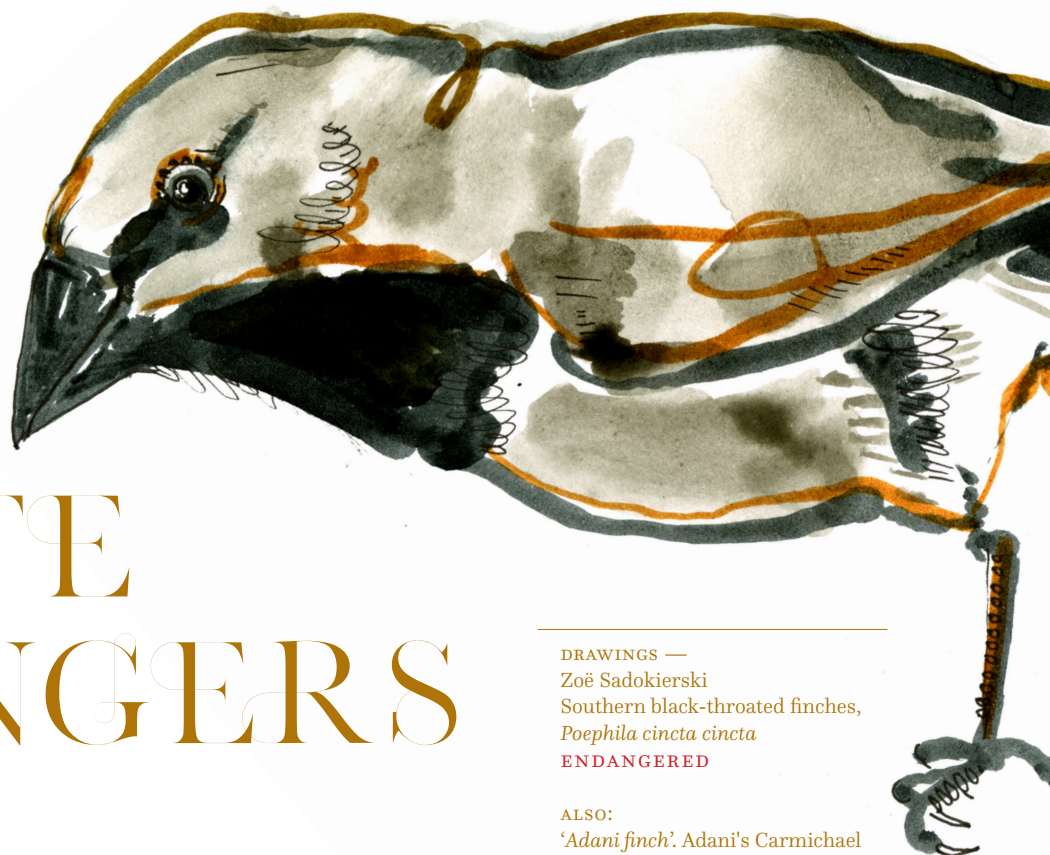


# AVIAN CLIMATE MESSENGERS

by ZOË SADOKIERSKI and TIMO RISSANEN



DRAWINGS —  
Zoë Sadokierski  
Southern black-throated finches,  
*Poephila cincta cincta*  
**ENDANGERED**

ALSO:  
'Adani finch'. Adani's Carmichael coalmine in Queensland is destroying the best remaining habitat of this endangered species. The finch has become an ecological messenger; the canary in Adani's coalmine; this tiny bird has drawn public attention to the habitat destruction involved in extraction projects, but also how corporations such as Adani concoct superficial 'conservation plans' to avoid real responsibility for the places and inhabitants put in jeopardy in pursuit of corporate financial gain.



