

About the artist



Marcus Coates

Marcus Coates lives and works in London. His work questions how we define our position as a species amongst others, asking 'Who are we compared to birds, plants, insects, etc and how and why do we state this difference? Why do we project so much of ourselves onto nature, humanising it with idealism, morality and sentiment? And where does nature exist for us, does it reside as much in the imagination as it does in our physical reality?' It brings attention to the lives of non human species in the hope that we can see more clearly how we relate to them, what this can tell us about ourselves and our future relationship with nature.

These questions have led him to work collaboratively with many wildlife experts. 'Conference for the Birds' is typical of this collaborative approach, all seven participants have an intimate and insightful relationship to different aspects of bird life.

Recent work has seen him also in collaboration with primatologist, Volker Sommer to create work about definitions of difference amongst human and non human apes as well as the subject of extinction.

Recent exhibitions and performances include:

Wilderness, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany 2018; Animals and Us, Turner Contemporary, Margate 2018; The Land We Live In, The Land We Left Behind, Hauser & Wirth Somerset 2018; As Above, So Below, IMMA, Dublin, 2017; Arrivals/Departures - sculpture commission for Utrecht Centraal Train Station, Netherlands 2017; Ape Culture, HKW Berlin, 2015; Trafalgar Square, London 4th Plinth Shortlist 2013; The Trip, Serpentine Gallery, London 2011

Recent publication:

Marcus Coates, 2016, a survey monograph published by Koenig Books

'Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience' is a research project led by Newcastle and Leeds Universities, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Working with partners the National Trust, Churches Conservation Trust and English Heritage, the project examines how, by encountering contemporary art in heritage locations, visitors can be encouraged to think about the property and its history in different ways. In 2018 and 2019, six new artworks were created for four heritage locations in North East England, including this work at Cherryburn.

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Marcus Coates' 'Conference for the Birds' is the last of the artworks commissioned by the project and responds specifically to Thomas Bewick's publication 'A History of British Birds' (1797) which brought his detailed wood engravings and information about the bird's lives to a mass audience for the first time.

With special thanks to the Cherryburn team for their support for this project

Cherryburn

Station Bank, Mickley Square, Stocksfield, Northumberland, NE43 7DD

01661 843 276

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/cherryburn

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Foreword

by Andrew Burton, Professor of Fine Art at Newcastle University

Over the summer at National Trust's Cherryburn you can discover a fascinating new installation by the contemporary artist Marcus Coates.

Marcus's artwork 'Conference for the Birds' has been specially commissioned as part of the Newcastle University-led research project 'Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience', which explores how contemporary art might change your experience at a heritage site. The project included three other National Trust commissions presented in 2018 at Cherryburn (Mark Fairington's 'Walking, Looking and Telling Tales') and Gibside (Andrew Burton's 'The Orangery Urns' and 'Your Sweetest Empire is to Please' by Fiona Curran).

As a group of researchers from Newcastle and Leeds Universities we are interested in finding out whether creating and siting new art in heritage places can change the ways in which these important places are understood and enjoyed. Many artists shape their careers around making work for such special places, but we know little about its impact. How does art in heritage places change visitor experiences? Do we love it, dislike it, or just ignore it? This is what our project sets out to discover.

We hope you enjoy Marcus's artwork: tell us what you think via

[t](#) Twitter @mcahe_NU #mcahe

For more information about this project, please visit <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/mcahe/>

Arts & Heritage



National Trust



Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience

Conference for the Birds

by Marcus Coates

Cherryburn, 15 June–3 November

'Conference for the Birds' celebrates the lives of the birds Thomas Bewick depicted in his wood engravings. His book 'A History of British Birds' first published in 1797 was a comprehensive guide to both the appearance and behaviour of birds. In Marcus' audio installation we hear seven different bird species discussing their lives with each other. The birds, played by wildlife experts, discuss topics from migration to predation, with each species speaking about the challenges they face day to day.

By exploring the lives of the birds that Bewick studied and depicted, this artwork attempts to reveal how we, when speaking from the position of another animal like a bird, rely on subjective experience to relate across to this alien perspective.

"I think there is value in this attempted shift in outlook as it creates unexpected lines of questioning and enquiry. This 'play' can also reveal just as much about ourselves than it does about the birds." Marcus Coates.

'Bewick must have known these birds so well. The details in his small woodcuts demonstrates a scrutiny that is painstaking and passionate. Every detail of their plumage would have been familiar to him, but not only that, he would have known their habits, calls and so much more about their lives. I imagine these birds occupied his mind day and night, like characters in his imagination. For the exhibition I have re-imagined Bewick's small family home, once filled with the conversation of his seven siblings, and now with seven of his birds.'

Marcus Coates

Message from the artist

As an enthusiast of natural history and an artist, Thomas Bewick 1753 – 1828 has been an important figure for me. He combines both these passions in groundbreaking and poetic ways to produce work that has a place and function in historical and contemporary public life. He created mass produced wildlife guides that were accessible, comprehensive and beautiful. In this way I see him as a 18th century David Attenborough, bringing the mysteries of the animal kingdom into people's homes for the first time. He revolutionised the art of woodcut printing for publications, to create a depth and detail of image that had not been seen before. His books reflected the demand and popularity for knowledge about the natural world which is just as relevant and necessary now.

