

FORUM

A bird in the pot or two in the bush?

Philip Johansson seeks sympathy for the West African bulbul

WEST AFRICA cannot boast the rich bird and animal life that brings droves of tourists to Kenya and Botswana in zebra-painted vans. The national parks are unimpressive. The rainforests are quiet. The savannas are stirred only by the wind. Where did all the animals go? A lot of them, it seems, have been eaten.

As I bicycled with my wife through Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, we saw the relentless harvest of "bush meat" all around us. Men held up bloody flanks of duiker to tempt passing motorists to buy. Every busy road had its "rat man", who killed giant rodents with a machete and hung them from a branch like Christmas decorations. Boys pelted roosting fruit bats with slingshots, and brought the membranous mammals home in their pockets for the sauce pot. Birds in particular didn't have a snowball's chance on the equator.

A purple heron is a splash of colour and grace on the edge of a marsh, but in the village market it was only food. We had stopped for a warm soda by the Black Volta river, in central Ghana, when we came face to face with one such heron. The man selling it had its wings and long neck clenched in one hand, making it looked more like a giant purple pretzel than a living creature. I asked him why someone would buy the panting, twisted bird, and he said, "To eat it."

It was the same story wherever we went. Two boys by the roadside in Burkina Faso held up a pair of fledgling barn owls by the tips of their wings, allowing the morning light to shine through their white primary feathers. A young man in the coastal village of Toukoudou Two paraded with a black crane under his arm, the marsh bird's long red legs tied together and its neck limp with exhaustion. A boy in Mali's Dogon country had tied a string to the yellow talon of a small hawk, and was swinging it around like a bola.

No bird was too small or shy to attract the interest of the hunters. We were eating breakfast by the side of the road one foggy morning when a man came by who had just shot a bulbul with his slingshot. The bird, the size of a sparrow and indistinct in its coloration, was barely big enough to fill the man's palm. But he was obviously pleased; it had not been an easy shot. What would he do with the limp little lump



K. & K. Ammann/Panet Earth Pictures

of feathers? "Eat it," he said.

We did not eat any bulbuls or barn owls that we knew of. But any and all sources of animal protein were eligible for the "sauce" which accompanied the local staple, whether it was manioc in Côte d'Ivoire or millet in Mali. What disturbed me more than the prospect of finding delicate little bones in my groundnut stew was the non-chalance, one could say callousness, with which these bright bits of protein were plucked from the trees and wetlands.

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Sentimentality for small creatures is one of those luxuries that, along with pure water and long lives, most West Africans have to do without. Sympathy for other animals comes from a more secure relationship with nature than most of the villagers we encountered will ever have. Families have more children than they can feed adequately. Environmental degradation and falling world prices of cash crops such as cacao, coffee and cotton make it harder each year to run a viable farm. In a region where 80 per cent of the diet is a starchy staple like manioc, protein is taken wherever it can be found. A purple heron on the edge of a reedy marsh, even if it was the last one in Ghana, would inspire less sympathy than a malnourished child.

Let us forget, it was not long ago that Western culture took a similar view of the proper role for pretty little birds. As recently as the last century, thousands of wild larks were sold in the London poultry markets. Robins, titmice, wagtails and wrens were all fair game in parts of southern Europe. The scarcity of these birds in the wild two hundred years ago was symptomatic of their popularity on the European menu. Relative prosperity in Europe and the US in this century made most birds too insubstantial to bother with, and opened the way to a new relationship with nature. Hunting titmice became distasteful, as it is to most of us today.

West Africa is on a different trajectory. Its citizens have been at the raw end of development since Europeans began trade in its gold, ivory and human beings. Their only prosperity since then has been in population growth. Sympathy for wild birds and animals is as unpragmatic and foreign a notion as family planning sometimes seems to be.

As we biked through cleared rainforests scarred with red gullies, past millet fields with their soil hanging in the air, down village lanes with worm-bellied children and bent women, we couldn't help thinking that it would be a long time before purple herons stimulate anything other than appetite. □

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