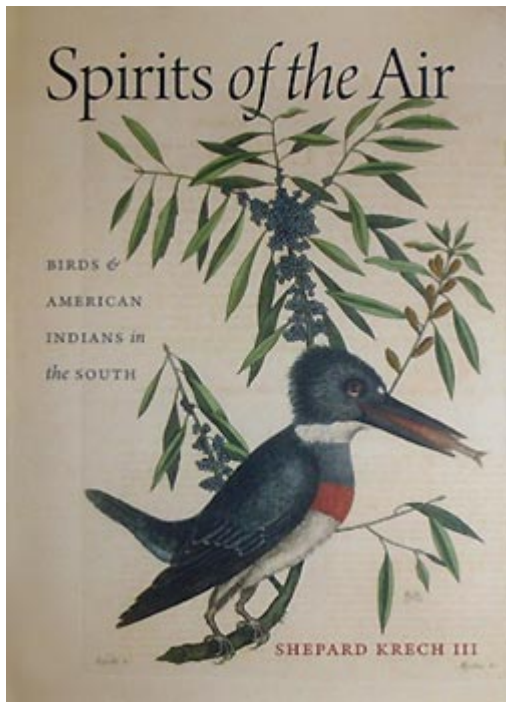


The Ornithological Indian



Early one evening in 1810, while he was staying with a group of Chickasaw Indians in the lower Mississippi region, the artist-ornithologist Alexander Wilson paused to listen to a mockingbird "pouring out a torrent of melody." A gunshot suddenly interrupted his reverie, however, and he "looked up and saw the poor mocking-bird fluttering to the ground" and then turned and realized that "one of the savages had ... barbarously shot him." Outraged at the silencing of the songster, Wilson immediately stalked over to the Indian and started berating him, telling him that "he was bad, very bad!" and that "the Great Spirit was offended with such cruelty, and that he would lose many a deer for doing so." At that point, the Indian's father-in-law intervened to defend his son-in-law from Wilson's tongue-lashing; the elder Chickasaw explained to Wilson that "when these birds come singing and making a noise all day near the house, *somebody will surely die.*"

Wilson's story about the death of the Mississippi mockingbird pits one sort of belief against another, with Wilson trying to frighten the Indian by appropriating the Indian's own god, a supposedly vengeful Great Spirit, only to be countered by another Indian arguing another version of supernatural certainty. In writing the story, Wilson no doubt intended to portray what he took to be the brutish behavior and superstitious beliefs of people who had no regard for the beauty of a mockingbird's song and, in doing so, to assert his own superior sensibility and rationality. In reading the story, though, we can certainly see different beliefs and sensibilities coexisting, even competing, in a common ground—and in the Natives' home ground, at that.



Shepard Krech III, *Spirits of the Air: Birds and American Indians in the South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2009. xvi + 245 pp., hardcover, \$44.95.

Had he been on the scene with Wilson, Shepard Krech would have helped us develop a much more subtle and sympathetic view of the cultural significance of birds among Native American peoples in the early South. As the title of his book, *Spirits of the Air*, implies, Krech is concerned with the many spiritual meanings Indians assigned birds, whether as dark omens of sickness and death, symbols of personal power and physical prowess, sources of luck, expressions of love, or embodiments of beauty. From far too many old movies, of course, we know quite well that Indians used eagle feathers to denote strength and status among warriors (as did European and Euro-American military forces), but Krech points out the plumage of other birds used in battle dress, including red-headed woodpeckers, kestrels, vultures, and crows. When Creek warriors took the scalp of an enemy, they gave a war whoop that ended with an imitation of a turkey's gobble, but when they meant peace, they carried the white tail feathers of eagles or the wings of swans. Birds also figured in less violent forms of physical difficulty. Cherokee people thought the yellow-breasted chat to be a cause of urinary tract infection, but they thought insect-eating birds, particularly woodpeckers and flycatchers, could provide a cure for toothache. And so it goes throughout the book, as birds and bird parts appear in a variety of symbolic and ceremonial forms, as decorations, ornaments, gifts, place names, clan names, even team mascots.

For all his attention the spiritual aspects of birds, Krech also takes note of their material importance to Native peoples. Archaeological analysis of bone and feather fragments in middens and other sites reveals quite clearly that Indians ate birds of all sorts—turkeys, ducks, and geese, of course, but also herons, hawks, cranes, eagles, crows, pigeons, and even small songbirds—all

told, upwards of fifty to eighty species. On the other hand, crows and blackbirds also ate the Indians' crops. To fight these predatory pests, some Native people erected observation platforms where human sentries could scare the birds away, while others set up hollow gourds on poles to attract purple martins, which would in turn attack the unwanted birds. In both ways, whether by contributing to the diversity or defense of people's food, birds figured more significantly in Indian diet than we might have previously realized.

