

## Praise for *Consider the Birds*

“A different kind of field guide! From the raven to the dove and the ostrich to the sparrow, Debbie Blue reminds us how rich the biblical account of the natural world can be, an endless source of metaphor and inspiration!”

—**Bill Mckibben**, founder of <http://350.org>

“Debbie Blue is simply one of my favorite preachers and writers in America today. *Consider the Birds* is a singular work of devotion and beauty that will make you fall in love with that which you may have never bothered to notice before. I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

—**Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber**, author of *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*

“Debbie Blue points to the sky and the trees and the grimy sidewalks of our world the way she points to the Word, saying: “Wisdom: attend!” And through the birds and their Creator and our stories about both, Debbie Blue does midrash on their lives, revealing mysteries and heartbreak, pratfalls and glory. This is a brilliant, astonishing work of scholarship and attention that will become a classic of Christian writing.”

—**Sara Miles**, author of *Take This Bread, Jesus Freak, and City of God*

“I would read Debbie Blue’s grocery list. That’s how much I love her writing. So, yes, I want to read her writings on birds—in the world and the Bible—about how birds are the ‘currency of mercy,’ about eating quail until it comes out of your nostrils, about the killing prowess of eagles. This is a book to be savored, to be read while sitting next to a lake, to be read aloud to a loved one, to be shelved with the most beautiful books you’ve ever read.”

—**Tony Jones** (<http://tonyj.net>), theologian-in-residence at Solomon’s Porch, Minneapolis, author, blogger

“Debbie Blue has a knack for noticing things, things of God and things of life. She not only notices, she sees. She sees the way spiritual guides see: with insight, clarity, wit, and truth. Debbie is at her best in *Consider the Birds*, and for those who are up for going on a journey of seeing the ways of the birds and of God, this book is a gem.”

—**Doug Pagitt**, pastor, author, Goodness Conspirator

“Debbie Blue knows a lot about birds. She’s ransacked history and mythology, not to mention her own backyard, for a wildly entertaining trove of obscure, comical, and sometimes downright revolting bits of lore about vultures, roosters, sparrows, and pigeons that we hardly notice when we’re reading the Bible. But it’s what Debbie knows about our hearts, and about the texture of life in our world today, and about God, that makes this book a real treasure. Debbie has a keen eye for the inhumane, the self-destructive, and the really stupid stuff that masquerades as cultural wisdom, conventional religion, and common sense, and the way she laughs at herself, and us too, when we unthinkingly fall into line is a big part of the charm of this book. In Debbie’s sure hands, the Bible becomes a sly and paradoxical—and often very funny—collection of stories that doesn’t say anywhere close to what we have been taught to think it says, and God becomes a presence so unrelentingly good that we can hardly believe it.”

—**Doug Frank**, author of *A Gentler God*

“Why do Jesus and Debbie Blue both tell us to ‘consider the birds’? Perhaps because a ‘corporate person’ has never seen a bird and never will. And perhaps because the visitations of spirit are very like being stunned by a wild bird and nothing like staring at a screen. Birds neither reap, sow, Tweet, nor Friend. They just fly into our lives with a powerless power rooted in the fact that beauty is truth and (as this delightful book and birdsong and Origen all agree) ‘the fowls of the air are also within thee.’ To see or hear a bird clearly, for the duration of that clarity, is to be the Way.”

