

Rosa Luxemburg's Birds

Saturday 19 March 2022, by [ABERNETHY Richard](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2022).

Summary: Besides being a revolutionary and one of the most creative post-Marx Marxist thinkers, Rosa Luxemburg was a dedicated birdwatcher. Her notes on birds may help us reveal an aspect of her approach to life, nature, and the new society - Editors.

In Berlin, one morning in April 1916, Sophie and Karl Liebknecht received a telephone call from Rosa Luxemburg. On this occasion, the call was not about their shared politics – opposition to the First World War, as internationalists and revolutionary socialists. What Rosa had to tell them was that a nightingale was singing in the botanic gardens. The three of them made an excursion to listen to it.[1]

At that time of year, the nightingale would have just completed its spring migration, returning from an Africa carved up, subjugated and ruthlessly exploited by European powers, to a Europe where the slaughter and devastation of world war were unleashed.

Rosa Luxemburg was passionate about many things, among them, the natural world and especially bird life. For her, this was inseparable from her passion for human liberation. She wrote:

“I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears...”[2]

Her studies at the University of Zurich included botany, zoology and geology, though later she switched to politics and economics. Later on, while devoting herself to socialist politics, she kept an herbarium, a collection of plants, dried, mounted and annotated.[3]

It was in her letters from prison that Luxemburg wrote about birds – in particular, those written in the period from October 1916 to July 1917, when she was held at the fortress of Wronke (now Wronki in Poland). At Wronke, she was allowed freedom of movement within the fortress grounds during daylight hours. There was a garden where she could observe the local bird and insect life and watch the clouds drifting overhead.

Her letters were written for personal friends and comrades, but in the knowledge that they would be monitored by the prison officers. One can only speculate whether she thought they would one day become part of her legacy. Through her responses to birds and the natural world, as well as to novels, poetry, drama, music and other topics, she expressed her own inner thoughts and emotions, creating an intimate self-portrait.

Like most birders today, Luxemburg was thrilled to see a species for the first time. On the outing to hear the nightingale in the botanic gardens, she was intrigued by the strange call of an unidentified bird. A year later, at Wronke, she was able to identify it:

“Just imagine that a few days ago, early in the morning, I suddenly heard the same sound here, nearby. My heart pounded with impatience finally to learn what it could be. I had no peace until I found out today: it is not an aquatic bird, but rather a wryneck, a kind of grey woodpecker. It is only

a little bigger than a sparrow, and it takes its name from the fact that, when in danger, it attempts to frighten its enemies through comical gestures and contortions of its head. It lives only on ants with its sticky tongue like the anteater. That's why the Spaniards call it Hormiguero - the ant-bird".[4]

Next day, she wrote:

"Today I saw for the first time in my life a splendid bird: the yellowhammer. I sat so quiet and motionless that it hopped over quite close and I was able to observe it in exact detail."[5]

Mostly, though, she wrote about the common, familiar birds that were her regular companions in the grounds of the fortress, such as great tits, blue tits and chaffinches, describing them for her friends in lively sketches. She did not simply observe them. She interacted with them in various ways. Not surprisingly, she fed them. She sang to them, spoke to them, mimicked their calls.

"The great tits are in loyal attendance in front of my window, they already know my voice exactly, and it seems that they like it when I sing. Recently I sang the Countess's aria from Figaro, about six of them were perched on a bush in front of the window and listened without moving all the way to the end; it was a very funny sight to see."[6]

Modern studies of bird behaviour confirm that birds do sometimes respond to human music. There is even one unique case of a tame bird, a cockatoo named Snowball, who breaks into his own dance moves when music is played.[7] Of course, it is also possible that the great tits were simply waiting to be fed.

The intensity of Rosa Luxemburg's feelings towards birds must be partly due to her situation as a prisoner, separated from her friends and cut off from her political activities, all in the midst of a war she abhorred. In one of her letters, she quotes some heroic lines of poetry, suggests that she would like part of it written on her gravestone, then in a quick change of mood:

"Did you take that seriously, Mathilde? Hey, laugh at it. On my grave, as in my life, there will be no pompous phrases. Only two syllables will be allowed to appear on my gravestone: 'Tsvee-tsvee'. That is the call made by the great tit, which I can imitate so well that they all immediately come running. And just think, in this call, which is usually quite clear and thin, sparkling like a steel needle, in the last few days there has been quite a low little trill, a tiny chesty sound. And do you know what that means, Miss Jacob? That is the first soft stirring of the coming spring. In spite of the snow and frost and loneliness, we believe - the titmice and I - in the coming of spring! And if in impatience I don't live through it, then don't forget that on my gravestone nothing is to appear except that 'Tsvee-tsvee'...

