



On Auks and Awkwardness

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Awkward

Not upward or downward, backward or forward, but awkward. Awk-wards: a vector. The (now obsolete) word *awk* means out of the way, strange, even sinister in nature and disposition. As an adverb, awkward suggests an action in the wrong, or at least a tangential direction. It evokes disjuncture, discord and incompatibility. Things have gone awry. As an adjective, awkward describes the unfamiliar, the clumsy and the unskilled. It conveys embarrassment, inconvenience and risk. To be awkward is to be ill at ease, uncomfortable or untoward.¹

Awkward offers a rich, polysemous term through which we might specify and explore creatures and modes of multispecies relations. As adjective and adverb it has at least two important valences for animal studies and the environmental humanities that I will explore in this short commentary. I open with some general observations before proffering another awkward creature and mode of relating.

First, to be awkward is to be different and difficult. As the editors of this section make clear,² attending to awkwardness draws attention away from the familiar subjects that have tended to preoccupy recent work in animal studies. The concern here is less with organisms that are ‘big-like-us’³ and more with those that are ‘smaller than a mouse’ (to borrow the title of a 2014 meeting of the British Animal Studies Network),⁴ cryptic and remote. While awkward encounters are no doubt possible across all taxa and spaces, the interest in awkwardness exemplified in this strand of work foregrounds lifeforms that are corporeally, ecologically and socially strange—both in theory and in practice. Insects, fungi and other microbes feature prominently here. As do submarine, subterranean and nocturnal worlds alien to prevalent human geographies.⁵

¹ I take these definitions from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (2014).

² Franklin Ginn, Uli Biesel and Maan Barua, “Flourishing with Awkward Creatures: Togetherness, Vulnerability, Killing,” *Environmental Humanities* (2014): 113-123.

³ Myra Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁴ See www.britishanimalstudiesnetwork.org.uk

⁵ For an illustrative range of examples see Chris Bear and Sally Eden, “Thinking Like a Fish? Engaging with Nonhuman Difference through Recreational Angling,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 336-352; Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Random House, 2010); Astrid

But to be awkward is also to be generative, productively troublesome. Disconcerting encounters across difference have the potential to prompt thought, practice and politics. In Heideggerian terms, awkwardness suggests an 'unreadiness to hand,'⁶ a recalcitrance or obstinacy to human aspiration and endeavour. Awkward creatures unsettle and make present habits, concepts and identities. The ready-to-hand becomes present-to-hand. Here things break down and in this breaking down new possibilities emerge. Awkwardness thus sensitises us to the challenges, risks and opportunities of thinking and living in multispecies worlds whose denizens cannot easily be aligned with human interests. Such awkward creatures are often neither domesticated nor wild (at least not in the purified sense common to the discourses of conservation and animal liberation) but live in our midst.

In my understanding, awkwardness is premised on a knowing co-presence or felt connection. It requires a mutual vulnerability and a sense of disconcertion. It makes little sense to talk of a non-relational awkwardness. Absence and ignorance are not awkward, at least not for those involved. Awkwardness has distinct affective and thus ethical logics. It can be differentiated from both comfortable, loving and caring relations and those marked by horror, abjection and phobia. As the accounts offered in this section make plain, it is neither detached nor fully engaged. Awkward relations nag, they preoccupy inconsistently, bubbling in and out of sensibility.

So first, what configures the character and intensities of awkwardness in creatures and their human relations? In previous writings I have developed the concept of 'nonhuman charisma'—the properties of an organism that distinguish it to human perception. I understand charisma to be a relational variable that emerges from the material and ecological properties of interacting, sensory bodies. These are shaped by specific cultural-political affective logics. I have documented how nonhuman charisma configures the scope, character and conduct of nature conservation and other modes of environmental governance. Charisma is not necessarily a catalyst for human affection, nor is it always a blessing, but it plays a vital role in contemporary environmentalisms.⁷

This concept of nonhuman charisma helps specify the natures of awkwardness in encounters across species and ecological difference. We can start from some fairly straightforward observations about the size, shape and affective capacities of a 'normal' human body. Our large mammalian anatomies and ocular-centrism shape the hardware and perceptual apparatus through which we sense the world. While our largely terrestrial, diurnal and temperate and tropical ecologies further influence the natures of these encounters. Comprehension, communication and reciprocity are more difficult in nocturnal, subterranean or microscopic worlds, mediated by pheromones, ultrasound and infrared. Many of these worlds have only become sensible through recent technological innovations. As omnivorous