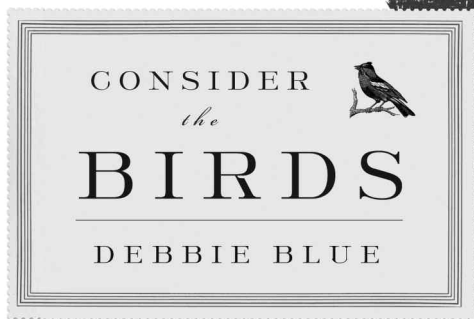
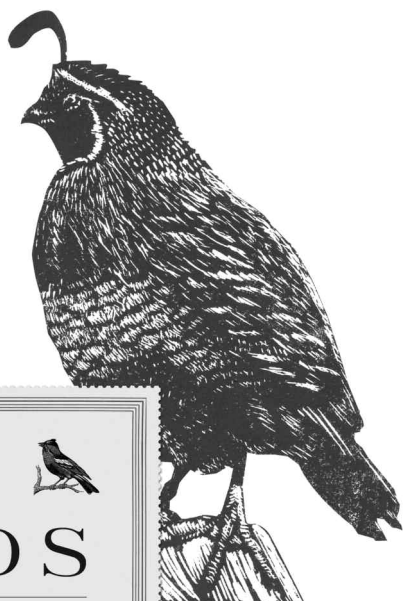
—**David James Duncan**, author of *The Brothers K* and *The River Why*

“Baby pelicans faint after feeding? A vulture collided with an airplane at 37,900 feet? How much there is to learn about birds! And, by following Debbie Blue’s meditations on them, how much there is to learn from birds about the Creator and our place in Creation. This book is a delight.”

—**Marilyn Nelson**, author of *Carver: A Life in Poems*, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, and *Faster Than Light: New and Selected Poems*

“Blue’s book is buoyant. We fly up like birds in a conversation about a supreme being—and I appreciated so the flight of this god-talk, a subject that doesn’t usually fly anymore, encrusted as it is by gold, shadows, centuries . . .”

—**Rev. Billy Talen**, founder of the Church of Stop Shopping, author of *The End of the World*



A PROVOCATIVE  
GUIDE TO  
BIRDS *of the* BIBLE

ABINGDON PRESS  
*Nashville*

CONSIDER THE BIRDS  
A PROVOCATIVE GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF THE BIBLE

*Copyright © 2013 by Debbie Blue*

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, P.O. Box 801, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202-0801, or e-mailed to [permissions@umpublishing.org](mailto:permissions@umpublishing.org).

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Blue, Debbie.

Consider the birds : a provocative guide to the birds of the bible / Debbie Blue.

1 online resource.

Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; record not viewed.

ISBN 978-1-4267-4950-6 (epub)—ISBN 978-1-4267-4950-6 (binding: soft black / paper / with flaps : alk. paper) 1. Birds in the Bible, I. Title.

BS664

220.8'598—dc23

2013014556

Illustrations by Jim Larson.

“Vultures” by Margaret Atwood, used by permission of the Author and publishers. Available in the following collections: In the United States, *SELECTED POEMS II, 1976–1986*, published by Houghton Mifflin, © Margaret Atwood 1987; In Canada, *SELECTED POEMS 1966–1984*, published by Oxford University Press, © Margaret Atwood 1990; In the UK, *EATING FIRE*, published by Virago Books, © Margaret Atwood 1998.

“Vultures,” from *SELECTED POEMS II: Poems Selected and New 1976–1986* by Margaret Atwood. Copyright © 1987 by Margaret Atwood. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are taken from the Common English Bible. Copyright © 2011 by the Common English Bible. All rights reserved. Used by permission. [www.CommonEnglishBible.com](http://www.CommonEnglishBible.com).

Scripture quotations noted KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown’s patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations noted *THE MESSAGE* are from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations noted NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations noted RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

