days in wild and beautiful places painting birds. I am fascinated by them: by their abstract shapes, their song, their behaviour, their migrations. I have sketched them and helped in scientific studies of their migratory journeys from the Arctic right down into Africa. In 2015 I watched reports from beaches on Mediterranean islands as desperate people came ashore, and I recognised these islands as the same places where I had watched and sketched migratory birds. Here now were people seeking refuge in order to survive, taking the same lines of flight as the birds that I had drawn.

Subsequently, over the course of a year, I travelled through the UK and Europe, through the Mediterranean to the Middle East. On my travels I spoke to refugees, to locals and to volunteers and I sketched what I saw: the people, the places and the birds. One of the interests that ecologists have in birds is that they are important environmental indicators. If the populations or migration of the birds change, this points to changes in the environment that could be of grave concern. The issues are complex but academic studies draw a link between climate change, conflict and large movements of refugees – all of which in turn cause further social and environmental stress. In these complex systems, ecologists look to the birds to indicate what might be happening to our world. How we address the intertwined issues of climate change and displacement will define who we are and what societies we will live in for generations to come.

During my travels, I taught art classes in refugee schools in Jordan [see image overleaf], organised art activities for families at refugee-welcoming events in the UK and held art engagement events for unaccompanied children in ‘the Jungle’ camp in Calais. Each had a different character and focus. In Jordan,

I tried to show the possibilities for personal development and identity, especially for women and girls in a very patriarchal society; in the UK, I wanted to help provide a sense of engagement and welcome where paintings on a wall could indicate a sense of ‘home’ and belonging; and in Calais I held events that helped engage very distrustful youngsters in conversation with the charity volunteers to see what clothes, help or services they needed.

There is a degree to which birdwatchers (and bird artists) are always birdwatching so when I sat down to draw in and around the camps, I looked out for birds – and drew them. It was poignant to see migrating birds flying over the fences that constrained their human, migratory counterparts but in their crossing of seas and borders, there were other comparisons, including the ensnarement of unfortunate individuals and the predation by birds of prey of smaller, exhausted birds. Both birds and people often travelled according to geography: the shortest crossing, skirting the edge of mountains, travelling through cover or from established provisioning points. Both found that a tended and man-made landscape offered little room for them and when I was sitting in unofficial camps pitched on waste ground, park edges or marginal ground between roads, I found people and birds brought together in scrubby edgelands where they could shelter and from which try to move onwards.

In a world where we are challenged by topics that can be hard to think about, people often close their minds. Art can bring together ideas in a way that makes people look at the ordinary afresh. And it can appeal directly to people’s emotions, helping to provoke an appreciation of a shared humanity and of the shared challenges that we need to address.

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What Colour Are The Wheatears?

Wildlife artist Derek Robertson visited and interviewed Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi refugee families who had settled in Jordan. He held a series of art classes for Syrian schoolchildren at a refugee school where he talked about his artwork and the links between artwork, environment, animals and the people who live and work in the landscape. “The children called out the names of the colours for me in Arabic – which are scribbled into the sketches. Later that day, we drove through the desert and I sketched migratory and resident species of wheatears.”

The population of Jordan has doubled in recent years and over-extraction of water has led to oasis towns reverting to desert. The effect has been measured immediately in a dramatic change in breeding bird populations and the consequences on migrating birds which now have to try to cross larger areas of arid ground.

See Derek Robertson’s article about the links between birds’ migratory journeys and refugee journeys on page 83 of this issue (as part of a mini-feature on humans and animals in refugee camps).

Enhancing dissemination and impact: opportunities to collaborate with FMR

In addition to the main feature on Economies, this issue of FMR includes two ‘mini-features’. In both cases we have worked with researchers to support and enhance the dissemination of research findings relating to a specific project. We have had fruitful similar collaborations with UN, government and NGO partners.

If your organisation is applying (or is part of a consortium applying) for funding on a theme that you think is relevant to FMR’s readership, please consider including FMR in your proposal narrative and budget. There are various options for doing so – whether through mini-features like the ones in this issue or indeed through a full feature theme of FMR.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this. Please contact the Editors at fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk.



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