Schrader, "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida* (the Fish Killer): Phantomatic Ontologies, Indeterminacy, and Responsibility in Toxic Microbiology," *Social Studies of Science* 40 (2010): 275-306; Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 141-154.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

⁷ Jamie Lorimer, "Nonhuman Charisma," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25 (2007): 911-932; Jamie Lorimer, "Moving Image Methodologies for More-Than-Human Geographies," *Cultural Geographies* 17 (2010): 237-258.

super-organisms we eat and have domesticated a wide range of lifeforms. In turn we are eaten by a diversity of pathogens, parasites, symbionts and (to a historically diminished degree) by predators. Together these properties come to shape what Green and Ginn in this issue refer to as our shared 'unequal vulnerabilities'⁸ and thence prevalent taxonomies of familiar, desired and risky organisms.

Understood this way we might take awkwardness as an index of alterity (though not incommensurability) in relation to human anatomy, ecology and wellbeing. These ecological and anatomical characteristics are differentially valued within a diversity of social and cultural representations and practices that come to shape the awkwardness felt in any encounter. Together these are commonly configured by anthropomorphism: by making reference to common anatomical and ecological norms. But the evaluation of this anthropomorphism is not unidirectional. Both similarity and difference, predator and prey can excite interest, affection and disdain. For example, as the papers in this section make clear, encounters can become awkward when it is difficult to individuate an organism from a swarm, an ecology or a microbial community. In such alien encounters, familiar concepts of personhood, love, life and death are quickly confounded. Nonhumans can become disconcerting, conceptually and ethically troublesome. But as many entomologists will testify, such alternative sociabilities can also be intriguing—catalysing an allure that on occasions drives an esoteric curiosity with an openness to difference, to care and to political investment.

The compelling ethnographic vignettes offered in the papers convey how awkwardness in encounters with non-mammalian life is temporally unstable. It relates in part to developing skills, habits and modes of relating. It describes clumsiness and inexperience. It emerges from perceptual and communicative aporia that can be overcome through attention and the (thoroughly embodied) process of 'learning to be affected' by nonhuman others.⁹ Keeping bees and worms well—as with other multispecies entanglements—takes time, technologies and the production of new bodily dispositions and habits. Awkwardness can be surmounted, differences can be acknowledged, interests aligned. With work, the awkward becomes the everyday, the largely unconscious and banal routines of domestic waste disposal and agriculture.

In this familiarisation—or at least a coming to terms—there is hope of multispecies flourishing in the type of multispecies politics of response-ability and mutual regard that Donna Haraway relates in her work with dogs.¹⁰ But there are situations of greater incompatibility and incommensurability in which awkwardness feels intractable. Here the flourishing of certain valued forms of life can only happen at the expense of others—death (in its varied forms) is unavoidable. Making wine, eating and growing food, being alive even, is fatal. There is an oft-neglected metabolic ecology at the heart of multispecies politics—that as Brice notes in his

⁸ Kelsey Green and Franklin Ginn, "The Smell of Selfless Love: Sharing Vulnerability with Bees in Alternative Apiculture," *Environmental Humanities* (2014): 4.

⁹ Vinciane Despret, "The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-Zoo-Genesis," *Body & Society* 10 (2004): 111-134; Vinciane Despret, "Responding Bodies and Partial Affinities in Human-Animal Worlds," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30 (2013): 51-76.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

paper¹¹—necessitates a sensitivity to the diversity of endings subsumed under the label death. Nonetheless, this is not an excuse to ignore a sense of awkwardness, a sense dulled perhaps by the physical and experiential distance between food and consumer common to contemporary food systems. Instead, as I will explore below, attending to (and even amplifying) awkwardness—or in Donna Haraway’s terms—‘staying with the trouble’¹²— can represent an epistemological and ethical virtue.

Auks

To illustrate and specify such generalities I will briefly work through another case of multispecies awkwardness in practice. Although the bodies we encounter here are larger than a mouse and less cryptic than others in this section, the ecologies and interspecies relations involved trouble environmental sensibilities in interesting ways. Here I turn to auks and in particular the extinct great auk. Auks are a family of maritime birds found on remote coastlines in cooler, Northern waters. In Old English, auks were called awks.¹³ It is possible (and pleasing) to think that auks became auks by virtue of their awkwardness. I have not been able to formally establish this etymological connection. It is possible that auk is simple onomatopoeia: awk! But for the purposes of this article let us assume that the archaic noun awk is not completely obsolete.¹⁴

There are 21 living species of auk, which include puffins, guillemots and razorbills (see figure 1). Auks are ecologically and anatomically similar to the penguins of the Southern hemisphere, though (with the exception of the great auk) they can fly. They share the penguin’s remote geographies, anthropomorphic anatomy, submarine agility and clumsy terrestrial comportment. The great auk was the largest species in the family, standing 75 to 85 centimetres tall and weighing around five kilograms.¹⁵ It went extinct in the middle of the nineteenth century; hunted and collected to death by an assortment of indigenous peoples, colonial settlers and European naturalists. It is the only British bird to have died out in recorded history. Less than 100 specimens remain in private and museum collections.

