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**Opening Extract from...**

# Extinct Boids

Written by Ralph Steadman and Ceri Levy

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A commentator and an illustrator
Got together as creators
Not just of any old potatoes
But became extinct Boid perpetrators.

Though thinking they were bird-haters
They discovered they were bird-raters
They loathed the job but never mind
They had not realised they were so kind

To re-create all of these birds
Required a mass of art and reams of words.
Finally it would disprove a lie
That none of these birds again would fly.

By Levy/Steadman



1st April 2012

# His Nibship in the midship

It all started with a mistake. I asked Ralph Steadman to create a drawing of one extinct bird for an exhibition and he created a book's worth. And his first bird wasn't even an extinct one. That was how this book of boids began, and the course it followed and the paths it veered through from that first moment led us on a journey to strange places, weirrrd conversations, odd creations and a voyage through the beautiful mind that belongs inside Ralph's head. In fact *voyage* is a very apt term, because it does feel that we have been sailing though the bird world together for this last year, discovering it anew and learning of extinction and all that the world has lost. As Ralph would say, "it's funny how things begin".

So how did this all begin? I had been making a documentary called *The Bird Effect* about how birds inspire and affect people, from birdwatchers and scientists to artists, writers and musicians. The more I learnt of the bird world the more I realised that there were some serious conservation issues at stake. Consequently, I had been approaching artists to take part in our show *Ghosts of Gone Birds*, created by Chris Aldhous and myself. Its purpose was to highlight the risk of extinction that is faced by many bird species in the world today; the premise of the show was to get artists to represent an extinct species of bird, and to breathe life back into it. We felt it would be more powerful for *Ghosts* to engage with an audience through creativity as opposed to telling all and sundry how awful humanity is and how dreadful we are as a species. We all know this; a sure way to alienate viewers is by ramming this kind of message down their throats. By using art as the medium for the message we hoped to engage and forge a lasting connection with our audience. The exhibition was also designed to promote the work done by BirdLife International's Preventing Extinctions programme, with a percentage of monies raised going toward their projects.

It fell upon me to approach some of our favourite artists and ask them to participate in the show. Ralph and his work had been part of my life from the first moments I first discovered his work on *Alice in Wonderland*, and through the years I always enjoyed his line, his wit and his cutting, creative spark. I felt that if there was someone who could work really well with the show's dark subject, it was Ralph. The only drawback was that I knew of nobody that could introduce me to him, and I had vowed not to approach people cold without some sort of an 'in' to them – it can be a soul-destroying process battling through the iron curtain of managers, agents or other protectorate states.

But serendipity played its part along the way, connecting me with the right people at the right time, and Ralph would prove to be no exception. It's just a matter of noticing when a window of opportunity opens, and then taking advantage of it.

# HMS Steadmanitania

At the 2010 Port Eliot Festival, I was invited to host a series of talks about birds and their effect on people in Jeff Barrett and Caught By The River's music and literary tent (for whose website I write a diary for, about the making of my film). As I entered the site I saw two massive doors, unmistakably adorned with a Steadman logo for the festival from a previous year. The daubing of these gates by Ralph had proved so popular that the logo remains on them to this day. It was a sign, literally. I mentioned to Jeff that I really wanted to find a way to connect with Ralph and involve him with *Ghosts*. He spoke to the festival organisers, and Lady Catherine St Germans, who organises the Festival with her husband Lord Peregrine Eliot, passed Ralph's email address to me. She suggested I send an email to Ralph, but warned me not to expect an immediate response. She also said that just when you've given up all hope of any response, the chances are that suddenly, out of the blue, something wonderful will drop into your inbox. For me, any kind of a reply from Ralph would have been wonderful. I sent the email. And then one day, just when I had indeed given up all hope of any response, something glittered in my inbox. It was an email from Ralph, and once I had read it, I knew the world would never be the same again. Things had changed forever.