We began our Precarious Birds collaboration<sup>†</sup> in 2018 as a way to bear witness to the devastating loss of bird species in the **SIXTH MASS EXTINCTION**. The project is an ongoing 'conversation through making': we talk, share readings, write, draw, cross-stitch and collage in response to the plight of **ENDANGERED** and **EXTINCT** bird species such as the **REGENT HONEYEATER**, **MUNCHIQUE WOOD-WREN** and **PASSENGER PIGEON**.

Within our critical creative practice, we use birds as an index, markers that point to the cultural, ecological and political dimensions of the **CLIMATE** and **EXTINCTION CRISES**: in addition to scientific data, we need qualitative research and storytelling to create 'cultural archives of loss'<sup>1</sup> to avoid 'ecological amnesia'.<sup>2</sup>

The artworks and stories we create communicate some of the myriad entanglements of humans, birds and landscapes. Our project gives form to accelerated and irrevocable losses of species and environments, but also draws out stories of resurrection, hopeful recovery and points to opportunities for adaptation and action. By focusing our attention on birds, we are able to hold a mirror sideways to the cascading ecological crises that can be overwhelming to face head on.

<sup>†</sup> [www.precariousbirds.net](http://www.precariousbirds.net)







It is thought that PIGEONS can sense changes in the magnetic fields around them, enabling them to navigate using Earth's magnetic field, although the specifics of how this happens remain a mystery.

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In 2017 Zoë (based in Sydney) sent a message by CARRIER PIGEON to Timo (based in NYC). The message, emailed to PigeonGram (based in Speaks, Texas), was delivered on a slip of paper:

WE SHOULD DO A BOOK ABOUT PIGEONS.

## BIRDS AS MESSENGERS

There is a long history of humans literally using birds as messengers. The military use of birds for message delivery dates back to ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilisations.<sup>3</sup> In particular, PIGEONS — *Colomba livia*, OLD WORLD ROCK DOVE, HOMING OR CARRIER PIGEON — were widely used for communicating over long distances until the invention of the telegram in the mid-1800s.

Birds also feature in metaphors, often referring to fatal interactions with humans: CANARY in the coal mine; dead as a DODO; a sitting DUCK; ALBATROSS around the neck. This entanglement of bird and human fate is drawn out in relation to the CLIMATE CRISIS in a report between Birdlife International and National Audubon Society<sup>4</sup>:

*Over time and across cultures, birds have sent us signals about the health of our environment. The canary in the coal mine offered that most precious resource, time — a small window in which humans could escape toxic gases. [...] [birds] are powerful messengers for the natural world. They are telling us how climate change poses risks to nature and people worldwide.<sup>4</sup>*

Below, we share four accounts of birds bearing messages about the impact of the CLIMATE CRISIS on humans and nonhuman species alike.

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IMAGE —  
Kookaburra,  
Nick Ritar, 2020.  
@milkwood\_nick

## FALLEN BIRDS OF MALLACOOTA | TIMO

On 2 January 2020, following the 2019 New Year's Eve bushfire that forced most of Mallacoota's residents onto a beach, Nick Ritar documented some of the avian victims, so that we could all bear witness. The birds had perished in flight and fallen into the ocean, later washing up on the beach. There is an eerie similarity between Ritar's photographs and American photographer Chris Jordan's images of dead ALBATROSS from Midway in the Pacific Ocean: fully grown ALBATROSS chicks killed by the ingested ocean plastic their parents mistook for food.

While fire is an inherent part of many Australian ecosystems, the scope of the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season was unprecedented, exacerbated by GLOBAL WARMING resulting

from human activity, namely from the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. There is little comfort in knowing that the species documented by Ritar are relatively common or at least not at risk of imminent extinction. A report commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature estimated that nearly three billion mammals, birds and reptiles died in the 2019-20 Australian fires, including 180 million birds. According to Birdlife International, EASTERN BRISTLE-BIRD, *Dasyornis brachypterus* (ENDANGERED), and REGENT HONEYEATER, *Anthochaera phrygia* (CRITICALLY ENDANGERED), were two species at immediate peril because of the fires. A recent assessment by Crates et al<sup>5</sup> notes the impact of the megafires on the REGENT HONEYEATER. For a species with less than 350 individuals spread across a vast area, a single megafire in the future could erase this HONEYEATER from Australia, and the planet. Birdlife Australia poignantly states:

