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COLLECTING BIRD STAMPS - A THEMATIC KALEIDOSCOPE

By Tony Statham

INTRODUCTION

Collecting any kind of stamps is something most people have tried at some stage in their lives, curiously mostly boys and men and inevitably the younger generation. A few persevere into keen amateur and perhaps professional philatelists and pursue the hobby for the rest of their lives.

While the pursuit of stamps has all the hallmarks of any collecting mania, the sheer volume of items inevitably concentrates the effort into collecting by country or between particular dates, e.g. 1945 to 1950, or just different varieties within these boundaries. Thematic collecting, concentrating on stamps with a single theme, is relatively new and, I believe, was much frowned upon in philatelic circles when first mooted. Apart from anything else, I suspect the idea of breaking up a set or retaining only one stamp from a particular set was anathema to the serious collector.

Led by the United States after 1945, topical or thematic collecting was officially recognised in 1967 when the Federation Internationale de Philatelie gave formal approval to the idea. The thematic approach has since gained wide acceptance, perhaps initially through the specialisation in a particular area of philately such as the postal history for a region or the varieties of a particular issue. Thematics have increased dramatically in popularity, covering everything imaginable from birds to railway engines, insects to fungi, sportsmen to spacecraft, famous people to bridges and cars to marine life. For personal reasons (a wide interest in natural history and, in particular, ornithology), I chose to collect bird stamps, building on my original schoolboy accumulation of motley items torn from the envelopes of various relatives with friends in foreign lands. Co-incidentally, birds are probably the most popular of all thematic subjects and Stanley Gibbons' first thematic catalogue was devoted to this topic in 1983.

BIRD STAMPS - THE CHALLENGE

As an amateur ornithologist I was well aware of the huge variety of bird species in the world, now recognised at around 9,800 species. Birds are found in every continent and almost in every environment imaginable from arctic wastes to tropical rain forest and from open seas to suburban gardens. Imagine the challenge then of collecting perhaps one stamp for every species known to man? Already the first question arises are there stamps depicting extinct birds like the Dodo or the Passenger Pigeon? The answer is yes! In fact over 17 extinct species are displayed on at least 50 stamps from more than a dozen different postal authorities and include the first known bird Archaeopteryx, long extinct and only known from fossil records in central Europe. Perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the birds of just one continent or just one country? However, a quick examination of the available material shows that while most countries have produced (and continue to produce) bird stamps, almost all countries depict birds on their stamps that never even visit that territory! The easiest example is of course the English Robin (the EC will be glad to hear that it is actually European) which is found on stamps from around the world as a universal symbol for Christmas.

Beyond this level, one reaches the stage where the breaking up of philatelic sets becomes inevitable. Among the more obvious choices are to collect birds of a particular family such as birds of prey or owls, or, if well represented, just one species such as that ubiquitous Robin Redbreast. One could further specialise by focusing on one species in one country for a particular period in history. One might confine a collection to the few examples of bird stamps that have watermark or perforation varieties but I believe this would impose too tight a restriction as a single theme.

BIRD STAMPS - THE SCOPE

Before we look at the subject in a little more detail, it may be helpful to try and quantify just how large the subject matter is. I have already given dimension to the variety of birds and their geographical abundance. Not all species are by any means depicted on all known bird stamps nor have all postal authorities actually issued bird stamps even

if one includes those that are not officially recognised by Stanley Gibbons. Indeed there are unfortunately several issues of bird stamps that fall into the latter category which generates frustration and resignation among the more serious collector. Examples include the 1969 and 1971 issues from Ajman, several issues from Equatorial Guinea and Paraguay. There are even some rather unpleasant 3-dimensional plastic items from the Yemen. Statistics are a moving target in this field but in their excellent thematic catalogue of Bird Stamps (latest edition is 1992), Hanne and Jens Eriksen state that there are over 2,200 species of birds depicted on some 10,000 different stamps from nearly 300 countries or postal authorities around the world. Attesting to the growth of bird designs is the fact that probably over 80% of all bird stamps have been printed in the past 20 years. A further challenge to the on-going collector is the fact that up to 500 new stamps appear each year which display some form of ornithological design.