This book is set out in a chronological fashion, utilising snippets of conversations, emails, entries from my diaries and memories of phone calls to record the period of creation of this extraordinary collection of birds, or boids, to use the name Ralph gave them when the first came into view; *boids* is what they have remained ever since. The artworks are presented in the order of their appearance in my inbox. Each time Ralph's name appears there, I still feel a thrill of anticipation at what might be contained within the email. It could be a thought, an idea, a promise of something miraculous to follow in a future message, but mostly it has proved to be an unfurling roll call of the birds that we have lost over the centuries. Both of us have discovered how humanity has destroyed so much of the natural world around us. Ralph's work has allowed us to glimpse the subject of extinction from a unique vantage point, for never before have these creatures been depicted in this way. In his search for the extinct birds, Ralph has uncovered an array of facts, realities and desperate stories, and through these pages we hope we can impart a little knowledge and a lot of great art to you. This is Ralph's representation of extinction.

Like confused Victorian explorers we clambered on board the HMS *Steadmanitania,* manned only by Ralph and myself. Confused as to which direction we were facing, let alone how to unfasten our moorings from the quayside, we managed to set sail on the imaginary seas of invention, which we knew would lead to the lands of extinction. On the way we would discover birds that through the pen of his Nibship would turn into boids. A world I thought I knew became something else altogether. One minute our craft would be setting sail for Mauritius and the next we would be in Australasia. Ralph's world does not follow the normal rules of geography. After all, with Ralph, Rodrigues would become a person and not an island. We steered our path to the distant horizon and beyond.

# So I said, then he said, then...

*On 25th February 2011, Ceri Levy wrote:*

Dear Ralph,
Lady Catherine Saint Germans passed on your email to me, as I would love to involve you in an exhibition we are organising about bird extinction and the dangers that face birds today. It is to raise awareness for BirdLife and their work to save critically endangered birds in the world, of which there are 192 species. The show will be in London in November and is called *Ghosts of Gone Birds.*

Artists are representing an extinct species of bird from the list that I have attached. I really hope that you will join the throng, as we also have musicians and writers on board and *Ghosts* is becoming a truly creative voice for conservation.

I have attached an outline to the show as well as the list of extinct birds and a list of all the birds that have already been chosen.
All best wishes
Ceri

*On 10th March 2011, Ralph Steadman wrote:*

I'm not sure quite what you want from me and the bird notion of yours puzzles me a little – I think WEIRRD is so much more intriguing. Man has always wanted to fly... perhaps we had wings once...

*Ceri's Diary:* This seems like an enigmatic start to our relationship, to say the least, but contact has been made. I am not certain that Ralph totally understands what I want from him, and perhaps he hasn't seen the brief that I attached to the email. I have just written gain to ask whether he has read the brief, to which he has just replied: 'Not as yet...'. This has led to him sending me images of all sorts of work he has done relating to flight, including hot air balloons, flying machines, angels, strange winged creatures, but no birds.

*12th March, Ceri's Diary:*Today, two days after first contact, Ralph phoned me for the first time. We began to talk about the project, but Ralph seemed keener to read me something he has written recently, and in those initial moments of hearing the storyteller begin to narrate, I lay down on my couch, relaxed and inhabited the same space as Ralph's vocal tones, listening to the timbre of his voice and his accent, which altered from line to line of his writing. Part-Welsh, part-Liverpudlian, part-gruff narrator, accents abounded, as his creativity crackled down the line and veered straight towards my cerebellum. I knew in that instant that I hoped that he, as much as anyone else I have spoken to so far, contributes a bird to *Ghosts.*

After the story was read I explained the purpose of the project and the need for him to study the list of extinct birds I have sent him, and to choose one to represent for the show. The thought of extinct birds as a subject seemed alien to him. So alien that he kept pondering the fact that I wanted him 'to draw creatures that don't even exist. It's madness really'. I agreed, but suggested that it might be possible to breathe life back into them. It's all down to him as to whether he can find a way into the subject. I have no idea what will happen next, but what I do know is I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation, and hope for more.

*At 18:30, Ralph emails:*
I don't know why I was doing it but I have done four birds today. Extinct too!!

*Ceri's Diary:* Four birds? Extinct birds? What is going on? I am so excited at the thought. I want to call him and find out what he has done – I want to see these birds. Am I really to believe that Ralph has created more than one bird? After all, only one is required. But we can make an exception in this case, can't we? Has he done four for a reason? Are three not very good? Does he want me to choose only one of them? So many damn questions and no answers until... I don't know when. I hope later tonight or tomorrow, who knows? I am now stuck inside Ralph's time. I sent an email stating my excitement but there's no reply. I am just going to have to sit and wait. Tomorrow will bring what tomorrow will bring.