I embrace you and Mimi with terrible longing, Your R.L."[8]

Mimi was Rosa Luxemburg's cat. Mathilde Jacob, secretary, comrade and friend of Rosa Luxemburg, was to die in Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943.[9]

One bird in particular Luxemburg credited for lifting her out of a blue mood. Known to her as the arbour bird or garden mocker, this is a bird that nests mainly in Eastern Europe: the icterine warbler. She describes it with affectionate humour:

"This comrade with the jauntily held beak, steeply rising forehead, and eye of a know-it-all... This bird is quite an oddball. He doesn't sing just one song or one melody, like other birds, but he is a public speaker by the grace of God, he holds forth, making his speeches to the garden... I laugh every time with joy and call to him out loud: 'Sweet dumbhead!'"[10]

She believed that she could understand nuances of meaning in bird calls.

"My mother, who considered the Bible (next to Schiller) the highest source of wisdom, was firmly convinced that King Solomon understood the language of birds. Back then, with all the superiority of my fifteen years and my training in natural science, I used to smile at my mother's naiveté. But now I myself am like King Solomon: I too understand the language of the birds, and of all animals. Not, of course, as if they were using human words, but I understand the most varied shades of meaning and of feeling conveyed by their tones. Only to the rude ear of one who is quite indifferent does the song of a bird seem always the same. If one has a love of animals, and a sympathetic understanding of them, one finds great diversity of expression, an entire 'language'." [11]

This is a remarkable claim, and quite possibly an exaggerated one. At least, Luxemburg was correct in thinking that bird vocalisations can convey a wide range of meanings. She was certainly ahead of her time in studying birds and other animals with "sympathetic understanding", rather than dispassionately as objects.

Rather oddly, on being told that Karl Liebknecht wanted a book about bird voices, Luxemburg rather bossily tried to redirect his interest:

"It surprises me a little that Karl wants a book specifically about bird calls. For me the voice of the birds is inseparable from their habitat and their life as a whole, it is only the whole that interests me, rather than any detached detail. Give him a good book on the geographical distribution of animals, which will certainly give him a lot of stimulation." [12]

When Luxemburg writes about birds, she generally does so from her own direct experience. One exception is a letter to her lover, Hans Diefenbach, where she gives a description of bird migration that she, as one of the greatest minds of the time, seems to have believed in all seriousness, but is no longer credible. [13]

"Hänschen, do you know that in their autumnal flights to the south, large birds like cranes often carry on their backs an entire load of smaller birds, such as larks, swallows, goldcrests etc.?! This is not just some fairy story for children, but a scientifically verified observation. And the little ones cheerfully twitter and converse in their 'seats on the bus'."

However appealing, the idea of small birds as hitch-hikers on the backs of larger ones was totally wrong. Most likely it arose because people could not believe that small birds could fly such long distances under their own power. Now we know that they do so by storing fat in their bodies to fuel their journey.

Her letter continues:

"Do you know that in these autumnal migrations it often happens that birds of prey – sparrowhawks, falcons, harriers – will make the journey in a single flock together with little songbirds, which they normally feed upon, in other circumstances, but during this journey a kind of God's truce [treuga Dei], a general armistice, is in force? When I read something like this, I am so thrilled and it puts me in such a mood of joie de vivre that I begin to consider even Breslau a place fit for humans to live in. I myself don't know why this affects me so; perhaps it's because I'm reminded again that life is a beautiful story".

Unfortunately, this particular beautiful story happens not to be true. Raptors (birds of prey) do not form mixed flocks with passerines (songbirds) on migration. Raptors, especially the larger species, fly mainly by soaring and gliding, and migrate by day. Small birds have a much more direct, level flight, powered by flapping; many (though not all) migrate by night. At most, a stream of migrants may include both types of bird, heading in the same direction, but without the coordination of a

flock.

It is not difficult to see why Luxemburg wanted these tales of bird migration to be true: they reflected her desire for new human relations in socialism.