# CONTENTS

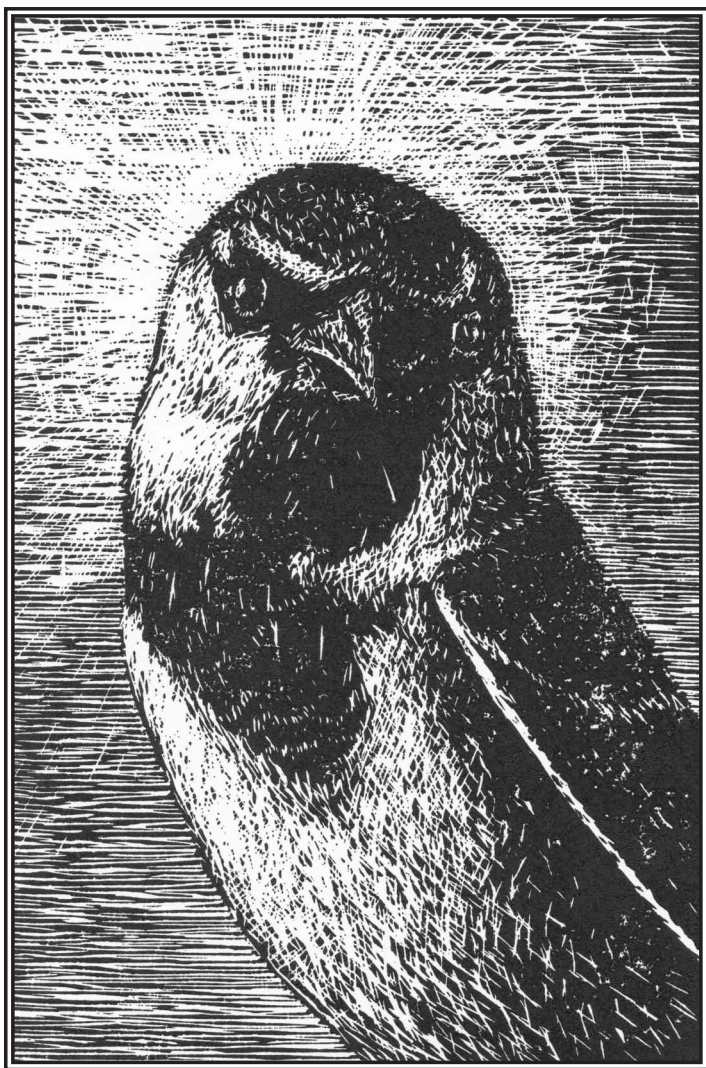
Foreword by Lauren Winner / vii

Introduction / xi

1. The Pigeon—Purity and Impurity / 1
2. The Pelican—Sacrifice and Gift / 21
3. The Quail—Desire and Slavery / 41
4. The Vulture—Ugliness and Beauty / 65
5. The Eagle—Power and Vulnerability / 85
6. The Ostrich—Comedy and Tragedy / 105
7. The Sparrow—Contempt and Compassion / 127
8. The Cock—Cockiness and Betrayal / 151
9. The Hen—Freedom and Domestication / 171
10. The Raven—Failure and Trust / 191

Acknowledgments / 203

Notes / 205



# FOREWORD

*by Lauren Winner*

Debbie Blue's book is the best I've read all year. I say that despite the fact that I cannot tell a warbler from a wren, cannot remember if cardinals are harbingers of winter or spring, and, indeed, am really not interested in birds at all. (Maybe this is because I have damaged hearing and can't hear high-pitched noises—would I care about birds more if I could hear their cheeps and chirps?)

I am, however, interested in the Bible.

If you're like me, you think that one of the amazing things about the Bible is that it seems so multilayered—there seems always to be another layer of meaning. Even when I think I “understand” a biblical story, even when I think I've gotten to “the” kernel of insight the story holds—it turns out there is something more there, something I haven't seen yet. As a rabbi with the alliterative name Ben Bag Bag once said of the Jewish Scriptures, “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it. Look deeply into it, and grow old with it, and spend time over it, and do not stir from it, because there is no greater portion.” Turn it and turn it—there is always more to see.

That amazes me. That is why the Bible is different from *Pride and Prejudice* or *Little Women*. There is *a lot* to see in

*Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women*. There is much to see. But I do not for a minute believe that even the best novel is somehow endlessly overflowing with meaning in the same way that the Bible is. This amazes me, this endless overflowing of the Bible.

\*\*

It also amazes me that those endless layers of meaning are so hard to see, so difficult to discern.

I am amazed by the number of times I sit down with a passage of Scripture and feel that it says nothing at all. That it is mute. That it is boring. Or that it says one thing, and I already saw the one thing nine years ago, and here the passage is still saying that one thing. Ho-hum.

Maybe you're different, but I need guides when it comes to Scripture. I need teachers and readers and friends who see things in Scripture that I do not see, who can show me those layers of meaning when all I see is ho-hum.