I have tried to imagine what type of birds he will have done. I can't guess, but I reckon that he won't have picked an obvious bird to start with, like the Dodo.

I feel like I did as a child on the night before Christmas. My mind is racing and I can't wait to fall asleep, so I can wake up, sit down at my computer, and discover what birds have materialised. Here's to sweet dreams of extinction.

**13th March**–First Official Day Aboard the *Steadmanitania*

*At 11:52, Ralph emails:*
I will photograph my suite of extinct birds today and send them to you late...
OK RALPH

*Ceri's Diary:* The tension is too much for me. I can't think of getting on with anything else, other than waiting for Ralph to photograph his suite. **Four** birds! A suite! All of which I presume we will be able to include in the show. Come on, Ralph. Quench my thirst and let me see your work.

And then...

*13th March, 12:43. Ralph emails:*

**Extinct BOIDS!!**

I am sending you some pics I did yesterday... OK RALPH

*Ceri's Diary:* And with this email that contains attachments of the following three birds, life has changed forever. We are on our way, afloat, and *Ghosts* has a new member of the team. I am so utterly excited by these pictures. I can't believe that we have not just one but three birds to use in the show. The Japanese Egret rising into the skies is a beautiful sight, but it is wrong. This is a *notion* of an extinct bird. It doesn't exist as a species, and never has. There are egrets in Japan but there is no specific Japanese Egret. But this is such beautiful chaos.

This is the mistake that started us on our adventure

# Japanese Egret

*Egretta ralphartum falsartum*

The egret is a very good place to start this collection. It has never become an extinct species, but the egret's modern tale is that of a dance with death as it has been persecuted for its plumage, especially in the breeding season when its feathers are at their most magnificent. Plume hunters would kill entire colonies of birds to procure a desirable fashion accessory for many a milliner. At the turn of the 20th century, the desire for egret feathers, especially those of the Snowy Egret, led to the price of feathers soaring to more than twice that of gold. There are many records from this time of feathers from hundreds of thousands of egrets being sold in auctions across the globe, from the United States to London, as the fashion trade demanded more and more decoration for their outfits.

Protests against the cruelty meted out to the birds by hunters and the changing mores of fashion allowed the egrets to strengthen their numbers, as fashion moved onto grebes, terns and albatrosses. Thanks to conservation movements the trade in bird feathers became outlawed in the early 1900s.


AN EGRET IN
JAPAN. EXTINCT!
Ralph Steadman 2011

# Great Auk

*Pinguinus impennis*

*Ceri's Diary:* I stare in amazement at what is appearing before my eyes. This is sorcery! Here are birds, sorry, *boids*, created by Ralph bloody Steadman. Only his hand could have created these drawings. His style and voice comes through loud and clear. I am gobsmacked. I love this painting. The line is so assured, and the piece is fluid and simple. It is so easy to read things into this picture. The auk's eye is black and looks shut, perhaps not wishing to see the path ahead. It moves its left foot uncertainly forwards. Is it feeling for its future? Is the ground solid enough for it to continue onwards? Unfortunately this was just about the end of the line for the auk. How I would love to have seen this bird.

The last Great Auk to die on British soil was captured in 1840 by two men from St Kilda, west of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Their job was to find and collect birds from the surrounding rocks for the pot, or to make shoes or hats with. They discovered a large sleeping bird on the rock Stac an Armin and brought it back to St Kilda. There was a terrible storm, the auk was blamed for it, and so it was supposedly killed as a witch.

The Great Auk is second only to the Dodo in the extinct bird familiarity stakes. This large seabird populated the wide expanse of the North Atlantic. The largest of the auk family, it stood just a little shy of three feet tall in its stockinged feet. It most resembled a penguin and was equally as flightless, which didn't help it in its fight or flight from extinction, making it easy prey for hunters. But like a penguin, it was a true creature of the sea. In the water its wings would have proved to be powerful oars steering it on its course, and it would have proved to be a bird of agility, a surging swimmer, and a devourer of fish.

There was a dreadful acceptance of the demise and imminent disappearance of the Great Auk, and frenzied specimen collection before it became extinct was a bizarre additional pressure on the last of the birds. The last known pair of Great Auks were both killed on Eldey Island, off the coast of Iceland, on June 3rd 1844. Some fishermen discovered this last pair, with the female sitting on a single egg. The birds were strangled and sold as museum skins, while the egg was smashed. The last solitary sighting of a living bird was made off the Newfoundland Banks in 1852. The bird was never seen again.


