ASSIGNMENT

Thanksgiving provides an occasion to give thanks as well as to contemplate the shortcomings of our humanity, especially when carving up the enormous game bird that graces the center of so many tables on that holiday. Last Thanksgiving, this contemplation prompted me to complete a self-imposed assignment to consider four other avian species and all the ways we humans may not have done right by them.

We begin with the rooster, or more properly, the cockerel. I'm assuming this trans-Atlantic name-change was prescribed by those bugbear Puritans.

Like men, roosters come in all sizes, Bantam to Rhode Island Red. My early affection for roosters came with my family's evacuation to the country after our home's demolition. Compared to the sickening siren's call, the rooster's dawn cry was sweet as finding money in a deserted street. I love their wobbly, wattled selves, their spurred march around the henhouse and total self-importance.

You can buy day-old chickens unsexed — they're much cheaper so. A cartload of cheeping fluffy things and you, anticipating an egg avalanche, might find most of them are not the laying kind. That's how we get capons, one more euphemism for a short life as a eunuch. Chickens exist in massive numbers, unfortunately not as free agents, because we eat them and their offspring. In the US, more than 90 percent of 300 million egg-laying chickens are housed in battery cages where the space available is less than the size of a sheet of paper. The hen cannot turn or flap wings, ruffle or preen feathers.

(Birds on Factory Farms, 3/02/15)

Peacocks are the national bird of India and God’s gentle reminders in an exquisite package. They're actually a prototype of people: the splendid astonishment of tail display parallels our free will. I've seen an...
importune male display to his reflection in a shiny car door, and heaven knows my choices, freely made, have been as laughable. And the voice, the outrageous, anomalous — and, let’s face it, downright ugly — squawk, reminds us in all things to remain humble despite strutting in the habitat of princes.

The peacock is in a struggle for survival, its population dwindling fast due to habitat loss, hunting and poaching, pesticides and poison. The 1991 Indian census revealed half the population lost since Partition in 1947. The Green Peacock is already extinct. (The Tribune, 5/2/04)

Sparrows are of small stature, humdrum in appearance, with an indifferent peep, but they’re the working people of the avian world.

They have steady family lives, shunning the promiscuity and dehonair approach to parenting of the catbird and cuckoo. They are Biblical favorites: “Are not sparrows sold two for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.” And yet this failed to save them from the Great Sparrow Campaign, part of Mao Zedong’s Four Pests Campaign. In 1958, scientists had concluded that each sparrow ate 4.5 kilos of grain per year, so every million killed would mean food for 60,000 people. Clanging pots and beating drums forced the sparrows to fly until they fell to the ground exhausted. Nests and eggs were smashed, birds were poisoned and shot; hundreds of millions were killed.

In February 2003, The Deccan Herald’s science and technology section declared: “If adequate steps are not taken to protect it, the common house sparrow will soon follow the footsteps of the dodo. The almost worldwide decline for scientists is a signal of the impact of human environmental activity.” If this sounds like hyperbole, consider the defunct passenger pigeon.

The photographer Frans Lanting calls the albatross in flight “a symphony, they’re a taut long bow with the breeze as bowstring.”
individual albatross measures approximately three feet in size with wingspan of up to 11 feet. They glide low over oceans and graze on wind bouncing off the water, using about the same energy in flight as they do sitting on sand doing nothing.

They travel more than 15,000 miles in a month, live for 50 years or more, and cover over three million miles in a lifetime. Their social lives are intricate; they mate for life, returning to their home colony to lay one egg a year. After fledging, chicks spend four to five years at sea before they touch solid ground again. These birds are a phenomenon, living beyond our imagination.

One bird, Wisdom, has flown up to 4.8 million miles, or “4 to 6 trips to from the Earth to the moon and back again with plenty of miles to spare” the U.S. Geological Survey announced. Wisdom is a Laysan albatross, and the world’s oldest known living wild bird. She has raised as many as 35 chicks over the years and on February 3, 2015, at age 63, gave birth to a . In 1956 Chandler Robbins, then in his 40s, tagged her when she was about five years old. The bands used for tagging can break; they usually last about 20 years. Wisdom has gone through six, each replaced before she lost them.

In 2001, Robbins, 81 years old and still working, returned to the atoll where he had studied Wisdom years earlier. Amid thousands to choose from, he picked up a bird with a tag which he traced back to Wisdom and then further back through six replacements to the original with his own signature on it. U.S. Fish & Wildlife (Fb 12/4/15) He exults that she’s back again and nesting. Bird and man are appropriately paired; at age 94 Robbins is still at work keeping records.

Nineteen of the 21 species of Albatross are threatened with extinction. Since 1950 the total seabird population has dropped 70 percent.

These four avian groups span the range of our human needs, values, and aspirations: sparrows, common as dirt in the vernacular; chickens, indentured to our appetites; peacocks, which signify the wild beauty of
the species; and the albatross, a transcendent bird that seems not subject to the material limitations of the world.

Contemplating the bird on my plate, I find it hard to work up gratitude, though I’m thankful that species are hanging on. But we can do better by our avian compatriots. Dominion over animals went out with an eye for an eye.

We can only hope that the birds’ actual or potential extinction is a topic that will shock us into action.