

Sibert Medal Acceptance Speech

Sy Montgomery



*The 2011 Sibert Medal was awarded to Kakapo Rescue: Saving the World's Strangest Parrot by **Sy Montgomery**, photographs by Nic Bishop. The book was published by Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.*



Nic Bishop (l) and Sy Montgomery (r).

Five years is a long time to wait to do a book—but this was well worth the wait. Nic and I had the extraordinary privilege of documenting what is undoubtedly the most elaborate, the most dramatic, and possibly the most desperate effort in the world to save an endangered bird.

And what a bird.

Here is a moss green parrot that weighs nine pounds—the heaviest on Earth—who doesn't fly, who is active at night, whose incredibly soft feathers smell like honey, and who can live more than seventy years. And despite the fact that humans nearly wiped every last one of them out, they are so curious and friendly that a kakapo may walk right up to you and look you in the face.

“The most wondrous, perhaps, of all living birds” was how the curator of the Museum of London described it when the first live kakapo reached Europe in 1870.

There were fewer than ninety of them left on the planet when we made our trip to Codfish Island in 2009. These are birds once so common that when Western explorers first visited New Zealand, by shaking a sapling by day when the birds were sleeping, giant flightless parrots would fall out like apples.

In the course of our work on this book, I had the honor of having one of them, Sirocco, attempt to copulate with my head. I'd say it was a once in a lifetime honor, except that every time any of us went to the latrine at night, we were in danger of being sexually assaulted by a nine-pound, lovesick parrot with an identity crisis. Sirocco had been raised by people and thought he was one of us.

Working with these birds and the people trying to save them was one of the most dramatic and emotional experiences of our lives. Each bird is so important that every single one of them has a radio telemetry backpack so that every kakapo can be located at any moment. Every bird that nests is assigned a pair of nest nannies who camp outside the nest. The scientists equip each nest with a video monitor so the people can see inside, and they also install an infrared beam at the nest entrance.

When the mother kakapo leaves at night to hunt for food, she breaks the beam, and a doorbell sounds inside the nannies' tent, so they can wake up, struggle into clothes, and check on the egg or chick—bringing a heated blanket to keep the baby warm.

Our first night on Codfish Island, we beheld what was then the only kakapo chick on planet Earth. As we say in the

“This is what the work of saving endangered species is like. You’re constantly coming up against the unexpected. You’re constantly trying to solve mysteries. And the stakes are really huge: the survival of an entire species. What could be more important than that?”

Yet we’re living in a time when plenty of people think there’s lots more important. Like making more money. Or having a bigger car. Or a bigger house. You know that’s a big lie. And most kids know it too—which is why we make these books for kids, before they buy these lies, before they forsake the great green breathing natural world, full of infinite wonder, full of creatures like the kakapo, each of whom loves his only, precious, vivid life as much as we love ours.”

book, each one of these birds is more valuable than a Hope Diamond or a Taj Mahal. Because unlike a jewel or a building, each one of these birds is a living creature—a creature who loves its life—and each one has the power to perpetuate its kind.

So imagine the thrill of actually meeting the first fluffy white chick to be born in years to these beautiful, strange, endangered creatures. And now imagine the sorrow and despair we all felt when that chick inexplicably died.

Our time on Codfish was an emotional rollercoaster of tragedy and triumph. But this is what the work of saving endangered species is like. You’re constantly coming up against the unexpected. You’re constantly trying to solve mysteries. And the stakes are really huge: the survival of an entire species. What could be more important than that?

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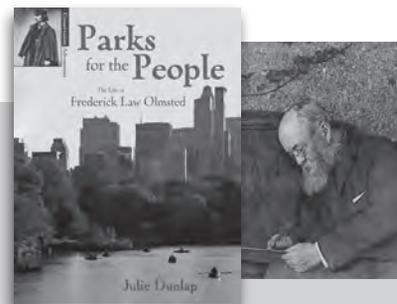
for kids, before they buy these lies, before they forsake the great green breathing natural world, full of infinite wonder, full of creatures like the kakapo, each of whom loves his only, precious, vivid life as much as we love ours.

This is why we are so grateful to the nine members of the Sibert Award Committee, and the Association for Library Service to Children, for selecting our book for the Sibert Medal. In honoring our book, you also honor the importance of saving the world’s endangered species. One of the volunteers helping with the kakapo project usually worked as a government official in New Zealand’s capitol. But, she told us, compared to what she was doing on Codfish Island, her paid job amounted to nothing more than “arguing over things that really don’t matter.”

“You come here,” she told us, “and it’s so on the brink,” she told us. “This,” she said, “is a life-and-death struggle.”

Today, with this award, you honor that struggle—and you honor the importance that children can play in keeping our world whole. Thank you. ☺

New biographies of conservationists
Frederick Law Olmsted
and Aldo Leopold!



Parks for the People:
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Julie Dunlap

Juvenile Nonfiction | Ages 9–12
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B&W photographs
978-1-55591-470-7

Growing up on a Connecticut farm in the 1800s, Frederick Law Olmsted loved roaming the outdoors. A contest to design the nation’s first city park opened new doors for Olmsted when his winning design became New York’s Central Park, just one of his ideas that changed our nation’s cities. Features resource and activity sections, a time line, black-and-white historical photographs, and a bibliography.



Things Natural, Wild, and Free:
The Life of Aldo Leopold
Marybeth Lorbiecki

Juvenile Nonfiction | Ages 9–12
Paperback | 7 x 9 | 112 pp | \$12.95
B&W photographs
978-1-55591-474-5

As a child, Aldo Leopold was always looking for adventure as he wandered over the bluffs along the Mississippi with his dog, Spud. This led Leopold to become a forester, wildlife scientist, author, and one of the most important conservationists in history. Features resource and activity sections, a time line, black-and-white historical photographs, and a bibliography.

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