

Conversations with Birds

Priyanka Kumar

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In the luminous essays of Priyanka Kumar's *Conversations with Birds*, birds are a portal to reclaiming childhood connections with nature and the lush, wild landscape of northern India's remote mountains.

Torn from her roots by a move to western North America in her teens, Kumar floundered. She believed that California's flora and fauna ran a distant second to India's, and that the US's obsession with material items was a poor substitute for conversation, real connections, and love. "All my hiking notwithstanding, an epiphany about the land had eluded me—until I began to notice birds," she writes. With delicious, colorful, and sometimes alliterative descriptions ("The grass glittered asparagus green"), the book details how, as a filmmaker in her twenties living in Los Angeles, Kumar developed a new, absorbing fascination with birds that led her back to the joyful solitude that immersion in nature had brought her as a child.

Love for the beautiful winged creatures led to a thirst for knowledge—not just about them, but about all that supported their thriving. With the attentive gaze of a naturalist, Kumar shares how, when making a home in New Mexico, she absorbed Indigenous stories of that land and its creatures, and learned how both Native American and Indian cultures saw the natural world as sacred. Contact and relationship with her new landscape led to deep questions about why bird populations were declining, and why the planet was turning into an ever more fragile, sad place.

While it reflects concern with the ravages of climate change and humanity's part in the crisis that the planet is facing, *Conversations with Birds* also points to a solution: forming a deep, personal relationship with the natural world and its creatures—one strong and vital enough to impel immediate action on their behalf.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 2022)

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