

# Licensed to Thrill

With the latest James Bond film, *No Time to Die*, arriving in early April, now's a good time to take a closer look at the birds of Ian Fleming and 007

WORDS: JIM WRIGHT

The most beautiful bird in Jamaica, and some say the most beautiful bird in the world, is the streamertail or doctor humming-bird. The cock bird is about nine inches long, but seven inches of it are tail – two long black feathers that curve and cross each other and whose inner edges are in a form of scalloped design. The head and crest are black, the wings dark green, the long bill is scarlet, and the eyes, bright and confiding, are black. The body is emerald green, so dazzling that when the sun is on the breast you see the brightest green thing in nature.

Ian Fleming, "For Your Eyes Only"

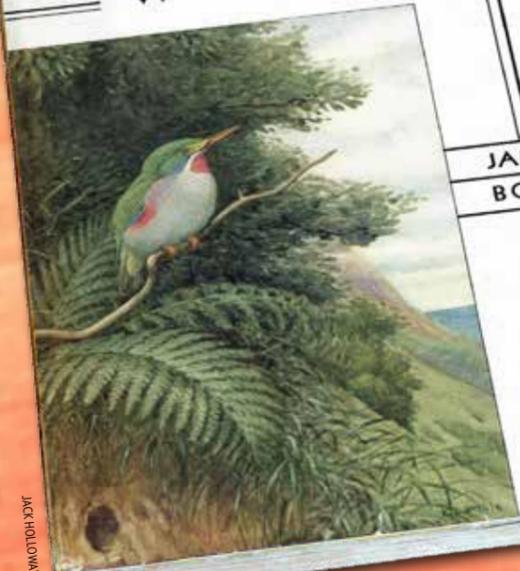
Red-billed Steamertail



JIM WRIGHT

## BIRDS of the WEST INDIES

JAMES BOND



JAC HOLLOWAY

Ian Fleming (right) meets James Bond



MARY WICKHAM BOND, COURTESY OF THE FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA

Jamaican Mango



RICARDO MILLER/ARROWHEAD BIRDING TOURS

**B**irdwatchers who love Ian Fleming's thrillers know he stole the name for his secret agent from the dust jacket of ornithologist James Bond's *Birds of the West Indies*. Not as widely known: wild birds often play integral roles in Fleming's spy novels, and he depicted them with a knowledge and affection seldom seen in most mainstream fiction.

Take the author's favourites, the hummingbirds of *Goldeneye*, his winter retreat on the north shore of Jamaica. Fleming planted hibiscus and bougainvillea to attract a trio of endemics – outlandish Red-billed Streamertails, shimmering Jamaican Mangos and tiny Vervains.

The streamertails clearly fascinated Fleming. He wrote about them twice. In addition to opening the short story *For Your Eyes Only*, they make a cameo appearance in *Live and Let Die*: "Like dangling emerald pendants the two hummingbirds were making their last rounds of the hibiscus."

Ramsey Acosta, the long-time gardener at *Goldeneye*, says another Fleming favourite was the Jamaican Nightingale, better known as the Northern Mockingbird.



Northern Mockingbird

Acosta says Fleming loved how the bird sang at twilight. No surprise, then, that the thriller-writer used it to help set a scene in both *For Your Eyes Only* and *Live and Let Die*, writing in the latter that “a mocking bird had started on its evening song, sweeter than [an English] nightingale’s, from the summit of a bush of night-scented jasmine.”

The streamertails and mockingbirds stand out for another reason – unlike most birds in Fleming’s fiction, they live to vocalise another day.

Later in *For Your Eyes Only*, Bond travels to the United States and watches through the telescopic sight of his Savage rifle as the villainous Von Hammerstein suddenly kills a Belted Kingfisher in a burst of machine-gun fire:

“The kingfisher, a handful of tattered blue and grey feathers, thudded to the lawn and lay fluttering. Von Hammerstein, smoke still dribbling from the snout of his Tommy-gun, walked a few steps and put the heel of his naked foot down and



Goldeneye Villa, Jamaica

pivoted sharply. He took his heel away and wiped it on the grass beside the heap of feathers. The others stood round, laughing and applauding obsequiously. Von Hammerstein’s red lips grinned with pleasure.”