What makes auks awkward? As with penguins, the anatomical awkwardness of auks relates to their surprising similarities with human bodily features, gestures and habits that are commonly found and made comic. Their geriatric waddling, beady-eyed faciality, honking calls, outsized clownlike feet, flipper-handedness, puffed out chests, snappy monochrome colouration and ornate and distended beaks all court assimilative parody, caricature and affection. These are just some of the features that have done so much to make the penguins (and to a lesser degree puffins) charismatic and telegenic—consider *March of the Penguins*,

¹¹ Jeremy Brice, “Killing in More-than-human Spaces: Pasteurisation, Fungi, and the Metabolic Lives of Wine,” *Environmental Humanities* (2014): 171-194.

¹² Donna Haraway, “When Species Meet: Staying with the Trouble,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010): 53-55.

¹³ OED, 2014.

¹⁴ Ron Freethy suggests the name derives from the Old Norse word (alka) for some of the species and reflects the noise they make with a fair degree of accuracy. See Ron Freethy, *Auks: An Ornithologist’s Guide* (Facts On File Publications, 1987), 16

¹⁵ Errol Fuller, *The Great Auk* (Errol Fuller, 1999).

Happy Feet and *Pingu*.¹⁶ To describe auks as awkward in these terms runs contrary to the evaluation of alterity that I outlined earlier. Here are birds that are superficially a bit like the awkward ones amongst us. These are birds whose anthropomorphism transcends stark ethological, geographic and corporeal differences.



Figure 1 A painting by Archibald Thorburn (1860-1930) entitled *The Great Auk surrounded by its true relatives*. Courtesy of the Wikimedia Commons <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Auks.jpg>.

However such terrestrial familiarities are undermined by the birds' liminal, aquatic and (to a lesser extent) aerial ecologies. For, as the authors of one field guide to auks notes, 'their structure is sculpted by water, rather than air.'¹⁷ Auks feed in the sea and only come to land to breed. Nesting on remote islands they historically had few terrestrial predators and had no need to evolve evasive mobility. Water is their element, and as zookeepers have discovered, it is here that they display their captivating aquatic agilities and behaviours. These are rendered all the more compelling by a visible land-water contrast enabled by plate-glass, clear water and architectural ingenuity. Underwater we see a very different animal. Clumsy, stunted wings

¹⁶ For an extended discussion of penguins in popular culture see Stephen Martin, *Penguin* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

¹⁷ Anthony Gaston and Ian Jones, *Auks: The Alcidae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

and floppy feet become dexterous flippers and fins. Their speed, stealth and precision remind us of our own awkward terrestriality.

But such watery spaces (especially of the remote North Atlantic) were invisible in the historical period when awks became awks. They have only recently become apparent and narrated through submersible visual technologies and the fingery-eyes of natural history film and captivity performance. Auks were perhaps more troubling historically before this audio-visual domestication. Anthropologists note how in coastal communities around the North Atlantic auks were mysterious.¹⁸ They were mobile and liminal, moving between earth, sea and sky. They defied categorisation as terrestrial or aquatic, animal or bird. They would appear from the sky or ocean to take up waddling residence on land; fodder for both metaphor and superstition. These anatomical and ecological dimensions of auks' awkwardness pale when compared to the alterity of the organisms that feature in this special section and in the current concerns of a diversified animal studies, but they no doubt came to shape historic and contemporary relations with people.

In 1999 Errol Fuller self-published his definitive and beautifully illustrated account of the demise of the great auk.¹⁹ He notes a long, if rather marginal prehistorical human interest in and affection for great auks. Archaeologists have documented the dietary and symbolic significance of great auks amongst Maritime Archaic cultures. People ate a lot of auks. They also adorned themselves with auk beak ornaments. They were buried with auk bones. In one example 200 great auk beaks were found woven into a burial cape made of great auk skin. Such symbolic value mattered less to early European explorers in the Americas, for whom the flightless great auk offered an easy source of food and fuel on cold and inhospitable coasts and islands. European great auk populations were largely destroyed by the collection of their down in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the demand for auk pillows eradicated the North American population once auks replaced eider as the down of choice in the eighteenth century. This prompted some anxieties amongst government officials and ineffectual efforts toward protective legislation but by the start of the nineteenth century the bird was extremely rare.

