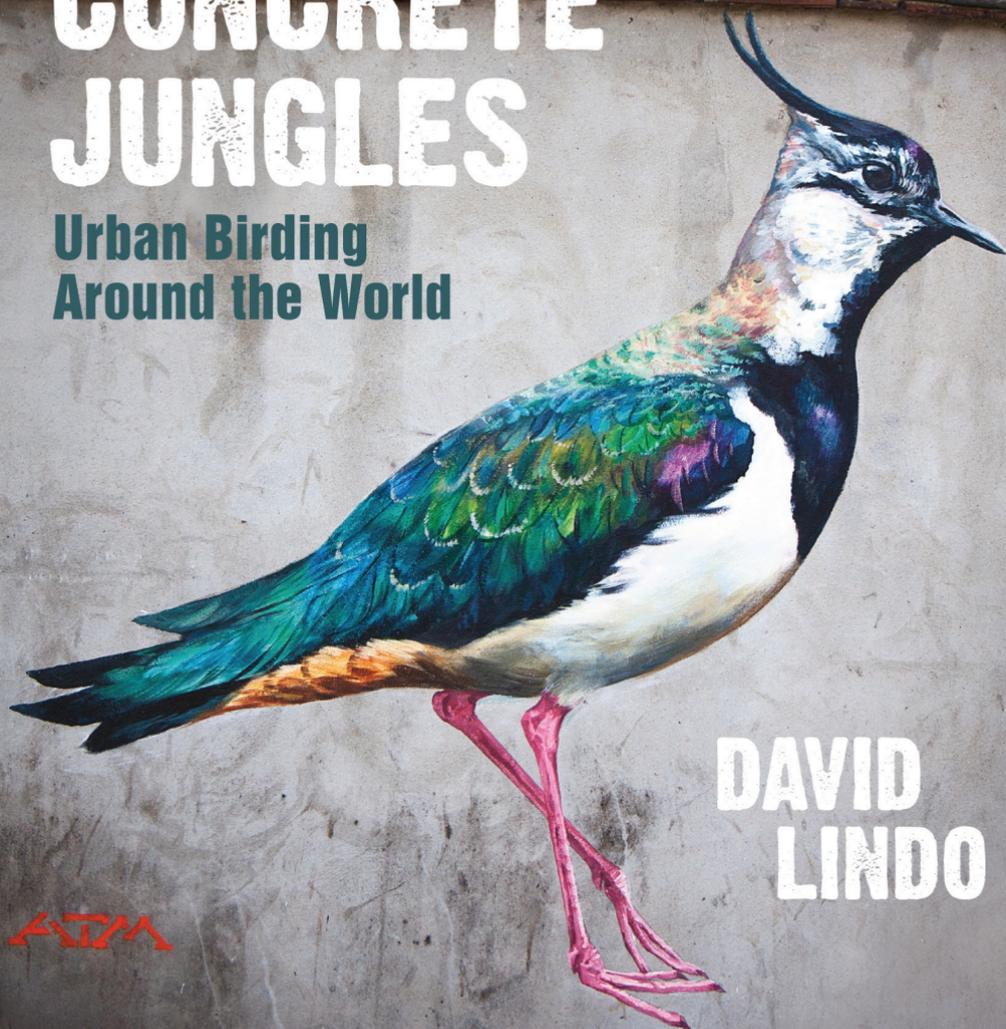


# TALES FROM CONCRETE JUNGLES

Urban Birding  
Around the World



DAVID  
LINDO

ATM

BLOOMSBURY

TALES FROM CONCRETE JUNGLES

*I dedicate this book to Donia and  
Nicole Lindo. I will always love you both.*

# TALES FROM CONCRETE JUNGLES

*Urban birding around the world*

*David Lindo*



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## Introduction

In August 2006 my life changed in a way I could never have imagined. I had just made my debut as the Urban Birder, having appeared on BBC's *Springwatch*, and was feeling totally on top of the world. I was strolling around the British Birdwatching Fair, the biggest and best birding convention of its kind in the world. Cock-of-the-rock. Visiting the bird fair was already etched into my psyche; it was the point of the year that everything and everybody remotely birdy planned for. But this year was different. I had just been on telly. Would anybody recognise me? I was especially hoping to be spotted by a scouting BBC executive browsing in the art marquee or forcing down a hot dog at the food tent as he cast a roving eye, ever on the lookout for a rough diamond. The sad answer was a resounding no to every hope I harboured. No one really recognised me apart from someone who had lent me a tenner the previous bird fair. He was clearly missing its weight in his wallet. And there certainly weren't any telly executives lurking. No matter, I still felt cocky. So when I decided to walk onto the *Bird Watching* magazine stand to cheekily advise Kevin Wilmott, the then editor, to write a piece about me, my bravado dial was set to maximum. That sudden surge of courage during my

triumphant entrance immediately evaporated the moment the last of those words left my mouth. Kevin looked at me without saying a word. His face said it all: ‘Who is this nutter?’ Then he uttered: ‘Who are you?’