*While unprecedented, these fires were predicted. In 2008, the Governments of Australia's Federation commissioned a report by Professor Ross Garnaut to examine the impacts of CLIMATE CHANGE on Australia. The Garnaut report predicted that Australia's bushfire seasons would progressively lengthen and generally be more intense, and that the impacts would be observable by 2020. The predictions of Garnaut and many other climate scientists have proved right.*

During the megafires some CLIMATE CHANGE denialists claimed that arson was to blame for the fires, however several credible news outlets debunked the claim. Drawing from conversations with family and friends, I suspect that for some people the scope of CLIMATE BREAKDOWN and the fact that it is happening now, not in some abstract future, is too much to bear and the denial is a form of mental self-protection. For many, however, the denial is about protecting self-interest, financially and perhaps now even morally. Maybe a time will come when we will successfully prosecute individuals, corporations and governments that willfully delayed actions to reduce carbon emissions and/or spread misinformation and doubt for the same reason. Denial of CLIMATE CHANGE is in part an attempt to postpone the arrival of that time. Nick Ritar's images from Mallacoota document our time. Bear witness and remember that every living being on Earth is a relative.

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IMAGE:  
Whipbird,  
Nick Ritar  
2020.  
@milkwood\_nick

See Nick Ritar's original post:  
[www.instagram.com/p/B6oDZA1hniQ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B6oDZA1hniQ/)

Accompanying the images, Nick wrote:  
*I apologise for showing you this heartbreak, but I believe we must bear witness. This is what climate change looks like. Washed up on Bastion Point Beach this afternoon. There was a body every few metres. The beach is 15km long.*





IMAGE:  
Sydney sky,  
3:30pm December 2019

## RED SUN | ZOË

While overseas in November 2019, I caught snippets of news from home: bushfire smoke choking major cities; heritage-listed rainforests burning; farmers traumatised by the screams of dying animals. From afar, these unsettling accounts seemed fictional, like the ‘raining frogs’ scene in Paul Thomas Anderson’s film *Magnolia*. Except in Anderson’s film, the uncanny frog-storm is a narrative device used to pull the disparate plotlines together. In Australia, some politicians are instructed<sup>6</sup> *not* to link the catastrophic bushfires with **CLIMATE CHANGE**, led by prime minister Scott Morrison who sent ‘thoughts and prayers’ to affected communities but publicly suggested Australia could increase emissions without worsening the fire season. If wildfires consuming *rainforest* is not the time to talk about **CLIMATE CHANGE**, when is?

My plane descended into a landscape that looked more like Mars than Sydney in spring. Shuffling through the tunnel connecting the plane to the airport, the smell further discombobulated me — days before, at an artists’ residency, a similar smell wafted from the chimneys of upstate New York homes as Timo and I crunched through Autumn snow, bird spotting. **BLUE JAY**, **MOURNING DOVE**, **BLACK CAPPED CHICKADEE**, **HAWK**. Autumn and spring should smell worlds apart.

Collecting my son from daycare at 3:30pm in an apocalyptic pink haze so dense we could barely see a few metres in front of us, I struggled to find ways to explain why it was not safe to play in the park before dinner that would make sense to a 3-year-old. At a time of year I associate with endless blue skies and outdoor play, I realised that this oppressive haze is how he knows spring: a time of indoor-only play, a season when his mum grimaces with smoke-induced sinus headaches, when water restrictions prevent planting a garden and soot-blackened ocean swims are unappealing. The world of his childhood is shockingly different to mine. How will the generation after him experience spring?