Paradoxically, amidst the rise of natural history and discussions of potential extinction, the great auk's rarity and threatened status accelerated its demise. The remaining birds and their eggs became a form of exotic animal capital, commodified and highly valued in the burgeoning market for specimens powered by museums and private collectors. Hunters scoured remote islands, braving dangerous seas and rocky cliffs in pursuit of birds and their large, striking eggs. The death of what were claimed to be the final great auks is well recorded. It took place on a small island off Iceland in 1844, when a pair of birds were caught, clubbed and sent to a Belgian museum for stuffing and display.

Contemporary museums and naturalists' relationships with great auks inherit these histories, rendered awkward by an awareness of and anxieties about biodiversity and extinction. On the one hand, great auk specimens remain valuable property. In his comprehensive inventory of auk remains, Fuller documents 78 skins, around 75 eggs and 24 complete skeletons.²⁰ These change hands for thousands of pounds. Unlike rare live animals,

¹⁸ Fuller, *Great Auk*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

their trade is unregulated. They are highly sought after by a (historically diminished) network of specimen collectors and continue to circulate as expensive (though no doubt more tawdry) commodities.

Present day human-great auk relations are more obviously awkward in public museums. Here taxidermied auks—like dodos—have become charismatic icons of extinction. With their documented cultural history and avian familiarity they seem more real (though rather less dramatic) than dinosaurs and other prehistoric life. Through creative arrangement and photographic and computer-generated animation great auks offer an exclusive, morbid encounter with the recent past (see figure 2). They serve as a catalyst for collective guilt, which is scaled apolitically at the scale of the species or sometimes that of the historically distant nation.



Figure 2 Stuffed great auk at Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow.
Image © Mike Pennington. Used under a CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

Great auks feature centrally in museum's efforts to grapple with anthropogenic extinction and to legitimise their own role in its narration and solution.²¹ Stuffed auks work like pandas and other rare and charismatic species in the awkward affective economies and politics of animal captivity at zoos. They are flagship specimens for prehistory edutainment and conservation pedagogy, opening affective spaces for shaping environmental citizens.²² As with the zoo, there is often little discussion of the specimen's provenance or the institution's historic complicity in its decimation.²³

In 1884 the great auk was immortalised in the title of the (now prestigious) scientific journal of the American Ornithologists' Union: *The Auk*.²⁴ This appellation testifies to the longevity of its status as an icon of extinction. It also raises the awkward genesis of the conservation movement in its entanglement with destructive modes of natural history. Perhaps not surprisingly given this provenance, the great auk has recently emerged as one of a few candidate species for de-extinction.²⁵ This is a new approach to countering extinction conservation, which imagines the bringing back to life of extinct species for whom viable genetic materials still exist. The vague, 'soft-focus fantasy'²⁶ offered is of cutting edge biotechnology enabling the genetic morphing of razorbills into great auks. Hopeful. Optimistic, perhaps. But awkward in its framing of the integrity and fungibility of lifeforms and in its abstraction from the degraded ecologies and absent societies into which any future auks would be released. Here the great auk seems reduced to a genetic code; a blueprint for reanimation offering a technological absolution of past wrongs.²⁷

For contemporary ornithologists studying living auks in the field, a sense of the ecological awkwardness of the bird is perhaps more open and generative. It seems that it is their liminality and alterity that makes them so intriguing. In their field guide to auks, Gaston and Jones offer the following appeal:

A bird leaves its breeding site ... it disappears over the horizon at a speed that a Peregrine Falcon would have difficulty sustaining in level flight. Eight hours later it returns having swum to a depth of 200 meters; much deeper than any SCUBA diver cares to go, where

²¹ I am thinking here in particular of the Natural History Museum in London's 2013 Extinction exhibition. This included a plan to 'return' a CGI version of their great auk to Shetland (from whence it came) on the 200th anniversary of its collection.

