

# Bird photography as threshold to deeper ecological consciousness: A Heideggerian perspective

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## Abstract

The significance of art to the environment has mainly focused on the creative utilization of materials that averts wastage and pollution. Although desirable, there are other connections between art and the environment that can be explored. Heidegger's conception of the essence of art as an event of truth promises a deeper ecological reading. As a privileged space for the unveiling of being or aletheia, the artwork carries a potential for transforming people's modes of thinking and being. Bird photography, with its peculiarity as a form of photography, provides a link between Heidegger's metaphysical treatment of art and the more practical demands of environmental ethics. In this way, the paper utilizes a phenomenological analysis of bird photography guided by a careful reading of Heidegger's treatise on art.

Interpreted within a Heideggerian framework, there are four aspects of bird photography that contribute to a more positive view of nature. One, it is an art that unveils beings. Two, it makes one realize the inherent value of non-human beings and nature in general. Three, it contradicts anthropocentric sentiments. Four, it makes clear the interconnectedness of nature and man's place in it. All these make bird photography an art for the environment.

**Key Words:** Bird photography; Heidegger; environmental philosophy; art and environment

## Introduction

When one ponders the connection between art and environment, the image that comes to mind would be the use of old or discarded things as art materials. Lanterns made up of natural materials like leaves or tree bark, costumes from plastic bags, re-purposed old television as façade for an aquarium are a few examples. This is the principle of reuse-reduce-recycle applied in the creation of art. Seeing art as an avenue to reuse what would otherwise be thrown as trash may somewhat help in easing the garbage problem but it at the same time underestimates art by relegating it to the level of superficial solutions to the environmental crisis. What is needed are not short-term solutions directed at the effects of the problem but a change in attitude, an alteration in mentality that attacks the roots of the problem. Hence, despite its merits, this point of view has not dug deep into the possible role that art could play in addressing our current environmental predicament.

To supplement this common notion, this paper reflects on the possibility of art, specifically bird photography, as an event of ecological awareness or awakening. Can art be a threshold that leads the individual to a more environmentally-sound frame of mind? Is there a transformative element inherent in the being of art that can somehow contradict the exaggerated anthropocentric attitude that has often been identified as the cause of environmental problem?

In answering these questions, the study adopts Heidegger's notion of art as an event of truth. This provides the needed depth in bringing out the ecological dimension of art and as such will comprise the first part of the paper. The second part of the paper substantiates this point by explaining how bird photography's peculiarity as an art greatly captures the strife between world and earth, a defining moment in the event of truth. It is done in two levels: on the level of the work of art (the photograph) and on the level of the creation of the work of art (the act of doing bird photography).

It is the thesis of this paper that the strife between world and earth unveiled and preserved in the work of art can be construed as a non-anthropocentric understanding of being. In an environmental sense, this strife effectively accentuates the unquantifiable aspect of nature, its inherent value. And to see reality in this way provides grounding for a more humble, ecocentric, environment-friendly treatment of nature.

### **Art as event of truth**

In the essay *On the origin of the work of art*, Heidegger presents truth not as correct representation or adequation but as a "happening" or an "event." In the moment of truth, what happens is an unveiling, an unconcealment of being. The being of things opens itself up to Dasein. The world of our being-in-the-world is set up in the work of art. Relations with things, other people, and one's own possibilities or being are made to shine forth in this unconcealment, brought to awareness and understanding. But truth as aletheia is never just a simple appearing of things, as if out of darkness and into this illuminated space, available for Dasein's absolute grasp. The event of truth is a play of unveiling and concealment, a setting into the open and a closedness. As being reveals an aspect of itself, others become absent or kept in obscurity. Heidegger sees this as part of the quality of being that it is never fully disclosed.

In the *Origin of the work of art*, Heidegger introduces the term earth to stand for this evasive aspect of being. Earth is a self-closedness. It is that something we could not totally put our fingers on. And although it is always there, serving as the ground of the world, it perpetually eludes our comprehension. It is in the happening of truth that the struggle or strife between these two elements, world and earth, one that appears and the other that covers-up, is captured. From this could be gathered

a notion of truth that is not a domination of the object but rather an openness to and a letting be of the being of beings.