I mentioned that the Robin was well represented globally but in fact several other species rank above this in popularity with, as far as I can determine, the most popular being the Greater Flamingo which appears on some 54 different postal authority issues. The other top ten species are Hoopoe, Swallow, Peregrine Falcon, Mallard Duck, Barn Owl, White Stork, 'Cattle Egret, Mute Swan and Golden Eagle, closely followed by the Ostrich and Kingfisher. It will be obvious that these very popular subjects are generally familiar and/or striking species. There are some examples however where the same species appears almost exclusively on all the bird stamps for a particular country such as the Resplendent Quetzal for Guatemala.

A further dimension also presents itself with the qualifications that are used in the thematic catalogue that I have just described. For the fanatic, and I may be one (!), the catalogue does not include any symbolic or stylised birds, nor those forming part of a coat of arms, nor does it include any peace doves nor poultry. It does, however, generally include miniature sheets (of which there are many) and overprint and surcharge items. Variations of watermarks and perforations not found in Stanley Gibbons Stamps of the World catalogue are not included. Many countries are prolific in producing stamps and some are generous indeed with their output of ornithological material. Both Cuba and Mongolia have averaged at least one bird stamp or set of bird stamps per year for the past twenty years. Conversely, it is possible that some countries have never printed a single bird stamp but to my knowledge none as such exist. Others have provided but one or two sets or nothing for years, e.g. Egypt with only two sets in their entire postal history. There appear to be few if any criteria for a country to produce or not produce bird stamps and few apparent criteria for what birds are displayed or why. There is even room for a little humour here and there, noting that Vatican City has among its dozen or so birds on stamps one depicting the Common Cardinal of North America.

To the new collector, economics may also play a role in making a decision on what to collect. This of course applies to any collection whether it is antiques, vintage cars, orchids or less taxing matchbox labels. Happily, or perhaps otherwise, a large proportion of all bird stamps can be acquired for relatively modest sums. There are, to my knowledge, few of the "Penny Black" type of rarities in the bird stamp world making it accessible to even the most humble collector. According to the Bird Stamp catalogue, the highest valued item at Stanley Gibbons prices is the Liberian 1941 surcharged 1 cent issue last catalogued at £2,000. A few early Chinese and Japanese items command several hundred pounds for good specimens but globally there are countless items freely obtainable for the statutory minimum value of 10p each.

THE CHOICE

So, you are no doubt asking, what do I do against this rather complex background?

My initial venturing into ornithological philately (or is it philatelic ornithology?), was the accumulation of bird stamps as an adjunct to my principal hobby of being a bird-watcher. To me, in this role, birds are literally "a thing of beauty and a joy forever". They can be observed almost anywhere and at any time of year. They enhance nature with colour and music and of course have been lauded for such by mankind for centuries, if for no other reason than their power of flight. No wonder that they should feature so readily on the stamps of the world's postal authorities. Indeed, many of the earlier bird stamps were used to differentiate air mail postage, obviously after the invention of the aeroplane itself. Earlier still, there are some US examples from the 19th century featuring, as one might expect, the American Bald Eagle, an unkind label for a line bird with white head feathers rather than none!

Out in the open air, even in one's garden, watching birds presents its own challenges. In inclement weather or, at night, if not following the hoot of an owl, what better diversion than to explore the world of bird books and bird stamps. The first is as diverse and as complex as the second but my task here is to elaborate on the latter.

