

*Drawn to the wild* book review 16.04.2021

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From the very first pages of *Drawn to the wild* I was hooked. This is not simply a collection of beautiful bird paintings; this is something more. Nicolas Dillon has done something extraordinary. He has not only shared elements of a life lived with passion and drive alongside exquisite paintings of our country's beloved avifauna but he has put into words the soul-deep art of an "ongoing dialogue with nature" and its rich returns for connection and purpose in the outdoors.

"A natural calling," Dillon's introduction to how he became the naturalist wildlife painter he is today is everything an origin story should be: personal, deeply connecting, and of a quality to build sufficient rapport with the reader. His life story as an artist and how he came to his craft is perfectly bookended by an in-the-moment description of an encounter with a banded dotterel in his home territory of the Wairau River.

Dillon begins by encouraging the reader to experience the moment he describes alongside him, to enter his world of careful contemplation of nature and see what he sees after years of honing the practice. As he leads us along his life's path, he provides many examples of how his connection with the natural world of Aotearoa New Zealand is grounding, unshakable, and the underpinning of everything he does. The tramper and nature-enthusiast reader will connect immediately with Dillon's attachment to place and its beautiful articulation in these pages.

In "Sketchbooks, the power of observation" Dillon's words make it clear that he is a champion of observing the natural world. Anyone who has spent time in the New Zealand outdoors knows that careful observation yields dividends on one's understanding and connection with nature. Throughout the book, Dillon challenges us to see "afresh [the natural world] in the particular light, in the moment of observation." He approaches each individual bird he meets as a new and profound opportunity to connect and create art and through doing so retains a fresh perspective. This is a brilliant concept that I will personally try to put into practice.

Dillon continually shows us what, "losing [one]self in the moment while interpreting the world around [you]" can do both for artistic endeavour and outdoor pursuit. His brush strokes and pencil sketches attest to the countless hours he has spent and continues to spend observing the natural world. His art and insightful notes reveal nuances of the avian world that even the most experienced birders may not have yet noticed.

Most of the book is dedicated to a delightful collection of bird artworks covering a wide range of introduced, native, and endemic species from migratory shorebirds to forest inhabitants better known to the tramper. As such, it is fully relatable to each and every New Zealander's experience of birds and is highly accessible to the novice and expert alike.

Each page turned impresses Dillon's words and art more on the heart and mind. Just as in nature, the closer the observation the more wonder is revealed. On page 100 Dillon describes a whio/blue duck as, "a beautiful piece of nature's poetry" which in turn illustrates his own work precisely.

Dillon's attention to detail and the book's careful editing is evident throughout. I strongly appreciate that Māori names for birds and locations are used wherever possible and in such an attentive manner.

Dillon weaves educational facts about each species effortlessly into their descriptions with an outcome that is of ideal length, truly interesting, and with personal anecdote. Overall, the book's writing is easy to understand and straight to the point, yet beautifully expressive.

I found instances of personal connection and recalled many memories in nature while turning the pages of *Drawn to the wild*. From the way Dillon captures the gleam of mischief in a weka's eye to his description of the subtle colour transitions in the plumage of a female tomtit/ngirungiru, I could put myself in his shoes with ease and knew his descriptions to be true from my own experience.

*Drawn to the wild* is not only visually and emotionally stimulating but it contributes to our collective knowledge of Aotearoa New Zealand's bird life. Dillon's deep connection and ongoing naturalist study of birds around his home pays homage to the bountiful Wairau River ecosystem and his work across New Zealand does much for citizen science.

*Drawn to the wild* is a testament to one man's connection to the whenua and its living creatures, humbly and authentically portrayed through vivid imagery and words of equal power.