Heidegger attributes to the being of art the important role as a space for this happening of truth. Here the study adopts an environmental reading of Heidegger.

### **Bird photography as threshold to deeper ecological consciousness**

The uniqueness of bird photography in comparison with other types of photography lies on two things: its rigorous demands and the appeal of its subject. Like other genres of photography, it is governed by photography's basic rules. Technical aspects like correct exposure, avoidance of camera shake or motion blur, and minimizing noise have to be kept in mind. Artistic considerations like proper placement of the subject in the frame (composition), subject and background separation, or achieving a smooth rendering of the out-of-focus areas (bokeh) are also at play in bird photography. The difference lies in the difficulty of applying these rules. The fast pace and the unpredictability of the subject as well as the shooting conditions often frustrates these rules. But as will be discussed below, this fact is not simply a problem but indicative of something deeper.

In comparison to wildlife photography in general or even to macrophotography which also takes images of moving critters, bird photography differs by virtue of the timeless and pervasive appeal of the birds themselves.

“Thirty thousand years ago, someone stretched out a finger and, in the soft mud on the wall of the cave of Chauvet-Pont-d’arc, in Southern France, traced an unmistakable outline: the round head, plump body, ear tufts, and face of an owl. Here, deep belowground, humans made the oldest paintings ever discovered – and one of the first objects our species chose to depict was a bird (Alderfer 2012, 6).”

This charm has never waned as birds permeated cultures all around the world. From ancient bird-headed women representations serving as fertility symbols and the Egyptian falcon-headed god Horus, from the spread-winged eagle symbol of the Roman legion to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly duckling*, to St. Francis of Assisi's avian sermon, down to the phoenix that healed Harry Potter's wounds, birds figure extensively in the human lifeworld (Alderfer 2012, 81-103).

This paper explores four aspects of bird photography that draws environmental significance from its unique metaphysical characteristics.

#### *1. Bird photography as an art that unveils*

Birds are ubiquitous. We see birds everywhere yet their beauty and variety may be unappreciated. Typically, when we look at birds, perched on a nearby tree or swooping in the air, we see them as a dark blur of a figure. The normal vision, which roughly equates to the field of view of a 50mm lens, does not offer enough magnification or reach to see the bird's magnificent features. In comparison, the minimum lens size in bird photography is 300mm while the optimum is about 500 to 600mm. With this magnification, a common bird like the Long-tailed Shrike (locally known as *Tarat*, Figure 1) is revealed in its grandeur. Looking at this image, noticing feather details of colors and patterns, its sharp beak designed for ripping the hard exoskeleton of beetles or scales of small snakes, the tenacity of its gaze, a person as if rediscovers this bird that one has seen every too often but always in partial darkness. Heidegger explains that Being, like tolling bells, entices us, invites us to take interest in it, to raise questions, look deeper, and in doing so let things reveal their essence (2001, 197). A stunning portrait of a bird, therefore, such as this Mangrove Blue Flycatcher (Figure 2), is not just a record of the species' presence in a place but a powerful testament of its being. As the photograph draws the eyes towards the bird's vibrant blue back that contrast with its warm rufous chest, to its white lores and brightly lit eyes, "the more luminous becomes the uniqueness of the fact that it is rather than is not (Heidegger 2002, 40)."

With details comes variety. It may not be known to many but the Philippines ranks fourth in the world for the most number of endemic bird species (192), next to Indonesia (375), Australia (313) and Brazil (202) (Beletsky 2010, 44). Add the migratory birds that visit annually and the occasional vagrants, bird species in the Philippines number more than six-hundred. This fact is in stark contrast to people's reaction when shown photos of birds taken in their area. Many of them would be surprised to know that such bird exists in their place! This unfamiliarity is also reflected in the equivocal quality of local bird names. Case in point is the term *pipit*. All-inclusive in its scope, it seems to be a generic term referring to any small bird, covering several species from various taxonomic groups like white-eyes, flowerpeckers, maybe even warblers. Being able to differentiate bird species through detailed photographs will reinforce the appreciation of nature's richness and biodiversity. This awareness opens up a world that lets one "tune in to the rhythms of a larger reality, one that marks seasons not by numbers on a calendar but by migration and song (Wood, Williamson and Glassberg 2005, 1)."