The GREAT EXTINCT AUK.
Ralph Steadman 2011

*Ceri's Diary:* I have been thinking about the word that has appeared with these first images. BOIDS. Ralph's use of this word intrigues me. I like the sound of it. It seems somehow apt. These are not scientific, textbook illustrations. These are Ralph's take on the subject. He has stamped his persona upon them, and given them their own unique identities.

I am delighted that we have not just one but three pictures for the show. I love what I'm seeing before me – *Ghosts* will be a better exhibition with these additions. I feel that we are home and dry, with Ralph becoming a part of the diverse roster of artists joining the creative army for conservation that we are assembling.

Ralph has managed to superbly capture the moa's look of revulsion at his imminent placement on the extinction list. A resigned pride crosses his beak. I look at the moa and wonder – how do you end up losing a bird of this size? Stupidity, that's what. To not notice such a large creature disappearing from view is more than extreme carelessness, it is negligence. Or maybe people just didn't care if a species fell by the wayside. Do we care now? I am doubtful that many people do, but I hope that is not the case. This is one of the main purposes of *Ghosts* – to point out the array of birds that have been lost, and to remind ourselves that species loss continues today, and that there are things we can do about it – by supporting the people who are out there fighting for the lives of our defenceless avian neighbours. I hope *Ghosts* can bring the subject to a new audience, which is why we have approached such a varied list of artists. This way we can engage with people who may never have been interested in conservation, ever. Whatever happens, I am sure that everyone who sees them will enjoy Ralph's pieces.

# North Island Giant Moa

*Dinornis novaezealandiae*

The moas are ratites – the tribe that includes ostriches, emus and cassowaries – but they are different enough to be placed by ornithologists in their very own order, the Dinornithiformes. There were several types of moa, all of which lacked any hint of a wing (unlike the other ratites mentioned above). The moas were endemic to New Zealand. They had all gone before the European discovery of New Zealand in 1642 by Abel Tasman. Reasons for their extinction included hunting and loss of habitat.


EXTINCT
NEW ZEALAND MOA

*13th March, 19:12. Ceri emails:*
Oh Ralph, these are extraordinary! These boids are no longer extinct. *Ghosts* will be a better place thanks to their existence. One of your previous emails said you had done four birds, but I only have the egret, the auk and the moa. I don't mean to be greedy but is there another one to come?

*Ralph replies:*
Glad you like my efforts. There is one more boid, the Choiseul Crested Pigeon, which is not quite finished. It should be done this morning and I will send it over. I may do a few more – they are rather fun to do!

*Ceri's Diary:* Time passes slowly as I wait for a FOURTH bird to appear. How good will it be?

And then…

*14th March, 13:09. Ralph emails:*
Here is the fourth one – any good??

*Ceri replies:*
I should say. The pigeon has an air of baleful resignation… it works exceptionally well. This bird looks way too hot to continue on its way, especially with that hefty looking, but pretty bonnet on. The burning ground it stands upon seems to scorch the bird's feet, and it seems such a meltingly hot day for it to try to survive. Really amazing, Ralph… thank you, from me and from *Ghosts*!

*Ceri's Diary:* What I find interesting is the setting that Ralph gives to these birds. They all have a sense of belonging to the landscape that surrounds them. These are not simple sketches. These involve time, thought and a sprinkling of Ralph's magic. I wonder how long it takes for him to do each piece, how much preparation goes into them, and if he makes preparatory sketches? I would have loved to have seen how he creates these boids. I would have enjoyed filming the creation of these boids – I love to capture the creative process. Ah well, can't have everything. But if he continues to paint birds then we may eventually do some filming together. That would be fantastic – fingers crossed.

# Choiseul Crested Pigeon

*Microgoura meeki*

The Choiseul Crested Pigeon was endemic to Choiseul in the Solomon Islands. The skins that survive in various collections don't really give a clue as to how the bird's crest would have appeared when erect, but Ralph's interpretation is what counts. The pigeon has not been seen since 1904, and is considered extinct. Its disappearance from the record was probably due to predation by dogs and cats.


CHOISEUL CRESTED PIGEON
(Microgoura Meeki)
KRYSTEADman 2011