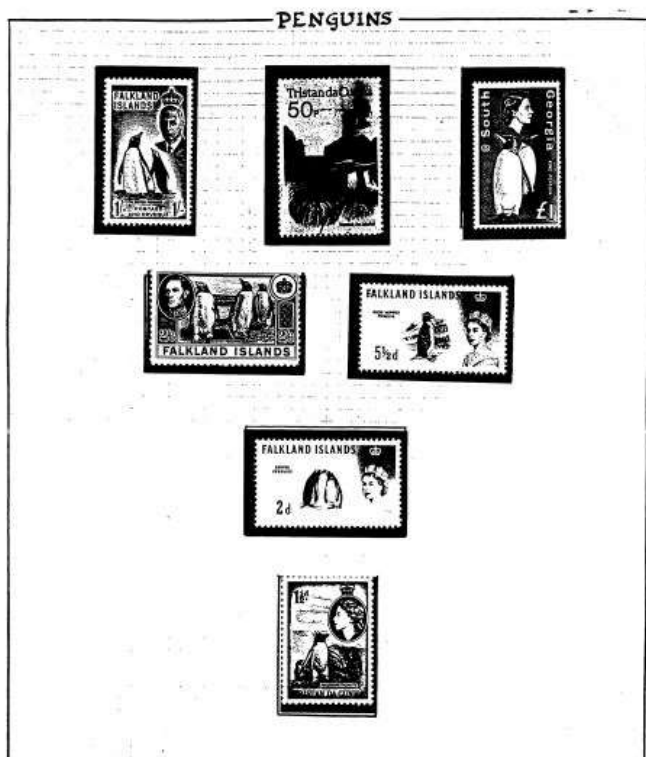
From an initial stock book which gave me easy flexibility to expand my fledgling collection (excuse the punt), I had a fortunate opportunity to acquire a considerable quantity of bird stamps from a part-time dealer who had grown weary of the sudden proliferation of bird issues which were threatening to overwhelm the collector's ambitions.

SPHENISCIFORMES



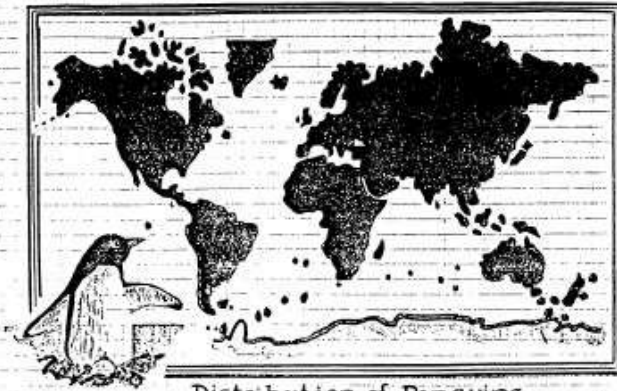
This collection had commenced with the target of organising all bird stamps into their natural and scientific families. Thus the Sphenisciformes for the Penguins, the Falconiformes for the Birds of Prey, and so on.

SPHENISCIFORMES



SPHENISCIFORMES

PENGUINS



Distribution of Penguins.

Penguins are aquatic flightless birds of the Southern hemisphere, only one species being found as far North as the equator. They are wonderful swimmers but cumbersome on land. They feed chiefly on fish and crustaceans. The natural habitat is the coastline, although they may breed a little inland. All species are gregarious and colonies may number 1,000,000 birds. Penguins are monogamous and appear to have a very long life span. They lay between 1 & 3 eggs and carry out fasting during incubation (up to 6 weeks). At first the young are fed by regurgitation, then on leaving the nest go into "crèches" of half grown chicks numbering up to 200 birds.

The project had started with two Plymouth albums with each page ruled up and labelled as if in a bird encyclopedia. Title pages were hand painted and described the overall characteristics of the family in question with a world distribution map showing where the species in that family are found. At the inception of this plan, all bird stamps for each family were known and appropriate spaces incorporated into the design. Many pages were complete at the time I acquired the albums while others were only partly filled or even blank; an immediate challenge to fill in the missing items. This promised to be easy with several additional stock books coming with the collection holding some 5,000 to 6,000 bird stamps.