With truth as aletheia, a setting forth of being into the light, photography as "painting with light" can be its rightful art.

## 2. *Capturing the strife of world and earth in bird photography*

In other genres of photography, a high level of control can be exercised. Poses of the bride and groom can be fine-tuned and elaborate lighting set-ups can be accomplished in a studio for portrait photography. This luxury does not exist in bird

photography. Taking a picture of a Mountain Tailorbird (Figure 3) illustrates the typical difficulties. The subject measures a mere ten centimeters, is quick and constantly moves from twig to twig before flying to a different branch, usually in the dense undergrowth below tall forest trees where light is always wanting.

I am putting forward these observations as a hobbyist and as a student of philosophy. Professional bird photographers have ways to go around these problems but the shooting condition will always be the same. From a Heideggerian perspective, these challenges embody the interplay of world (as elements we can control) and earth (as unpredictable elements that transcend our grasp). Photographing birds allows one to experience being's "constant concealment in the twofold form of refusal and obstructing (Heidegger 2002, 31)." First, the actual shooting time in bird photography is just a matter of a few to several seconds. That's how short the time the bird stands illuminated in the clearing of being, after which it goes back to concealment – temporarily moving out of view or disappearing for good. Secretive water birds such as rails and crakes will dart into cover upon the first sign of a human's presence, simply refusing to be photographed! Second, tracking a bird through the viewfinder is a constant search for better vantage points, avoiding obstructions and getting better angles for the background. For some birds, catching them in the open is itself the challenge. A bird photographer narrates his experience with the Arctic Warbler:

For a long time, this shifty migrant only allowed me some distance shots. This is the first time it came close. You have to be patient, waiting for it to approach than chasing it all over the place. Most often, it hides behind the thickets, occasionally coming out into the open. This time, it did come out long enough for some bursts. No chance, however, to get a 'perfect' frame. But with this rare opportunity with this bird with its patented eyebrow, I cannot complain. I was all smiles (Costales 2017).

"Beings push themselves in front of others, the one hides the other, this casts that into shadow, a few obstructs the many, on occasion one denies all (Heidegger 2002, 30)." Twigs, leaves, deep shadow, bright light, and the bird itself all conspire to obscure the subject, which makes the photograph the space where the struggle between the seen and the unseen transpires. The bird, which corresponds to the human person's conscious goal, is perpetually caught up in the self-closedness of the earth, manifested by nature's evasiveness. It creates in bird photography a kind of respect and reverence for the natural. This translates into the opposition between presenting a bird in its natural setting, however messy, versus digital manipulation for aesthetic consideration. The Philippine Bird Photography Forum (PBPF), one of the national avenues where bird photographers can share photos and interact with other bird photographers and birders has a set of rules for those wanting to share bird images. For one: "Natural looking photos with minimal digital manipulation

that emphasize that the bird was taken in the wild are encouraged. No major changes in photo background, cloning of birds, and dishonest manipulation of images (PBPF 2018).” This interference with the natural also implies prohibiting pictures of “caged birds, pet birds, captive birds, zoo birds, fed birds, or baited birds (PBPF 2018).”

Perhaps it is this acknowledgment of nature’s transcendent quality that accounts for its mystery. There are moments when a bird photographer is out there in the forest, taking in all these innumerable elements and just feeling a sense of the divine, or at least something larger, greater than oneself. This kind of “deep-seated respect, or even veneration for ways and forms of life” develops from the “deep pleasure and satisfaction” that a person derives from a “close partnership with other forms of life (Naess 2008, 216).” Shooting in Puerto Princesa, a seasoned bird photographer, narrates his realization:

I read somewhere that Light can only be understood with the wisdom of darkness. It seems that this is how the Palawan Flycatcher perceived the encroaching light when it perched on that portion of its lair as a sentient being.

