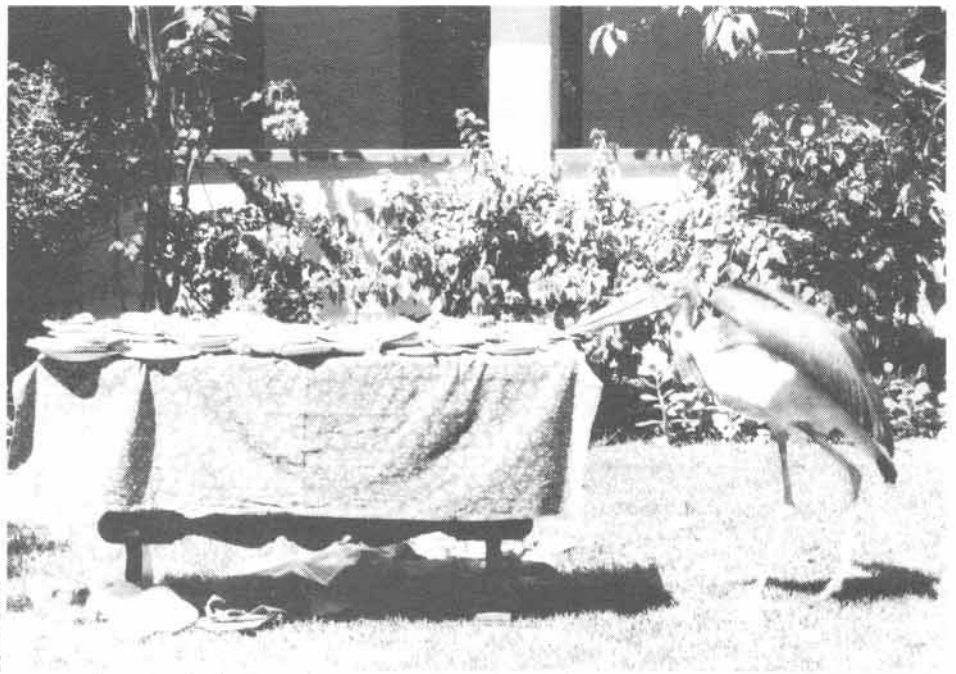


Marabou -the saintly bird

by Daniel Stiles



Daniel Stiles

A Marabou Stork checking out the remains of a meal.

It is past time to rectify a glaring and unjustified omission in wildlife literature. The Marabou Stork has probably never been seen on the cover of any magazine, except perhaps of a horror comic. No one has ever written a poem about it, nor even used its name in the making of a sublime simile or sweet metaphor. It is not the kind of stork that delivers babies, Alan Root has not made a film about it (nor is he likely to), it is not featured on calendars and certain members of parliament want it banned. It is not the national bird of any country, it graces no currency note, and no sports team has taken the 'Marabous' as a name. In short it is almost totally ignored. The reason why is obvious to the most obtuse observer: it is repulsive, foul, clumsy, grotesque and loathsome—in brief, Ugly.

One wonders what Oscar Wilde would have thought of the Marabou Stork. Wilde had a well-known aversion to ugliness and once said: 'It is better to be beautiful than to be good, but it is better to be good than ugly'. Ugliness made Wilde ill, and the sight of the scrofulous Marabou would probably have put him into an intensive care unit.

Poor, denigrated, unloved and scorned Marabou. Does it deserve our contempt and laughter, or can we find in it some redeeming qualities? I doubt that anyone has ever thought to ask the question, and most would prefer not even to think of the Marabou. If there were only ten left in the world I doubt that any 'Save the Marabou' movement would get very far. It is invariably seen in the most disreputable places: garbage dumps, market centre scrap heaps, or hovering around the putrifying carcasses of kills after the big cats, hyenas, jackals and vultures have had their fill. Its diet does not inspire admiration.

The Marabou's appearance also acts against an objective analysis of its character. The poor thing looks like an ancient, hunch-shouldered, beady-eyed derelict with a terminal case of facial eczema and its conversation is limited to loud, inarticulate clackings of its oversized bill, though rumour has it that in the breeding colony it

comes out with some interesting croaks and grunts. A disgusting spotty pink sack droops down its chest from its throat, which the unfortunate observer will see can develop into an air-filled balloon. The horrible sight causes a potential attacker to throw up, thus allowing the Marabou's escape.

The Marabou Stork must have something going for it, though, as it inhabits virtually all of Africa, from the sea to the mountains and from forest to desert. In fact, its name comes from French West Africa where a *marabout* (the 't' has been dropped in English) is a mystic Islamic saint who is revered and even a little feared. One wonders how the stork and the saint came to be associated. Perhaps it was the pious and dignified manner in which the Marabou stalked the sea shore at Dakar, or maybe both hung out in market places looking for hand outs. The Marabou does seem to look upon the world with a detached beatitude, worthy of a saint. Surely the Marabou could never be accused of blasphemy or adultery, though it definitely covets its neighbour's scraps. This one fault of covetousness, readily understandable to man, may have saved the Marabou from a truly divine appellation.

Now the Marabou Stork definitely does have positive attributes, and to kill two birds with one stone I shall enumerate them in a poem. Here, for the first time, the Marabou takes its rightful place in literature alongside the swan, peacock, robin, raven, vulture, canary and various other twittering feathered creatures.

Ode to the Marabou

One day as I was bouncing through the
I happened upon a magnificent sight ^{bundu}
High on a carcass perched a saintly
About to take another bite ^{Marabou}

O pantophagous and seraphic Marabou
How Mother Nature is indebted to thee

For clearing the plains of what others slew
And you do it all for free

In the market place and on the dump
Biotic waste can raise a stink
But our saintly stork is no chump
He eats the scraps 'til in the pink

Blessed be Marabou for cleaning up the ^{mess}
Our praise goes out most vociferous
And do not think of him any the less
Because in Latin he is *L. crumeniferus*.

At national park lodges and lake hotels
Ranks not the Marabou with the Big Five
But when they answer the feeding time ^{bells}
It's fun to watch them start their jive

While stiffly strutting with great dignity
They clack their bills in epicurean greeting
And piously hope with great avidity
That scrap and bill will soon be meeting

This sanctified stork should no more be ^{denigrated}
To call him ugly is a Philistine plaint
In truth his spirit should be highly ^{venerated}
Here we have an ecological saint

To *Leptoptilos crumeniferus*
A hearty toast of thanks from all of us

I hope now that the reader has a new appreciation of the value of the Marabou Stork. He excels other scavengers in the fact that he entertains while performing nature's mandate as sanitation engineer. We can laugh at the antics of the Marabou, the hyena laughs at us. The vulture inspires little humour, unless it be that of the gallows. The Marabou would never think of eating your cat, and it will only nip your child in self defence when being chased. Ugliness may not be a virtue, but neither is it a sin.

The next time you see some Marabous, just think of them as rather degenerate saints. ♪