The killing of birds for either physical consumption or ornamental display takes us into territory Krech covered in an earlier work, *The Ecological Indian* (1999), in which he sought to set aside the seemingly sympathetic but ultimately dehumanizing notion of the Indian as being "one" with nature. He argued that Native Americans did indeed have an impact on the environment, sometimes engaging in practices that could not be sustainable, up to and including the extirpation of species. *The Ecological Indian* proved to be as controversial as it was influential, but Krech does not completely shy away from the same issues in *Spirits of the Air*. Here he notes, for instance, that Indian demand for eagle feathers contributed to the decline in the numbers of bald eagles and the near extirpation of golden eagles in the region—contributed to, that is, but did not cause. On the whole, in fact, he takes a reasonably benign view of Native people's practices, concluding that Indians took a "sustainable harvest" of birds and, in a sense, understood overkill (177-179).

Krech has made quite a harvest of his own, and the variety of bird species he discusses in some detail is especially impressive. Finding birds in historical sources is a little like spotting them in nature: they seem to be everywhere if you only take the trouble to look for them, and you get even more from the experience if you can identify them properly. That's where Krech's own identity as a scholar and a birder makes a difference. The dust jacket text tells of his accomplishments as member of the anthropology faculty at Brown University, prolific author of books and articles, and prominent member of learned societies. The accompanying photograph, however, does not depict him at his desk, bookshelves in the background; rather, it shows him in front of some birch trees, binoculars around his neck. (Full disclosure: On a free afternoon at the 2008 meeting of the American Society for Environmental History in Boise, Idaho, I went birding with Krech in the nearby Snake River Birds of Prey Natural Area. He's very good.) Krech has written a scholar's book that birders can love, or perhaps vice versa.

As an anthropologist, Krech is careful to consider the possible errors and exaggerations inherent in his sources, particularly the verbal and visual representations left by early European observers. "Many southern Indians were represented visually wearing feathers, bird parts, and even entire birds," he notes, but he immediately raises the possibility that Europeans saw those feathered Indians through the lens of their own ornate fashion sense, making Native people look like nabobs of the royal court. "Thus, the probability that the evidence is not straightforward or watertight dictates a cautious approach," he concludes (63-64). As a birder, moreover, Krech is careful to

turn a trained eye to the very feathers themselves. He questions, for instance, William Bartram's observation that some of the Indian men he met in the eighteenth-century Southeast wore colorful cloaks of what he took to be "scarlet" flamingo feathers. Krech notes that flamingoes don't normally get north of Yucatan these days, although he admits they might have in previous centuries; still, he suggests that the red feathers Bartram saw might just as well have been those of the scarlet ibis or, even more likely, the roseate spoonbill, which is much more common along coastal areas in the South.

Does that degree of identification really matter, one might ask, or is it just a pedantic attempt to bag another bird for one's historical life list? It matters, I would argue, to the extent that we need to know the birds well enough to know the Indians better and thus perhaps to grasp what symbolic meanings Native people might have invested in which avian neighbors and why. Krech recounts, for instance, the startling discovery, in 1897, of the painted image of a crested bird that adorned a board pulled out of the muck of Florida's Gulf Coast by ethnologist and archaeologist Frank Cushing. Cushing initially identified the blue-hued bird as a blue jay or kingfisher, but from a closer ornithological examination of the image (a copy of which appears on page 82 for the reader's own investigation), Krech concludes that the painting depicts an ivory-billed woodpecker, a bird commonly deemed a culturally important "object of exchange, curiosity, and spiritual interest" among Indians in earlier times, a bird more worthy of human wonder and, no doubt, pictorial preservation (83-86).

Spirits of the Air is itself a work of pictorial preservation, and even though it may seem a bit out of place to do here in an on-line journal, I want to close with an appreciative word about the book itself as a book, as a physical object. In this emerging era of e-books, Krech offers a Kindle-defying handful, a heavy and handsome volume that sits solidly on the lap, a delight as much for the eye as for the mind. The pages are thick, slick, and beautifully illustrated, almost every one containing good-quality color reproductions of artwork by Native painters and sculptors and some of the usual Euro-American suspects, most notably Mark Catesby, Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon. Yet while the book itself is hefty, the price is not: I've bought scholarly books that cost just as much but don't look or feel anywhere near as good. And elegant and well-adorned though this book is, it would be a shame to shortchange *Spirits of the Air* by calling it a coffee-table book. It is, rather, a book for the academic office or home library, both a ready reference for scholarly inquiry and a relaxing source of visual pleasure. Shepard Krech can be proud to have written it, and the University of Georgia Press equally proud to have produced it.