Then reality set in and a stirring in my philatelic conscience started to query whether it was right to divide up sets. I realised that ultimately I would still have complete sets throughout the collection but somehow it didn't seem right to have them distributed over several different albums. This also presented problems in trying to keep track of whether one did in fact have a whole set. A set of eight items which depict birds of prey might be considered easy to manage. If however seven are eagles and the eighth is an owl, the latter might be banished to another album or worse, spend years in expectant stagnation in a stock book waiting for a home. Clearly I had to make a decision which accommodated the incipient project I had acquired and cope with the on-going demands of wanting to build up the collection to greater things. At that stage, and even today, the boundaries are not completely defined but I believe I have a workable compromise in the current scenario. There is however still a great deal to do.

THE PROJECT




It was always my ambition that I could accumulate a set of all known bird stamps with perhaps a few exceptions because of economic constraints. This I believe is still feasible even allowing for the great increase in the number of items available and with no immediate prospect of the supply drying up. Admittedly, keeping track of new issues and acquiring these as a priority tends to curtail one's activities in filling gaps in the older parts of the collection. I also

believe that my ultimate aim should be to build a thematic collection but based on countries, i.e., postal authorities rather than splitting sets into bird families. However, in order to preserve the bird family part of the collection that I acquired many years ago, it is my intention to complete that section as a separate branch to the overall collection. This will mean obtaining, in many cases, duplicate items. To some extent this can be offset by ensuring that there is one good set in the main collection with, perhaps, second-best examples for the other.

It is my intention to acquire only unmounted mint issues wherever possible. In the early days of my collecting experience, I was an unwitting victim of acquiring stamps of all sorts and often buying what purported to be whole sets but were in fact missing the higher values. I am sure these are standard pitfalls for all new collectors. In time, I have tried to concentrate on only unmounted mint issues unless it is appropriate to take alternatives. In recent years I have also compromised the philatelic aspect by only acquiring where possible the bird stamps in a set even if other designs are present. In those cases where a mixed set is printed with birds and other topics, I have thus favoured the ornithological bias. Occasionally I have therefore "inherited" non-bird stamps which are either swapped or given away unless it makes sense to retain the non-bird items in a separate stock book.

The bulk of my collection resides in stock books 'providing the flexibility to handle the increasing numbers of stamps while the more serious business of building the album pages takes shape. The latter are planned to continue with the Plymouth format and I intend to maintain a complementary format in these albums to those used for the bird family arrangement. I will however, probably allow myself to indulge in some contemporary text from a computer, my own writing not always being ideal for an album display.