In addition to the deep trauma inflicted upon victims and rescuers of natural disasters, there is also psychological distress associated with a world changing so fast we barely recognise ‘home’. The term solastalgia<sup>7</sup> refers to a homesickness experienced while still at home, a nostalgia for a familiar place made strange by transmuting climate and local ecologies. Returning from a month overseas to an uncanny version of home, I experienced solastalgia profoundly. This is not to equate solastalgia with the trauma experienced by those who lost lives and homes in the fires, but to recognise the spectrum of ways humans are affected by our **CHANGING CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTS**.

How can I prepare a child for a world I don’t recognise? What stories can I



tell him, to prepare him for a future that makes Australian climate scientist Sophie Lewis publicly think twice about having a child at all?<sup>8</sup> What stories can I tell myself, to avoid infecting him with my anxiety and solastalgia?



A few months earlier, before the park was apocalyptic, I taught him to spot the difference between male and female **IBISES** (females have shorter beaks). We watch them beak around in the freshly cut grass for grubs, and pick through bins for less natural snacks. We talk about how **IBIS** should live in wetlands, not inner city parks, and why some kids throw sticks and chase them screaming ‘bin chicken’ while their parents laugh encouragement.

A few months later, the sky is clear but the park is again deserted: the play equipment has been cordoned off with police tape, to avoid the spread of the Corona-19 virus. Housebound, we gaze out to the park devoid of humans but alive with birds and all the creatures we can’t see from the window. The **IBIS** pick through the grass and drink from the dog bowl.

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## MUNCHIQUE WOOD-WREN | TIMO

The **MUNCHIQUE WOOD-WREN** lives in a specific band of cloud forests on the slope of the western Andes in Colombia. An inconspicuous bird best found by sound, it has only been known to science for two decades. As the **CLIMATE WARMS**, its cloud forest home is becoming drier and more prone to fires, further exacerbated by the clearing of forests. Simultaneously the forests are slowly shifting to higher altitudes chasing cooler temperatures. What happens if and when the mountain slopes run out? Will the great great grandchildren of today’s **WOOD-WRENS** have a home? Does it matter if the **WOOD-WREN** disappears? Most people on the planet do not know it exists. It is not useful to humans beyond perhaps some interest from birdwatchers, and as a symbol for protecting the national park after which it is named. Although stunningly delicate up close, with a long white brow and a refined, streaked face, the wren is easily dismissed as just another small brown bird.