In my experience, there is no better guide to the Bible than Debbie Blue. I could listen to her talk about the Bible all week. And I would see something I hadn't seen before every hour of that week. Truly, if I could read, forever and ever, only one person's illumination of the Bible—if I could have one person, and interpretations or sermons or insights by no other people—I'd pick Debbie Blue. (It's nice, of course, that I don't have to make that choice. If you like Debbie Blue's readings, you might also like the ways the Bible is read and interpreted by Ellen Davis and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg and Bryna Jocheved Levy and Barbara Brown Taylor and Sarah Jobe.)

I could tell you how irreverent Debbie Blue is. I could tell



you that though irreverent, she is also deeply reverent. I could tell you about her quirky perspective, and her even quirkiest voice; I could tell you how much you will just downright enjoy passing the hours with this book. All of that is true, but what I really want to tell you is something less frothy than irreverence and quirk. I want to tell you that you will be deeply nourished and edified by this book.

*Edified* is an old-fashioned word; it comes from a Latin term meaning “to instruct or improve spiritually.” Yes, this is a book that surprises and entertains. It is also—more importantly, more seriously—a book that will improve you spiritually.

In *Consider the Birds*, you will learn about not just birds. You will learn about sacrifice, and salvation, and desire. Along the way you will also learn a little about Ishtar, and about masculinity. And you will learn something about quail and pigeons. (I promise, pigeons are more interesting than you realize.) What you will learn most about, though, is God. Who knew that biblical birds held so many of the keys to what the Scriptures have to say about God? Yet birds do. You will learn about God, and you will learn something about yourself—about how God sees you, and how you might more wholly dwell with this God who is sometimes imaged as a pigeon or a hen.

And when you go back to the Bible, you might, if you are lucky, periodically hear Debbie’s voice in your head, inviting you to look for those layers of meaning in places you wouldn’t have thought to look before. After I read *Consider the Birds*, I found myself noticing, in a way I previously had not, various flowers in the Bible. *What really is a rose of Sharon?* I wondered as I was

reading the Song of Songs. *And what might it have to show me about God, or about myself?* In other words, Debbie Blue does the best kind of teaching—she shows us things we had not seen before, and she models how we might go and do likewise. So read here about the God who is revealed by birds, but do not be surprised if next time you are in the Scriptures, you find yourself thinking something wonderful about a lily or a cedar tree or a giant. Or an asp!

\*\*

I will read this book again many times, I am sure, but I am envious that you are about to read it for the first time. You are in for a treat. You are in for delight, and for a new vision of birds and the Bible—and you are in for an encounter with God.

# INTRODUCTION



I DID NOT START paying attention to birds in earnest until I was twenty-five years old. I was dating a younger man at the time who was a naturalist. He took me birding in the arboretum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I was working in campus ministry at the time—he was a student. I didn't like getting up early, and I had a difficult time finding the birds in my binoculars. I'm not sure if I ever quite managed to focus on one, but his enthusiasm was boundless and I really liked him. He was two feet taller than me and he wrote beautiful poetry.

Not long after, I met a man of a more suitable age for me—who was also a birder. I fell in love with him in large part because he taught me to identify warblers. Falling in love and identifying birds have similar effects. Normal life is altered; every experience heightened; what was mundane begins to explode with meaning. You think birds are just birds—undifferentiated fluttering, then you find one magnified in your lens. You recognize its unique

markings, lines, and color. Your heart pounds. It is a cerulean warbler. It is your new mate. I believe both things have equal power to change your life. I'm not kidding. Jim and I spent our courtship looking for birds. We drove to Nebraska to see the cranes do their mating dances. We bought a VW van and drove out west. We stopped the bus and got out our binoculars anytime we saw a duck in a puddle. We didn't care much about a wedding—we got married in a park in Seattle. We began to keep our life list, checking off birds.