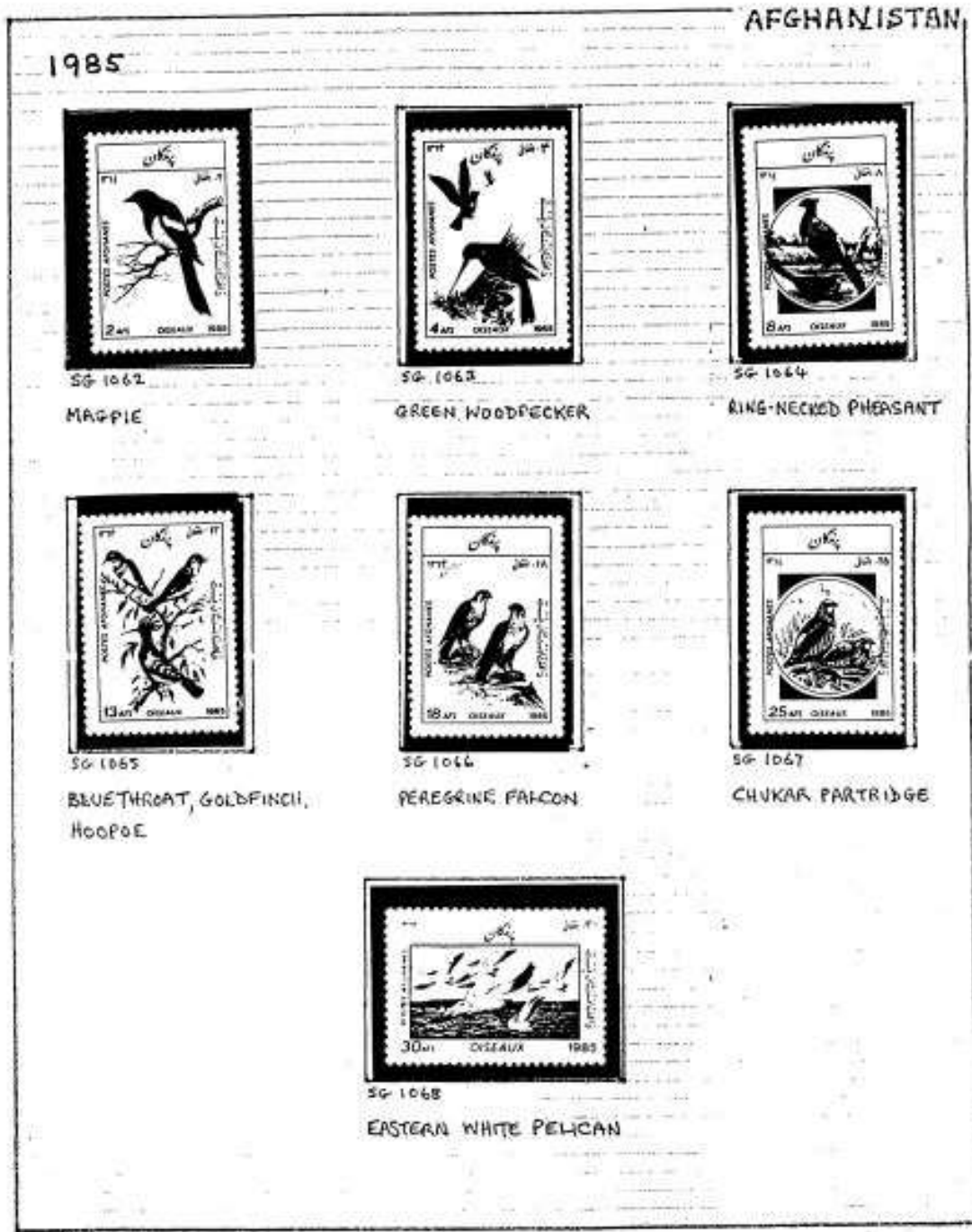
AFGHANISTAN



AFGHANISTAN - a land-locked country in Central Asia situated in the general area 30°-40°N and 60°-75°E and bordered by Pakistan to the south and east and Iran to the west. The country, a republic since 1973, is bisected east/west by the western extremity of the Himalayas and includes the Hindu Kush in the east with peaks up to 7 600 m. This central highland separates the northern fertile plain from the arid, desert region in the south. The economy is agricultural (animal husbandry, fruit and nuts) and natural gas is a major export.

Natural history not well documented following years of civil unrest but the climate demonstrates great variation in line with the topography of the country. Fauna are almost certainly heavily compromised under current political conditions. Bird life is probably typical of the terrain.

Postal history since 1860 but poorly defined until the 1890s; bird stamps produced from 1965 with an unrecognised issue for 1961. Birds on stamps generally those likely to be present in the area such as game birds, birds of prey and freshwater species.



The few pages displayed in this article comprise the two main aspects of my collection. Firstly I have shown sample pages from a single family (The Penguins) from the species arrangement already described. Secondly a group of pages from one of the less prolific countries (Afghanistan), demonstrating my ambitions for the future with bird stamps arranged in chronological sets. You will note the intention to describe the territory, its habitat and local birdlife as well as the stamps or relevant postal history pertaining to the area as pan of the background material.