Thus, whenever we are out there in the field, we should take cognizance of the fact that our subjects are sentient beings, being able to perceive and feel things. After all, they are just like us, creatures made by God (Paler 2014)!

Sentientism, as an environmental ethical theory, “hold[s] that all sentient creatures (or all conscious creatures) have moral standing, and that their interests have independent value, value that is not dependent on human interests or on any other kind of value (Attfield 2014, 10).”

There are times too when the unpredictability of nature leads to pleasant surprises. The picture of the Mountain White-eye (Figure 4) was taken during a light drizzle and fog which unexpectedly added a mystical character to the background. The presence of the rain and fog ceased to be obstacles but facilitated the appearance of the subject by blurring the background and accentuating it by reflecting the light in such a way that it gave a dreamy feel to the scene. The bird’s natural behavior of sipping nectar was not only caught on camera but it highlighted the delicate beauty of the calliandra flower that provided it nourishment. It is part of the essence of art to capture this harmony. Such is the counterplay present in the event of truth:

“World demands its decisiveness and measure and allows beings to attain to the openness of its paths. Earth, bearing and rising up, strives to preserve its closedness and to entrust everything to its law. The strife is not rift, in the sense of a tearing open of a mere cleft;

rather, it is the intimacy of the mutual dependence of the contestants. The rift carries the contestants into the source of their unity, their common ground (Heidegger 2002, 38).”

### *3. The human person's embeddedness in nature*

Aldo Leopold, from the point of view of land ethic, urges people to change their role from “conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such (2008, 164).” Doing bird photography can strengthen this idea as the experience makes one realize that the birds, and nature in general, have their own way, their own flow that may be indifferent to the human person. Hence the human person is not a master that lords over nature but a simple participant in, even an admirer of its unfolding.

“Birds wait for no man.” So says a Hollywood movie about birding. In practice, bird photography is really mostly waiting. This photo of a White-fronted Tit (Figure 5), an endemic species that some have dubbed “fabled” due to its rarity, took three days of scouring the remote roads of Subic. In the same fashion, the photographer of this Indigo-banded Kingfisher (Figure 6) had to return to the same mountain stream in Baguio City repeatedly, spending two to four hours each time. Going home without any usable photo is also perfectly conceivable. It is not only the time element that robs the human person of dominance. The elusiveness of the subject and the less than ideal shooting condition that constitute the intricacy of bird photography presents a non-anthropocentric model of reality where human beings is not the center. Although anthropocentrism dictates that “none but human interests or concerns matter, in the sense of having independent value (Atfield 2014, 5),” when one is out in the field, nature simply does not care about these “human interests.”

In capturing a beautiful photograph, therefore, one can only take what nature gives and nothing more. That is why there is always a feeling of gratitude that accompanies a good photo. A photographer expresses his gratefulness after a successful shoot with the beautiful Luzon Water Redstart (Figure 7):

As we merrily packed our gear, with a satisfying grin marring our faces, I looked back at the site as we started our ascent and shouted a praise of thanks to the Gods of this mountain, or to whoever dwells in this site, seen or unseen, or perhaps to the nymphs and naiads of the waterfall, for the wonderful opportunity they have given us to take pictures of the LWR.

Then the birds, as if sensing our thanks and goodbyes, made a final appearance, then disappeared into the fading light (Paler 2016).

Seeking for birds re-establishes our primordial connection with nature. Dichotomies like mind-body or man-nature can be posited philosophically but this activity plunges one in the midst of the natural world, engaging the primal instincts. The eyes track every movement in the vegetation, seeking for the familiar silhouette of a bird. The ears, too, identify and locate calls and songs, or the rustling of leaves. Even the sense of touch is engaged as one treads a rocky trail or the muddy stream bed whose murky waters fill the air with fetid smell. In situations where some level of danger exists like the presence of cobras or vipers, steep embankments, or slippery trails, the human beings immanence in the face of nature is underscored. At the end of the day, man is still just one part of the biotic community.