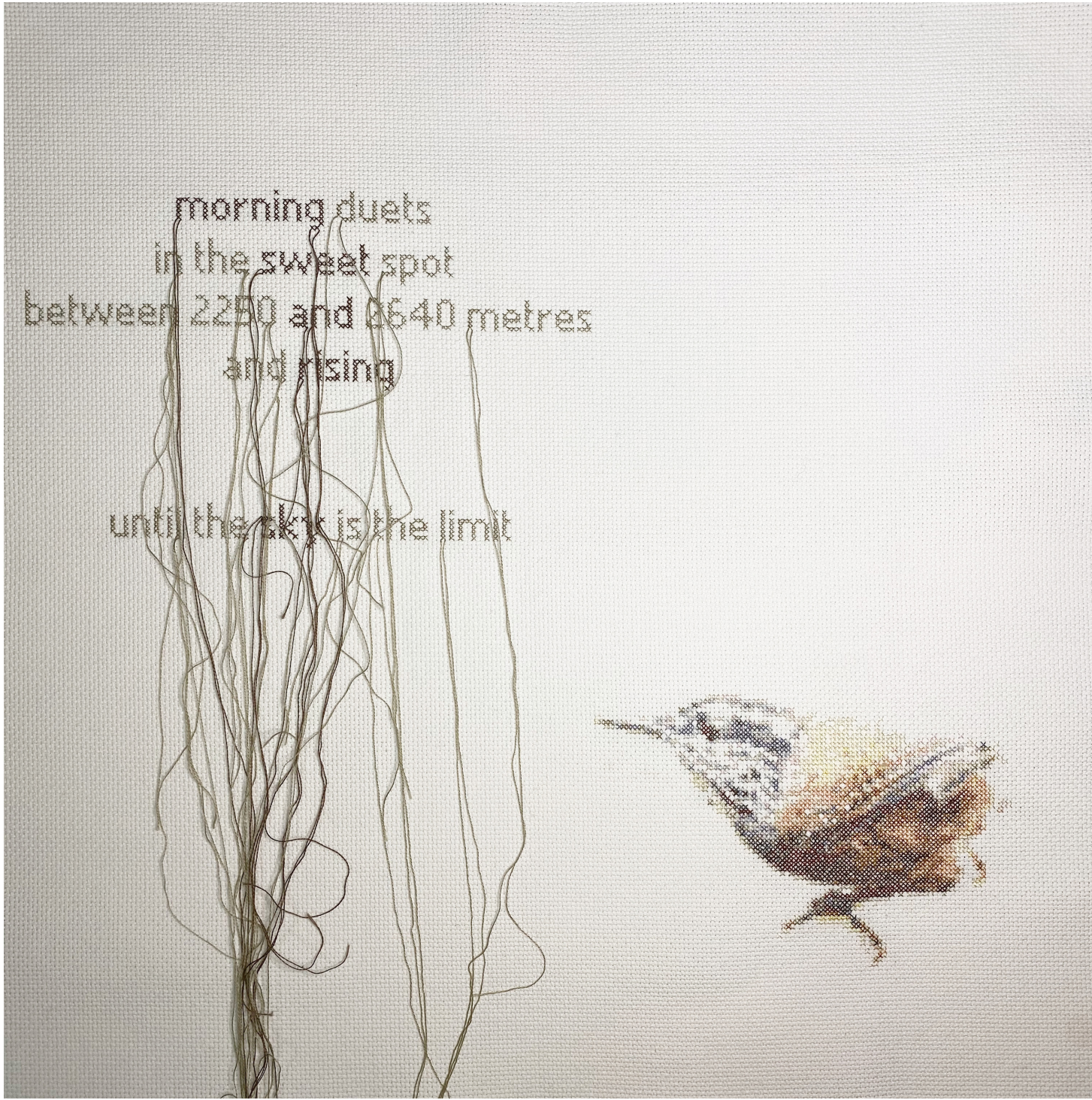
Yet it is a messenger of change happening in the Andes: it is entirely dependent upon a particular habitat that may one day no longer exist as **THE PLANET WARMS**. If we know that, how can we remain uninvolved, unmoved, neutral?

The **MUNCHIQUE WOOD-WREN** is delivering us a message now, to act on **CLIMATE CHANGE** such that **MUNCHIQUE WOOD-WRENS** can call the slopes of the Andes home for millennia to come.



IMAGE:  
Timo Rissanen.  
Cross-stitch pattern developed from an original photograph by Dr Paul Noakes, Colombia, Tanager Finch Reserve, January 2016: paul.noakes@nhs.net





IMAGE—  
Timo Rissanen, 2020

morning duets  
in the sweet spot  
between 2250 and 2640 metres  
and rising

until the sky is the limit

## THE AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS | ZOË

Australians have a troubled relationship with our most infamous IBIS, the AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS (*Threskiornis molucca*). They have a distinct black head (wrinkled, a little scrotal in texture with crimson-pink highlights) ending in a sabre-like bill and alarming, raw-beef colouring under the wings. In comparison to our cuter native birds — say, the SUPERB FAIRY-WREN or LITTLE CORELLA — they are a frightful sight. Urban-dwelling ibises are grubby and, to human noses, smell funky. Due to garbage-scavenging, they are referred to as Bin Chickens. However, IBISES' natural habitat are inland wetlands — drought and habitat loss (read: CLIMATE CHANGE and human infrastructure projects) have driven these birds to our east coast cities. They pick through our bins and stalk our picnics because they are refugees, adapting to survive.