Fleming used the slaying of a bird as a dramatic device to provide a dramatic display of evil without shedding human blood. The killing symbolized a crime

against innocence and nature. It also foreshadowed more death and destruction – but more on that a bit later.

The first of the bird killings came in *Live and Let Die*, his second 007 novel: “A pelican, grey with a pale yellow head, was hunched on one of the mooring posts on the end of the jetty. He let them [Bond and Leiter] get very close, then reluctantly gave a few heavy beats of his

“FLEMING USED THE SLAYING OF A BIRD AS A DRAMATIC DEVICE TO PROVIDE A DRAMATIC DISPLAY OF EVIL WITHOUT SHEDDING HUMAN BLOOD”

wings and planed down towards the water. The two men stood and watched him flying slowly along just above the surface of the harbour. Suddenly he crashed clumsily down, his long bill snaking out and down in front of him. It came up clutching a small fish which he moodily swallowed. Then the heavy bird got up again and went on fishing, flying mostly into the sun so that its big shadow would give no warning. ...

“The Robber looked briefly up, narrowed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The pelican gave a faint squawk and they heard its heavy body crash into the water... “Why the hell d’you do that for?’ asked Bond furiously.

“Practice,’ said the man, pumping another bullet into the breech.”

If you want to portray a villain as wicked in four paragraphs without torturing humans or kittens, the above passage provides a textbook example.

The Brown Pelican hunts so skillfully that it avoids casting a tell-tale shadow in order to surprise its prey. The Robber, in contrast, simply blasts his quarry out of the sky – for the hell of it.

In *Dr. No*, the sixth 007 novel, lots of birds and tons of bird guano play supporting roles. Bond is sent to Jamaica to investigate the disappearance of two MI6 staffers and discovers suspicious goings-on on Crab Key, owned by Dr. Junius No.

**Guano mine**

Half the island is an Audubon sanctuary where the Roseate Spoonbill population has dwindled. (“Looks like a sort of pink stork with an ugly flat bill which it uses for digging for food in the mud,” Fleming writes.)

The other half is a guano mine: “Now then, guano.” Pleydell-Smith tilted his chair back. Bond prepared to be

**BOND V BOND**

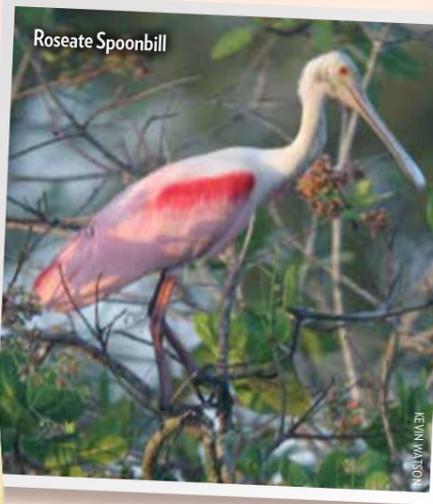
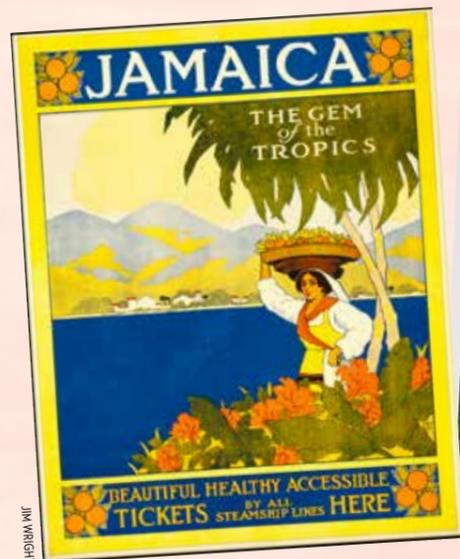