At one point, Luxemburg writes ruefully how changing methods of agriculture are making birds decline:

“Only yesterday I read why the warblers are disappearing from Germany. Increasingly systematic forestry, gardening and agriculture are, step by step, destroying all natural nesting and breeding places: hollow trees, fallow land, thickets and shrubs, withered leaves on the garden grounds. It pained me when I read that. Not because of the song they sing for people, but rather it was the picture of the silent, irresistible extinction of these defenceless little creatures which hurt me to the point where I had to cry. It reminded me of a Russian book which I read while still in Zurich, a book by Professor Sieber about the ravage of the redskins [sic] in North America. In exactly the same way, step by step, they have been pushed from their land by civilized men and abandoned to perish silently and cruelly.”[14]

Today, it is beyond dispute that many bird species (though by no means all) are in serious decline, and this includes many farmland birds that were once a familiar sight, such as turtle dove, grey partridge and corn bunting. What is surprising is that Luxemburg was aware of habitat loss and its impact on bird populations over a century ago. However, the warbler family is doing fairly well: most European species have a conservation status of green – least concern.

Two things Rosa Luxemburg could not foresee (although the fatalism of these few lines in a private letter should not be taken as a fixed opinion). If she could have known, she would have rejoiced. Extinction is resistible. And the Native Americans would rise again.

After Luxemburg’s tragic and violent death, Lenin, who had clashed with her many times in the battle of ideas within the socialist movement, expressed his esteem for her in an avian image:

“To this we reply with two lines from a good old Russian fable: an eagle can indeed sometimes fly lower than a chicken, but a chicken can never rise to the same heights as an eagle. Rosa Luxemburg erred on the question of Polish independence; she erred in 1903 in her evaluation of Menshevism... [a series of further ‘errors’ follows] ... But despite these mistakes she was and remains an eagle.”[15]

An eagle – a powerful bird soaring to great heights. It’s a fitting image for Red Rosa, Marxist thinker and revolutionary leader. She herself would have most likely have preferred to be associated with the little songbirds she knew so well.

“Why are there blue tits in the world? I really don’t know, but I’m glad there are, and I experience it as a sweet consolation when a hasty tsee-tsee-bay sounds suddenly from the distance.”[16]

Richard Abernethy

List of birds seen by Rosa Luxemburg and noted in her correspondence:

Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove) *Columba livia*

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Great Tit *Parus major*

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Icterine Warbler Hippolais icterina
Blackbird Turdus merula
European Robin Erithacus rebecula
Nightingale Luscinia megarhynchos
House Sparrow Passer domesticus
White Wagtail Motacilla alba
Chaffinch Fringilla coelebs
Greenfinch Chloris chloris
Siskin Spinus spinus
Yellowhammer Emberiza citronella

Photos, sound recordings and videos of all these birds can be found on the internet.

References

The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson. Monthly Review Press, 2004.

The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg, edited by Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitza. Verso, 2011.

[1] To Sophie Liebknecht, 2 May 1917. Reader, 390.

[2] To Mathilde Wurm, 16 February 1917. Letters 376.

[3] Rosa Luxemburg: Herbarium published (in German) by Dietz Verlag, Berlin 2016

[4] To Sophie Liebknecht, 2 May 1917. Reader, 390.

[5] To Mathilde Jacob, 3 May 1917, Letters, 407.

[6] To Luise Kautsky, 26 January 1917, Letters, 368.

[7] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowball_\(cockatoo\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowball_(cockatoo))

[8] To Mathilde Jacob, 7 February 1917, Letters 373.

[9] For an acclaimed biography of Mathilde Jacob (in German) see Heinz Knobloch: Meine liebste Mathilde: die beste Freundin der Rosa Luxemburg (My Dear Mathilde: the Best Friend of Rosa Luxemburg).

[10] To Hans Diefenbach, 6 July 1917, Letters, 426-427

[11] To Sophie Liebknecht, 23 May 1917, Letters, 411.

[12] To Sophie Liebknecht, 2 August 1917, Letters, 432.

[13] To Hans Diefenbach, 27 August 1917, Letters, 439.

[14] To Sophie Liebknecht, 2 May 1917, Reader, 390-391.

[15] Written in February 1922, first published in Pravda, 16 April 1924. Quoted by Iring Fetscher in his postscript to Paul Frölich: Rosa Luxemburg Pluto Press 1972 304.

[16] To Sophie Liebknecht, 23 May 1917, Letters 413.

P.S.

- The International Marxist-Humanist. August 14, 2020:
<https://imhojournal.org/articles/rosa-luxemburgs-birds/>
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