

REVIEW

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The Archaeology of Wild Birds in Britain and Ireland. By DALE SERJEANTSON. 290 mm. Pp xvii + 230, 21 col pls, 104 figs, 73 tabs. Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2023. ISBN 9781789259568. £60 (hbk).

The Glastonbury Lake Village reports were on our reading lists when I was a student, and among all the extraordinary finds from the excavations were bones of a Dalmatian pelican. This startling find, identified as early as 1917, revealed to me the potential of bird bones for telling us much on the ecology and history of species now extinct in the British Isles. As might be expected, pelicans are discussed in Dale Serjeantson's excellent survey of wild birds in archaeology and history. There have been other pelican finds since the Glastonbury excavations, notably from Haddenham in the Fens. It is clear from the cut marks that this species was very likely to have been eaten by the Iron Age peoples of the Fens and Levels. There may have been a consequence, as pelican bones are not found later than the Roman period, with inevitable questions to be posed concerning their regional extinction – was it predation and consumption, or disturbance and loss of habitat due to increasing human exploitation of these landscapes? By the Middle Ages the

pelican had become a semi-mythical creature, whose appearance was only vaguely known to illustrators.

The story of the pelican in Britain encapsulates the archaeological reality and the human impact on wild bird populations. Serjeantson's book systematically surveys human–wild bird interaction from prehistory to the early modern period, taking groups such as the crow family, fenland birds, waders or pigeons as chapter headings. Inevitably there is overlap with domesticated species, especially of ducks and geese, but the book does not aim to discuss the domestic birds of the *basse-cour*. Rather, it puts the wild bird remains into their historical and archaeological context, including economic, dietary and ritual usages. There are good illustrated surveys of medieval and early modern exploitation, with much interesting and helpful data, often tabulated, covering all periods further back in time as well.

This book is a major resource for archaeologists seeking to understand and interpret the bird species on their sites and in their periods of study. Dale Serjeantson has given us a rich pageant of the archaeo-sociology of humans and wild birds, and the volume will undoubtedly become a standard work on the subject.

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