I like IBIS. In part because Thoth, the Egyptian god of knowledge and writing, frequently appears as an IBIS-headed being; it appeals to me that the ibis' long black beak resembles an ancient, inky writing tool.

Until the 1990s, the AFRICAN SACRED IBIS (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*) was classified as the same species as the AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS. Yet instead of reviled, the African sister-species is revered in Egyptian culture. Beyond the divine associations, these ibis played a key role in keeping river water clean and usable for humans.

I love that IBIS look more like dinosaurs than modern creatures. Birds survived the fifth mass EXTINCTION — the meteor impact best-known for wiping out the dinosaurs — but are not faring well in the SIXTH MASS EXTINCTION EVENT, in which humankind is wiping out our furred, scaled, feathered kin. The 2020 *Action Plan for Australian Birds* reports that in the past thirty years, an additional 82 Australian birds have been listed as at risk of EXTINCTION, including 27 listed as threatened based on the impact of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires.<sup>8</sup> More widely and anxiously reported than this statistic was the claim that koala populations were believed to be functionally EXTINCT following the fires — although not true of the entire Australian landscape, habitat loss is a serious threat to some local populations.

Would we harbour more affection for the AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS if they were more conventionally cute, and economically beneficial, bringing in the tourist dollars that koalas do? If our IBIS — currently classified Least Concern on the IUCN Redlist — begin to decline in numbers will we turn away, relieved that this constant reminder of large-scale human impact on the environment is out of sight, or feel guilt for what we have passively borne witness to? Or perhaps worse, will we not notice at all? Remember when you used to have to stop regularly to clear the insects off the windshield on a long car trip? Remember when the IBISES stalked our picnics and nested in the palm trees on roundabouts?

There are two lesser-known native Australian IBIS: STRAW-NECKED IBIS (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) and GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*).

### ALSO:

Rubbish Raptor;  
Tip Turkey;  
Picnic Pirate;  
Dumpster Diver;  
Sandwich Stealer.



AUSTRALIAN  
WHITE IBIS

BIN CHICKEN, PICNIC PIRATE  
TRASH TURKEY



THOTH

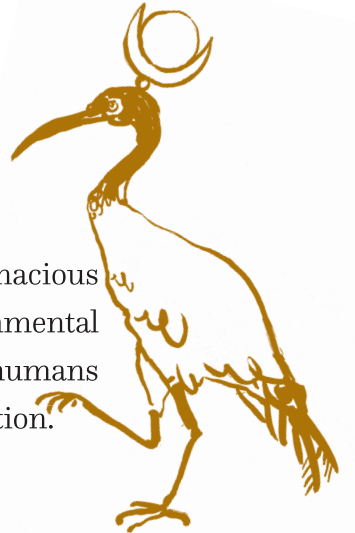
EGYPTIAN GOD OF  
WRITING, MAGIC,  
WISDOM + the MOON



Yet Australians love an underdog. In 2017, the **IBIS** came a narrow second to the **MAGPIE** in *The Guardian* newspaper’s annual ‘bird of the year’ campaign. Paul Allatson and Andrea Conner<sup>9</sup> report that the **WHITE IBIS** has gone viral in popular culture, citing a proliferation of **IBIS**-adorned items for sale online, **IBIS** murals popping up in major cities around the country and even a trend for **IBIS** tattoos:

*This IBIS juggernaut says a lot about Australian identity and culture in the 21st century — and human-animal relations in a time of environmental threat and uncertainty.*

Allatson and Conner conclude that **AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS** are tenacious and fearless ‘environmental refugees’, reminding us of the environmental challenges we face. Rather than mocking and even attacking these birds, humans would do well to pay attention to their remarkable resilience and adaptation.



DRAWINGS—  
Zoë Sadokierski, 2022

Black-throated finch [*poephila cincta*] specimens, drawn from photographs of specimens in the *Encyclopedia of Life*: eol.org



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