Why should he have written about me? OK, I had been on *Springwatch* for five minutes but that hardly meant that I was the next Bill Oddie. He broke the quizzical stare that seemed to last for an eon, by laughing. To his everlasting credit not only did he feature me in a Q&A, but he eventually handed me my first regular writing opportunity – an urban birding column in the magazine. A brave move considering that I hadn’t written so much as a sentence for public consumption before. The column initially featured my musings on the general act of urban birding but I soon thought it would be interesting to visit cities worldwide in pursuit of fresh material. Thinking that this would be a subject that perhaps would last for a year at a push before running dry, I was surprised by the striking variations between the cities I visited. Little did I know that this would be the start of a road trip like no other. Each urban centre seemed to have its own personality that was further heightened by the people I met and the luck that I had (and often didn’t have) with the birds during the period of my visit. This book is a collection of many of those adventures spawned from that fateful meeting on the *Bird Watching* magazine stand. It spans from my early days with the magazine back in 2006 through to 2013, the time of writing.

Don’t expect to find a compendium of birding sites within an everlasting list of the world’s cities. That’s not going to happen. Instead, I would like to invite you on a journey that first examines some of the principles of everyday urban birding before launching into a meander through a few of the world’s cities, starting with some British ones. Not all the places I visit are even cities. Some are islands, others are specific sites that I thought rude not to pop into for a quick gander. I am not confined to cities as I

feel that the city perspective on birding can also be brought out into the hinterlands. These stories are largely extended versions of the ones that originally appeared in my regular column in *Bird Watching* magazine. That said, there are also a few that have not been published before.

As I said before, this has been a journey that got started quite by accident and it is one that has brought me in touch not only with some wondrous wildlife but with some amazing conservationists. Many of these people truly impressed me with their commitment to urban wildlife conservation no matter how small their projects were. It is their work and successes that I wish to celebrate in the pages of this book. I hope that they inspire you to look at cities with different eyes and realise that the conservation message is perhaps more important to spread here than anywhere else in the world.



## Being an Urban Birder







When was the last time that you stood in the middle of a busy street in a busy urban centre with your eyes closed listening out for the songs and calls of hitherto invisible birds? Let me rephrase the question: when was the first time you ever seriously indulged in urban birding?

If the answer is never then that's fine because urban birding is a bit of a mindset thing. Let me explain. I was born in London and spent my formative years watching birds in urban environments. Although I grew up to eventually call myself the Urban Birder, in reality it took me years to truly believe that I could find birds in cities. That was borne from the fact that I had no mentors and very little reference points as to where I could find birds in the metropolis. While wandering around in my daily city life I noticed birds. I had unconsciously discovered that birds were indeed everywhere.

The day I woke up to the idea of birds in the city was the day I fell in love with Wormwood Scrubs, my local patch. This area of land completely surrounded by housing, industry, roads, a hospital and a forbidding prison of the same name still managed to attract birdlife that even my friends in Norfolk were jealous of. When you start to see the urban world as a habitat with cliffs, woodland, marshes, lakes, rivers and scrubland, that is when you start to see birds.

## Uncle Birds

I've been a birder since the devil was a boy, which comes as a surprise to those who only know me from behind the wheels of steel when I'm spinning tunes in a nightclub or diving around between the sticks on a football pitch on a cold, wet Saturday morning.

If only they knew that early every morning I am to be found roaming my beloved local patch, Wormwood Scrubs in west London; home to the notorious prison of the same name, mentioned in The Jam's 'Down in the Tube Station at Midnight' and featured in the original *The Italian Job* starring the King of the Cockneys, Michael Caine.

Sometimes after visiting the Scrubs, having seen next to nothing, I ask myself: 'Why am I here birding in the middle of London when I could be watching real and more exotic birds somewhere decent out in the countryside?'