²² Stephanie Rutherford, *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²³ For example, on its website the NHM of London rails against the 'thoughtless slaughter' of the last Great auk in 1844, but withhold judgment on those responsible for the death of its own specimen, which passed to the NHM from the collector William Bullock in 1819. See www.nhm.ac.uk

²⁴ See <http://www.aou.org/auk/>

²⁵ See for example for the website of the *Revive and Restore* project, recently launched by Stewart Brand's *Long Now* foundation <http://longnow.org/revive/>

²⁶ I take this description from a recent critique of de-extinction by Nathaniel Rich. See Nathaniel Rich, "The Mammoth Cometh," *New York Times*, 27 February 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com>

²⁷ For further critical analysis of the rise of de-extinction and its implications for conservation and environmental ethics see recent writings by Matt Chrulow at www.thinkingextinction.com and Thom van Dooren www.extinctionstudies.org.

light in the soupy, plankton rich waters of the Arctic summer can scarcely penetrate. In so doing it has held its breadth for longer than you or I could, although we have lungs hundreds of times larger. When a bird dives, there is, literally and figuratively, an area of darkness. If there have to be reasons to study auks, these demonstrations of the physical prowess and the mystery of their underwater behaviour are surely powerful arguments.²⁸

As with the reflections on bee- and worm-keeping that were detailed in the previous papers, here curiosity in the face of ignorance and difference becomes an ethical sensibility. The literal and figural 'area of darkness' that is the lifeworld of another being is worthy of a lifetime's contemplation and modest activism. The conceptual discomfort of such darkness offers a shock to thought, an imperative to think life otherwise to human norms. Meanwhile protracted fieldwork on remote, guano-encrusted rocks or ever-moving, emetic boats generates posthumanist affinities across difference. Like other committed ethologists such field scientists become responsible to their auks. There is no communication and little reciprocity here but fieldworkers learn to be affected—cultivating a non-proprietary sense of care. Here awkwardness gains political force expressed (however ineffectually) in the modest appeals of field biologists for respect for the wonders of nonhuman life.

The Promise of Awkwardness

In her compelling critique of unilinear understandings of globalisation and development, the anthropologist Anna Tsing attends to 'zones of awkward engagement'²⁹ in the politics of deforestation in Indonesia. In her writings, and those of her collaborators, attention focuses on the nonhumans that facilitate and obstruct these engagements. Mushrooms feature prominently in one ongoing project; their fungal political ecologies divulge oblique connections across cultural difference.³⁰ Here awkwardness describes unprecedented 'specificities'³¹ in the forms and vectors of social change. Neither forward or backward, upward or downward, but awkward. My short comments here and the papers it follows are located in such zones of awkward engagement. I have sought to map some of the properties of awkward creatures and to attend to the promise of the untoward for the environmental humanities.

Following an etymological connection from auks to awkwardness helps explore the role of nonhuman charisma in shaping prevalent taxonomies of interspecies regard. The anthropomorphism of awkward auks' bodies gives the birds popular allure—though it was not enough to save its largest species from the depredations of first industry and then natural history. Auks are loved for their comic familiarity across manifest difference. They are also loved for the liminal alterity—or 'darkness'—of their aquatic ecologies. This triggered mystery in prehistorical cultures that persists in the curiosity and affection amongst contemporary scientists. Such variegated responses to the bird's charisma are manifest in the responses triggered by its awkwardness. The story of the great auk is a parable of the virtues and pathologies of modes of curiosity. The proprietary desire to domesticate and own appealing

²⁸ Gaston and Jones, 59.

²⁹ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, (2005).

³⁰ Tsing, "Unruly Edges."

³¹ Tim Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

specimens of nonhuman life, characteristic of Victorian natural history, now figures as an embarrassing, awkward past-present.³²

Contemporary awkwardness is freighted with political power. Stuffed auks are invested with governmental force: aesthetic icons of an apocalyptic future deployed for shaping citizens for the avoidance of future extinctions. Their surviving living relatives are mobilised as flagship species, circulating obliviously in virtual form as charismatic icons for ocean conservation. Here the affective vulnerability of auks—like puffins—engages publics in more opaque—but nonetheless awkward tracings of our metabolic connections to birdlife.³³ Auks become near-human ambassadors for ecological anxieties about (over)fishing, waste disposal and climate change.

I sense that there is great ontological, epistemological and political promise in awkwardness. Awk-ward environmental humanities offers compelling alternatives to the prevalent forms of environmentalism that are becoming ascendant in the Anthropocene—an epoch whose naming threatens to negate the strange, clumsy and obscure more-than-human natures of planetary life to which awkwardness attends.

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³² Katie King in Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 292.

³³ See for example the discussion of the puffin and its conservation on the website of the UK conservation organization The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds www.rspb.org.uk

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