#### *4. From art to environmental conservation*

Art is not just about the artwork or the artist. There is a third element to it that Heidegger calls the “preserver.” The truth unveiled in the work of art needs an audience who will dwell in this truth. This truth must affect people in a way that it transforms their mode of being. In Heidegger’s words:

“...for the more purely is the work itself transported into the openness of beings it itself opens up, then the more simply does it carry us into this openness and, at the same time, out of the realm of the usual. To submit to this displacement means: to transform all familiar relations to world and to earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work (Heidegger 2002, 40).”

This preserving or “standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work” is first and foremost a knowing but is at the same time a willing (Heidegger 2002, 41). For a work of art to fully accomplish its being, its truth must be comprehended by people, inspiring and guiding them towards a course of action.

Heidegger further adds that the artwork “belongs uniquely within the region it itself opens up,” hence its power and significance must be understood within its “own essential space (Heidegger 2002, 20).” Within this world the work of art acts like an intersection that “simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations” that affect a people’s life.

Now to apply these two points on the case of the Luzon Water Redstart mentioned above. In the picture, it is shown perched on a rock. The striking dark blue coloration of the head and back that flows into that deep chestnut tail is at once noticeable. Then the burnt brown color of the wings that mediates between the two takes prominence. Add the look-back pose plus the tranquil setting and you have a beautiful artwork of a photograph. But art has never been merely about



beauty for Heidegger; it is about truth. One can hang this photograph in an exhibit to be cherished for its beauty but that would be missing the point. The being of the Luzon Water Redstart that the photo celebrates cannot be withdrawn from its world, the habitat that supports its subsistence. Returning to the photograph, the rock upon which the bird stands is part of a wall of boulders that encloses a pool of clear water fed by a small waterfall. This is the stringent condition of its existence; polluted streams will not permit its survival, accounting for its vulnerable state. This is the kind of knowing concurrent in art that Heidegger stresses. And since this knowing is also a willing, the realization is set into motion. The “broader and deeper interest in all aspects of the environment” that happens in bird photography makes it “nearly impossible to study birds and not become an advocate for conservation (Wood, Williamson and Glassberg 2005, 4).”

As if symbolically, the home of this bird is under a bridge. This implies its belongingness to a wider web of relations: to the crowd of admirers whose bonds of friendship it helped establish and whose wonder desires for its conservation, to the community surrounding it that is caught up within its own facticity and whose decisions and actions will determine its continued presence, to issues of conservation like pollution, habitat destruction, even hunting. This chain of connections also brings about questions of valuation. What value do people within the community ascribe to this wonderful creature? How can the conservation of this endemic species be successfully integrated within its changing environment? All these and more converge in the photograph as the truth that it unveils and which compels the human person to act. Truly, there is more to art than pleasing the senses:

“As the setting-into-work of truth, art is poetry. It is not only the creation of the work that is poetic; equally poetic, though in its own way, is the preservation of the work. For a work only actually is as a work when we transport ourselves out of the habitual and into what is opened up by the work so as to bring our essence itself to take a stand within the truth of beings (Heidegger 2002, 47).”

### **Concluding Reflection**

Bird photography does three things of significance to the environment. One, it makes us realize the inherent value of non-human beings and nature as a whole. Two, it contradicts our anthropocentric sentiments. Three, it makes us see the interconnectedness of nature and man’s place in it. And it does so in an intuitive way through immersion and a display of beauty.

Thus, bird photography can truly be an art for the environment. Both in the work of art and the work put in the art, bird photography may contribute in the formation of a consciousness that places a deep value on the natural world.

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## Photo Credits

Dr. Nick Pasiken: figure 2

Dr. Ron Paraan: figure 6 and figure 7

## Appendix



Figure 1. Long-tailed Shrike



Figure 2. Mangrove Blue Flycatcher



Figure 5. White-fronted Tit



Figure 3. Mountain Tailorbird



Figure 4. Mountain White-eye



Figure 6. Indigo-banded Kingfisher



Figure 7. Luzon Water Redstart