To answer that question, I have to go back to when I was a little five year old staring out of my bedroom window over my back garden in suburban Wembley, north London. At first I was spotting 'mummy birds' and 'daddy birds' (Starlings and Blackbirds respectively), 'baby birds' and 'uncle birds' (House Sparrows and Carrion Crows). I watched Woodpigeons performing their display flights and christened them 'jack-in-the-boxes', and the rounded wings of the passage Lapwings that I occasionally saw reminded me of spoons, so they were quickly renamed 'spoon wings'. A whole new world was opening up before me.

Eventually, when I got hold of an old field guide there was no stopping me. By the age of eight I had begun keeping a list of the birds I recognised in my garden – including a few really dodgy sightings.

I quickly learnt that the best time to observe the action was first thing in the morning before Mrs Smith next door came out to mow her lawn. The drawback with pre-school

early-morning birding from my bedroom window was the potential for being identified as a peeping Tom.

By the time I was ten, I had progressed to my local park, consisting of mown grassland, a river and large areas of undeveloped wasteland. In those days I took for granted the breeding Skylarks and wintering flocks of Tree Sparrows. It was here that I discovered that migrants like Yellow Wagtails and Wheatears were more regular than I had ever imagined.

However, when I had reached thirteen, the Skylarks and Tree Sparrows had disappeared, the wasteland had been built upon and the new tide of human residents had invaded the park. The appeal of my nursery local patch had diminished. The major turning point in my early urban birding occurred after I read *Birds of Town and Suburb* by the ornithologist and broadcaster Eric Simms. I learnt three important lessons.

First, look at every bird you see – even if you think you know what it is. Anything can turn up anywhere at anytime and at the very least, you may learn something new about a species that you thought you knew well. Second, you can watch birds anywhere, even within a large city and, finally, he taught me the value of patch watching.

By this time I was truly an Urban Birder and despite regular trips to Norfolk, Kent, the Isles of Scilly and the like, I still watched birds predominately in London. There is always something special about seeing birds we are more accustomed to seeing in wild environments against the backdrop of urbanisation.

I remember racing back from Norfolk after watching Marsh Harriers and Bearded Tits to see a grubby female Garganey that had decided to temporarily reside among the semi-submerged abandoned shopping trolleys and dumped scooters at Brent Reservoir.

Well, fifteen years, one Ortolan Bunting, a low-flying Honey-buzzard, and quite a few Redstarts, Wheatears and Ring Ouzels later, it's fairly clear that my decision to watch

the Scrubs was a good one. But I believe that I could have picked any underwatched urban area with sufficient habitat and still have found interesting species.

So my message is this: birding is exciting and rewarding. By getting to know a local patch you will become familiar with the commoner species and you will be amazed when you witness their habits and the seasonal changes in their populations. With this ever-growing knowledge will come a great sense of pride when you eventually uncover an unusual bird.



## Love Story

It's the light. There's something about the autumnal light. It sends out a vibe that is so inviting, alluring, even seductive. There's also an air of expectancy. The smells differ, as does the atmosphere and, of course, the birds; they are on the move. Something stirs within me too. I begin to develop an inexplicable excitement that begins as a twinge, a slight urge that at its height becomes an unrestrained desire to be out birding at the crack of dawn every morning regardless of the weather and despite the fact that I may have gone to bed in the wee hours the night before.

This psychological change in me begins in mid-July, when I start craning my neck skywards. Even a Woodpigeon flapping overhead is enough to have me temporarily searching the skies for hitherto undetected migrants. This peculiar behaviour has its roots in my childhood. As a boy, I noticed from my north-west London bedroom window that from June to late July there were a lot more feral pigeons flying around than at other times. At the time I put

it down to migration and not to the fact that there were just a lot of pigeons flying around. But it was while watching them that I first noticed real migrants. Nowadays, by late August I become very restless. If I'm in a building I often find myself drawn to the windows where I stare out and drift away, dreaming of being somewhere looking for migrants while searching the skies for, well, anything animate with wings. My lunchtimes could easily be spent on an office-balcony vantage point surveying the urban skyline.

Autumn is definitely my favourite time of the year, as it is the season of love. I have fallen in love during this magical period on many occasions, and when I do I don't hold back, I just get stuck right in. Oh, let me explain what I mean by love. It is unconditional: it can blind you, lead you astray, distract you and in extreme cases cause you to defend the object of your desire to your last breath. Allow me to tell you a love story.

