

# Margaret Atwood's love of feathered friends

Author believes we should all have a passion for birds, and her reasoning is complicated

**DEBORAH DUNDAS**  
BOOKS EDITOR

Margaret Atwood loves birds.

In fact, she loves birds so much that, for each of the past 16 years, the famed Canadian author has hosted a fundraiser for the Pelee Island Bird Observatory.

Springsong, as it's named, takes place traditionally on Mother's Day weekend, starting with a race where dozens of participants come to the island and vie to spot the most species. This year's winner observed 108 species in 24 hours.

Awards are given out at an evening banquet — the 200 or so tickets sell out well in advance — and Atwood always invites an author to come and read for the audience. This year it was Newfoundland writer Michael Crummey.

It's not all serious — the whole evening is homey and fun, with Atwood at the centre of it.

She collects squeaky rubber chickens that are handed out to people throughout the room; they then join her up front to take part in a "chicken choir."

Atwood leads the chorus during a spirited rendition of, what else, "Old Macdonald Had a Chicken."

"My relationship with birds goes back to year one because my dad was a biologist so I just grew up with all of this," Atwood said the day after last month's Springsong, during an interview at the Pelee Island Book House Writers' Retreat. Her husband, Graham Gibson, she notes, "is a convert and you know converts are always all gung ho. So a lot of the bird stuff actually is his impetus."

Gibson is the chair of the Pelee Island Bird Observatory — known as PIBO — and Atwood is also on the board. Pelee Island, the largest island in Lake Erie, is Canada's southernmost point. It's an important stop for migratory birds, which PIBO and other organizations in Canada and the U.S. track.

"They can pool their data so they can have a pretty good idea of which



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Canadian author Margaret Atwood, seen at Book House, a writers' retreat on Pelee Island in Lake Erie, where the annual Springsong fundraiser is held.

species are on the up and which ones are on the down," Atwood says. The organization also does a nest census to determine which birds are nesting on the island.

Her concern about birds and their conservation is clear to anyone who's seen the first two instalments of Atwood's graphic novel *Angel Catbird* — the third volume, *The Catbird Roars*, comes out in July.

"I had cats from the age of 9 or 10 until our last one died," she said, "at which point we decided that we were getting too old for it because we would trip on it going down the stairs. It became a tripping hazard in our household."

Still, "cats are the major killer of migratory songbirds in North Amer-

ica," she points out. "I wanted to create a positive conversation around cats and birds that didn't just completely annoy cat people."

She firmly believes people need to be interested in birds and conservation.

"If they don't get interested in it, pretty soon the oceans and the soil, and soil is important, will be dead and we will cease to breathe. In a nutshell."

She explains why with a scientific bent.

"Once upon a time," she begins, bedding us in for a story, "1.9 billion years ago the atmosphere was methane. And with a methane atmosphere oxygen-breathing forms could not survive. And that situation

was changed by blue-green algae. You can see the remnants of them in fossil forms called stromatolites.

"So they created the oxygen atmosphere by splitting H<sub>2</sub>O into H(ydrogen) and O(xygen) . . . Other plants do it too, but there aren't enough of other plants to maintain the oxygen level apart from the marine algae. So we would be seriously disadvantaged if all the other plants died — but we would be dead if the marine algae died."

So what's that got to do with birds? "Seabirds poo into the water and fertilize it," increasing the marine algae.

She describes soil as a "carbon sink," preventing carbon from being released into the atmosphere and

helping to aid the growth of plants. Inorganic farming "kills the soil," she says, along with the insects that birds usually eat.

Additionally, "Birds, especially migratory birds, are like an early warning radar system. When things are going badly wrong with their habitats and environments and their numbers are declining, that's a wake-up call . . .

"Anybody interested in conservation is interested in systems. So anybody interested in conservation knows that everything's connected and if you influence one part of it . . . you may find that all sorts of other things are being affected."

And that, in a nutshell, is why we should all care about birds.