For all that, I can't say I'm a birder. I quit keeping the list after Jim and I had kids; and although we have binoculars hanging from a beam in our house, I have not pursued birding with the same intensity I have given other things. I started a church, House of Mercy, with a couple of friends in St. Paul. We bought a farm an hour north of the city where we live with three other human families and the occasional threesome of sandhill cranes, a pair of nesting bald eagles, bird-killing cats, beautiful gardens, chickens, bunnies, and paths by the river.

I have never stopped admiring people who get up early in the morning to wait quietly for small colorful (or drab) gifts to appear in the bushes. I'm convinced that there is something about the sort of consciousness necessary for birding that is very much like the practice of faith. It comes and it goes. It requires waiting. You must use both your body and your mind. Attention is paramount. Whenever a bird showed up in a text I was preaching on, I would become (perhaps inordinately) intrigued by it. With some encouragement from an editor, I decided to write this book. I knew it would get me paying attention to birds

again, make me pick up the binoculars. And I am always looking for new ways into the text of the Bible—I thought taking the birds seriously as characters (minor as they might be) might lead down some interesting and unusual paths. I think it has.

Birds are everywhere in the Bible, from start to finish. God hovers over the face of the water in Genesis—the ancient rabbis suggest—like a bird. Birds gorge on the flesh of the defeated “beast” in Revelation. They are the currency of mercy—the birds of sacrifice. They bring bread to the prophets. They are food for the wanderers. Abraham has to shoo them away from his offering, and a pigeon goes with Jesus on his first visit to the temple. God is a bird who carries the Israelites on her wings—a bird under whose feathers we will find refuge. Jesus compares himself to a hen. He tells us to “consider the birds.” I love a guy who says that, obviously.

Birds have a prominent place in the Judeo-Christian founding narratives, as well as the founding narratives of almost every culture and religion. As long as humans have been breathing, they’ve been investing birds with meaning. They are not just bones and feathers—they are strength or hope, omen or oracle—the spirit has wings. Birds are in the legends of gods, the iconography of the church, and the lexicon of tattoo artists.

People identify with birds. We watch them, research them, tell stories about them, and in the process we explore our humanity and inhumanity—mystery and manners. They’re funny and dirty, noble and shifty—much like us.

Once you start looking for birds, you will find them everywhere—in your bushes, of course, but they are also in alleys and

mines and caves. Every songwriter I've ever loved, almost every poet I know, has written words about birds. I pick up my *Harper's*, my *New Yorker*, even the *Nation*, and there are stories, essays, poems about birds. I have heard about three new bands in the last week: Sleeping in the Aviary, Birds and Batteries, and the Larks.

I believe it is the same way with the grace of God—when you start paying attention, you'll discover it in places you hadn't noticed it before. It may make your heart race, or help you breathe. It can free you from anxiety (at least now and again). My hope in writing this book was to get myself and readers deeply paying attention—to what flits by us on any given day, to the layers of meaning in sacred text.

Considering the birds is different than considering rocket science or technology; it gets you thinking different thoughts about creatures, creation, and the creator. Whatever bird I looked at and studied, however each was represented in the text, I was again and again struck by the vulnerability. Their flight is amazing; but it is because of their hollow bones, the fragile strength of their feathers, that they can fly. A bird can grow a new feather in two weeks—it can also be wiped out so easily. Many birds are on the brink of extinction. Without human influence (habitat destruction, climate change), the expected rate of extinction for birds would be around one species per century. Some reports say we are losing ten species a year. I hope considering the birds will motivate us to press for more responsible human behavior. If, as Emily Dickinson wrote, “hope is the thing with feathers,” you'd think we'd be passionate about keeping it alive.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Blue (MA, Yale Divinity School) is one of the founding pastors of House of Mercy, a church in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is the author of *Sensual Orthodoxy* and *From Stone to Living Word*. Reverend Blue's sermon podcasts are listened to by subscribers around the world, and her essays, sermons, and reflections on the scripture have appeared in a wide variety of publications including *Life in Body*, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, *Geez*, *The Image Journal*, and *The Christian Century*. Debbie and her family live with friends on a farm near Milaca, Minnesota.