Marcus Coates

About the 'conference'

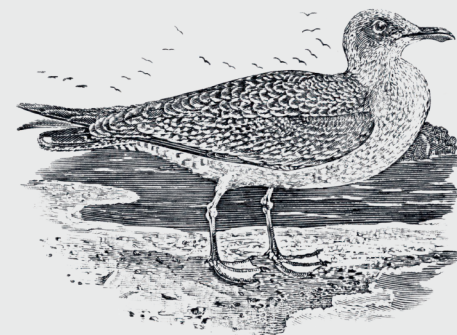
The basis of the conversation, or 'conference,' is a studio recording where seven bird experts and enthusiasts came together to create an improvised conversation between seven birds. Each of the participants was asked to choose a bird from Bewick's prints.

The birds are:

Cuckoo Helen Macdonald

The female cuckoo has a fascinating approach to rearing young. It is well known that she lays her egg in another bird's nest like a reed warbler or dunnock however, it is still a mystery how the young cuckoo finds its way back to Africa alone. Helen talks about her migration and her childhood, confused about the other bird's distrust of her.

Helen Macdonald is a writer, naturalist, and an Affiliated Research Scholar at the University of Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy of Science. She is best known as the author of 'H is for Hawk'.



Great black-backed gull Sally Reay

This is the largest of the gulls in UK; it preys on other gulls and sea birds as well as stealing fish from them. Sally is a young gull and speaks about the act of killing and her life as a predator.

Sally Reay is a zoology graduate, she has been working on the Isle of May NNR where she monitors the bird life, doing population counts and bird ringing.

Roseate tern Tom Cadwallender

This is a species of tern that has been on the brink of extinction in the UK. It survives in a small breeding colony on Coquet Island in Northumberland. (Tom has been instrumental in protecting this colony and developing strategies for its survival.) Tom speaks about his relationship as a tern to the sea and the huge distances he migrates each year.

Tom Cadwallender is the British Trust for Ornithology Regional Representative for Northumberland, he is an author writing and contributing to guides on birds and coastal environments.



Tree sparrow Muriel Cadwallender

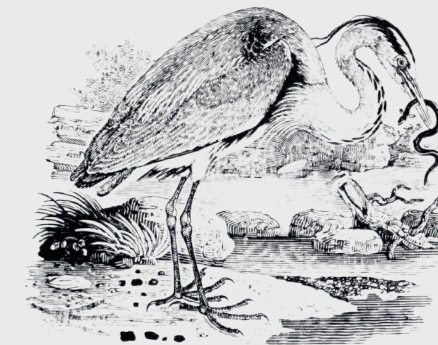
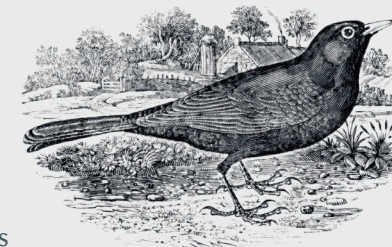
This is a social bird, living in small groups. The tree sparrow's population in the UK has fallen dramatically in recent years. Muriel speaks about her observations and concerns regarding this.

Muriel Cadwallender is the British Trust for Ornithology Regional Development Officer for Northumberland and co-editor of the 'Northumbria Bird Atlas', a survey of bird populations across the region.

Blackbird Geoff Sample

The only bird in the group that has a true song, much of the discussion with Geoff is about the culture of song, understanding its purpose, musicality and regional differences.

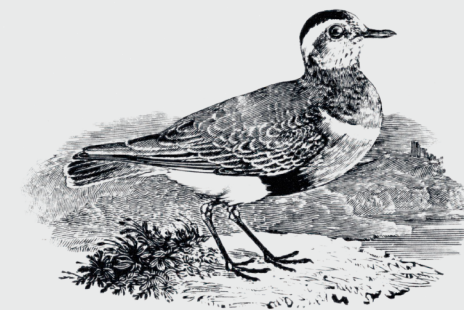
Geoff Sample is the author/producer of a series of audio guides published by HarperCollins, including the best-selling 'Collins Bird Songs and Calls'. He also regularly leads workshops and gives talks and performs at festivals and conferences.



Heron Ceri Levy

Hérons are solitary birds when not breeding. Ceri speaks about his world as a bird alone, his hunting strategies and the benefits of a waiting game.

Ceri Levy is a film-maker, writer, wildlife activist and conservationist. Recent film projects include Bananaz, about the band Gorillaz and he is currently working on 'The Bird Effect'. With artist, Ralph Steadman, he has written the Gonzovation trilogy, about the threat of extinction faced by birds and animals today.



Dotterel Marcus Coates

Unusually for birds, the female dotterel is more colourful than the male. Marcus speaks about his roles as a male dotterel, in incubating the eggs and rearing the chicks, the female having gone off to find another male and lay another clutch of eggs.