This story concerns the conducting of a fingertip search for migrants in one of my favourite places on the planet: Cape Clear, that amazing gem of an island off the coast of County Cork, Ireland. I fell in love with this place after reading for years about the birds that have been found there. I decided to experience it for myself for a week in one October. Well, my original plan was to spend a week in County Cork, incorporating a couple of days on the Cape. However, by the time I got to Baltimore to catch the ferry across to the island, the lure of potential island vagrants was too strong, so at the last minute I decided to spend my entire time there.

When I stepped off the ferry at the other end I was immediately struck by the friendliness of the locals. As I walked to my B&B I passed by walled coastal gardens that were filled with feeding Siskins, and above my head swirled Herring Gulls, Jackdaws, Choughs and a few Ravens. Walking the incline that led to my accommodation, I noticed some very interesting looking gardens filled with the kinds

of bushes that migrants love getting lost in. A cursory glance resulted in foraging Robins and Blackbirds. Yet even these *ordinary* birds enchanted me, filling me with delight as they fed in the autumn light. I was blown away and I hadn't even started birding properly yet.

Over the ensuing days, I walked the length and breadth of the island many times, enjoying birds as diverse as Little Grebes and Fieldfares through to Merlin, a Short-eared Owl, Yellow-browed Warblers and a lonesome Pied Flycatcher. Even dipping out on a male Ring Ouzel and a juvenile Night Heron didn't dull my enthusiasm for my newly found nirvana.

One day, while walking past a farmhouse, I was called over by a distressed looking elderly local. With telescope draped across my shoulder, I went to her aid. After introducing herself as Mary (confusingly, most women on the island were called Mary), she explained that her husband had fallen out of his bed and was too heavy to lift up. Undaunted, I followed her into the house. Her old man, who must have been in his nineties, weighed more than a small ox and could I budge him? In the end I had to enlist the help of Mary's daughter (another Mary) and her husband. After shifting her husband back onto his bed, I was invited to stay for tea by a very grateful Mary senior.

Every evening after a thoroughly enjoyable day in the field, I would turn up at the Bird Observatory for the log call with the other visiting birders. The evenings would invariably descend into a garrulous and raucous get-together hosted by warden Steve Wing and partner Mary (!). Before long, my week had ended and it was time to head back to London. As I went for my final walk around my by now Irish local patch, I could not help but feel a great sense of connection and affection for the place and, despite not finding the vagrants I dreamt of, a piece of my heart was embedded into the fibre of the island, forever present in the glow of the autumn light.

## Birds on Film

I'm seven years old and cowering behind the sofa at home. Moments earlier, I was sitting on the sofa watching television. Why am I now behind the sofa? There was the clearly audible sound of thousands of beating wings, deranged squawking and people screaming. I'm peering over the top of the sofa to see hundreds of gulls and crows wantonly attacking the hapless panicking humans, pecking and scratching with vengeance. I am watching Alfred Hitchcock's immortal *The Birds*.

As is the case with countless others, my irrational nervousness towards anything with wings that chooses to flap around my head was born right there. For a small kid like I was then, that fear was magnified because the reasons for the attacks were unresolved in the film. Years later, I watched *The Birds* again and admired Hitchcock's mastery of suspense and smiled at some of the obviously stuffed birds swooping around without even once covering my eyes. I have since largely got over my phobia of flying things; however, even to this day the sound of multitudes of flapping wings still leaves me feeling slightly uneasy.

Birds have often been portrayed in film either as malevolent creatures or as avian eye candy frequently chucked in with little regard to whether they are relevant to the story or not. Much to the annoyance of the birders among us, some film-makers blatantly get it wrong, featuring birds and other wildlife that clearly don't belong. I mean, why have some boring brown bird when you could cast a gaudy interesting species that has 'camera presence'. Besides, how many of the cinema-going public would ever have noticed anyway?

One of the most obvious cases of total miscasting was in *Tarzan and the Amazons*. Made in 1945, the film sees Tarzan supposedly frolicking in the Amazon looking for a lost city of Amazon women while encountering wildlife more

befitting the African continent. In the opening scene, Cheetah, the chimp, was fishing in a river that I presume was the Amazon, in the company of some parrots. The macaws were reasonable to include but the cockatoos, which of course are natives of Australasia, grated on me. The year before saw the release of *Tawny Pipit*, directed by Bernard Miles and Charles Saunders. The plot follows the story of a Second World War fighter pilot, recovering from his injuries in a sleepy English village, who discovers a pair of rare Tawny Pipits nesting in the adjacent countryside. The featured birds were in fact Meadow Pipits.

