**Birdlife, by Glenda Hurst, reviewed by Carl Truman**

Birds are present in our lives in so many ways – as pets, as part of many people’s diet, even as a source of inspiration – that Glend Hurst’s *Birdlife* is, in some respects, a welcome miscellany of fact and fiction. Her previous book, *Gold*, was a best-seller, and Hurst has, understandably, chosen to repeat a winning formula. In that book, each chapter focused on a different aspect of the metal, from its financial use to edible gold leaf, but apparently random order of chapters meant *Gold* lacked continuity: there was no sense of the author presenting a case and leading us through the steps of her argument. While each chapter was interesting enough in itself, overall the book seemed lightweight, a series of magazine articles. Nevertheless, *Gold* sold in large numbers, and I see no reason why *Birdlife* should not repeat that success.

Birds have played a role in myths for millennia, from ancient China to Egypt to Central America, and birds are often used as symbols: the dove to represent peace, the eagle for power and so no. In her chapter on mythology, Hurst takes the reader on a world tour at breakneck speed, but the lack of comparison and cross-referencing means that readers are often left to their own devices if they wish to interpret the information or identify similarities between cultures. Furthermore, this approach means that a fair amount of potentially tedious repetition is unavoidable. There is a great deal of detail and not enough synthesis, leaving the reader wondering what point, if any, is being made.

I enjoyed the chapter on birds working with human beings. It gives the familiar example of taking canaries into mines so that if methane or carbon dioxide is present, its effect on the bird gives the miners early warning of danger. However, I suspect I am not alone in being unfamiliar with the East African honeyguide, a wild bird which leads people to bee colonies. The men searching for honeycomb make specific noises, and when the honeyguide hears them, it replies, with a particular call that it restricts to that one situation. The people smoke out the bees and take the honeycomb, leaving a little as a reward for the bird – which in this way avoids having to tackle the bees itself. This I thought to be the only instance of birds in the wild deliberately communicating with human beings to the advantage of both parties.

An area that has seen a great deal of research in recent years is bird migration, a phenomenon that used to be totally misunderstood: a couple of centuries ago, it was thought that birds that disappeared for the winter were hiding in mud. We now know a great deal about migration. The Arctic tern, for instance, breeds in the Arctic, flies south to the Antarctic in August or September, arriving back in May or June – a round trip of over 70,000 kilometres. And the bird appears to be determined to reach its destination: even if fish are being caught below it, and birds that are not migrating dive down to steal some, the Arctic tern cannot be deflected from its journey. Although the Arctic tern holds the record, feats on this scale are far from rare.

*Birdlife* ends with a short epilogue in which Hurst lays out her vision of an ideal future: restoring habitats that have been transformed by drainage or by grubbing up hedges, in both cases to improve agriculture; from the birds’ point of view, their habitat is damaged or even destroyed. It is here that Hurst reveals her true colours, as food production comes a poor second to protecting an environment in which birds can thrive. Reverting to the farming methods of the past is a forlorn hope, however she can hardly expect us to sacrifice the enormous increase in agricultural output that we have achieved, when even that is not enough to feed the world’s population.

While Birdlife has little to say to serious ornithologists, professional or amateur, if picked up in an airport bookshop or given as a present, it might well broaden the horizons of others.

**Circle the answer which best fits**

The reviewer mentions Gold in order to

1. Emphasize the wide range of topics that Hurst covers in each book
2. Explain what he sees as a weakness in Hurst’s approach
3. Support his opinion that Birdlife deserves to be very popular
4. Express his disappointment with Birdlife in comparison with Gold

The reviewer suggests that in the chapter on birds in mythology, Hurst

1. Misses opportunities to draw conclusions form the information she presents.
2. Misunderstands the significance of some of the myths that she mentions
3. Uses repetition rather than discussion to support her interpretations
4. Tries to cover too wide a range of cultures.

The reviewer refers to the honeyguide to suggest that birds

1. And human beings can co-operate to their mutual benefit
2. Can be trained to assist human beings
3. Could be exploited by human beings to a greater extent
4. Are not as useful to human beings as is sometimes claimed

The phrase ‘feats on this scale’ (last line, 4 paragraph) refers to the ability of some birds to

1. Avoid getting distracted
2. Survive without eating
3. Live in cold climates
4. Fly long distances

What does the reviewer say about the epilogue?

1. It overestimates the damage done to birds by changes in agriculture.
2. It reveals Hurst’s lack of understanding of certain subjects
3. It is unlikely to have the effect that Hurst would like
4. It convinced him that Hurst’s concern for birds is justified

In the text as a whole, the reviewer gives the impression of thinking that Birdlife

1. Reveals how much more there is to discover about its subject
2. Is readable without providing new insights into the subject
3. Provide a clear overview of a subject with many facets
4. Is unusual in bringing together diverse aspects of the subject.