More recently, while watching Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain*, which was set in North Carolina, I noticed that many of the corvids in the mountain forests were Hooded Crows that are natives of the Old World. And then there's the classic Pygmy Nuthatch scene in *Charlie's Angels*, which I find difficult to erase from my mind. Boswell is banged up in an undisclosed prison cell somewhere in North America and manages to contact Cameron Diaz's character. She precisely locates him by hearing a calling Pygmy Nuthatch recognised through a walkie-talkie. Now had she heard a Zapata Wren, found only in the marshland of the same name in Cuba, or Socotra Cormorants that are mainly found, you guessed it, on Socotra Island in the Indian Ocean, then I would say fair dos. I could have lived with the fact that the Pygmy Nuthatch has a patchy, though not a particularly restricted, range in western America. However, when the bird was revealed it was not even a nuthatch but an American icterid. I'm sure the TV armchair birders out there could fill the pages of this book with many other such moments.

Stuffed, mechanical and animated birds in films seem to be commonplace too. Although usually live, the caged lovebirds featured in *The Birds* became obviously stuffed and swayed in unison in a speeding car. In David Lynch's *Blue*

*Velvet*, the warbling electronic American Robins were amusing to watch, but don't get me started on the owls featured in some films that are often nothing short of laughable, though the Eagle Owl in Ridley Scott's superb *Blade Runner* was both real and absolutely stunning.

There was also a wealth of birds to be watched in Chris Weitz's *The Golden Compass*. Seeing as this is a fantasy film, there were plenty of dreamt-up birds, including dozens of weird passerines, odd-looking Red Kites and a first-winter gull with a distinctive head pattern that was not dissimilar to a Dotterel. Oh, and if you ever get to see *I Am Legend*, starring Will Smith, check out the array of birds that are coincidentally featured, including the continuous sound of a daytime churring nightjar of some sort.

One thing that I will give good old Mr Hitchcock is the fact that in the main, he used species that were relevant to the area in which *The Birds* was set – coastal California. I loved the fact that he featured Western Gulls, the typical west-coast larid. Gus Van Sant's *Finding Forrester*, released in 2001, featured a scene in which the lead character, played by none other than Sean Connery, pointed out a proper singing male Yellow Warbler to an urban kid from his New York office window. In Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State*, at least the Canada Geese were used in the correct settings and, what's more, one of the central characters was a birder. Unfortunately, he met a very grizzly end fairly early on in the film. But for me, Ken Loach's classic *Kes* stands out. It felt totally real and made me look at Kestrels in a different light.

So I suppose the message to all you film-makers out there is simple: get it right guys to stop us birders from bursting out laughing in packed cinemas at inappropriate moments. I hear that Hollywood is thinking about remaking *The Birds*. When that hits the big screens will there be a whole new generation of people with a fear of flapping wings?

## Viva Ronaldo

It's 1.30 a.m. on a dank, dismal May night, but frankly I couldn't care less. I'm euphoric. 'Viva Ronaldo' the crowd chants in unison as I wildly embrace similarly excited and jubilant complete strangers. I'm alternating between sitting and standing in the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow having just watched my favourite football team, Manchester United, beat Chelsea to lift the European Cup. Don't worry, you haven't picked up a sports book by mistake and I'm not going to start waxing lyrical about pass completion rates, noteworthy goals and other soccer-related trivia. No, this is a tale about finding happiness.

My three-day Moscow trip came about quite by accident, as I hadn't planned to go to the Cup Final until a ticket suddenly came into my possession literally a couple days before the game. Being a United follower was one thing, but being an even bigger urban birding fan meant that I could not turn down the opportunity to discover the birdlife in this historic city.

As I boarded the plane dreaming of my team lifting the Cup, I drooled at the thought of seeing several of the eastern European woodpecker species that had so far evaded me, and bumping into Bluethroats and perhaps spying on Red-footed Falcons as they frolicked over some parkland heath. To be honest, I didn't have a clue what to expect. I was just excited about the prospect of visiting a Russian city.

I landed hours before the game in an unpronounceable Moscow airport on the outskirts of town to be greeted by stony-faced officials and less-than-happy-looking police officers. This initial impression of the Muscovites was to be a reoccurring theme. While walking to the taxi rank outside the airport a hidden Siskin singing from a nearby block of conifers momentarily lifted my heart. I felt that I had encountered at least one friendly-sounding voice.