The real James Bond (1900-1989) and 007 shared much in common. Both were tall, lean and part Scottish. Both were graduates of British public schools (Harrow for the real Bond, Eton for Fleming’s character). Both loved to travel to exotic locales and to spend their winters in the Caribbean. Both smoked cigarettes, though the real Bond, who preferred to be called ‘Jim’, later switched to a pipe. Both drank hard liquor. And both were skilled in the use of firearms. Secret Agent 007 preferred a Beretta and later a Walther PPK; Jim Bond, a double-barrelled shotgun. One huge difference: Jim Bond spent much of his career shooting birds and studying them. In contrast, Fleming’s 007 never killed a bird and was disgusted when a villain did.

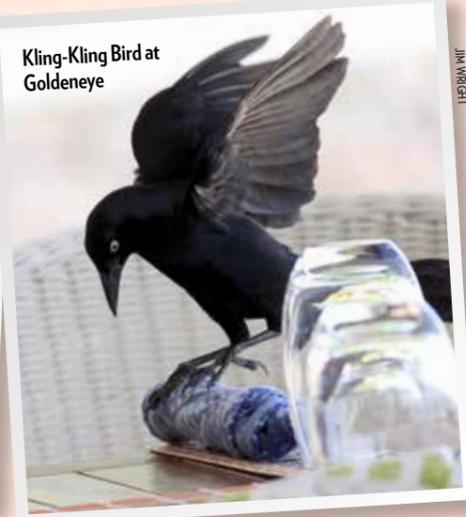
bored. ‘As you know, it’s bird dung. Comes from the rear end of two birds, the masked booby and the guany. So far as Crab Key is concerned, it’s only the guany, otherwise known as the green cormorant, same bird as you find in England. The guany is a machine for converting fish into guano. They mostly eat anchovies. Just to show you how much fish they eat, they’ve found up to seventy anchovies inside one bird!’”

Fleming most likely forgot to consult his *Birds of the West Indies* when he wrote that passage. A more likely candidate was the double-crested cormorant. Bond’s description begins: “General color glossy greenish black.”

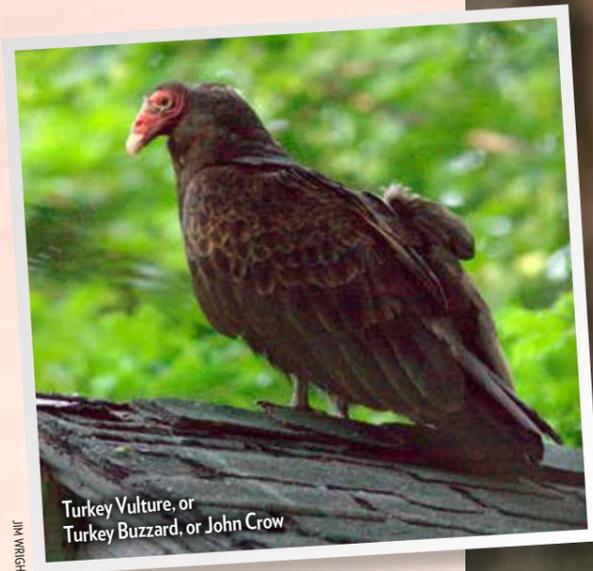
The good news for the cormorants – whichever species they were – was that no villains were around to shoot them. As for the man behind the deaths of the spoonbills, *Dr. No* later gets his just deserts



Roseate Spoonbill



Kling-Kling Bird at Goldeneye



Turkey Vulture, or Turkey Buzzard, or John Crow

(spoiler alert), when 007 commandeers a guano-loading machine and buries him alive under a load of bird droppings.

That's justice far more poetic than Dr. No's demise in the 1962 movie version. In the film, Bond boiled him alive in a nuclear reactor.

**Room filled with tension**

Fleming saved some of his finest bird descriptions for his final 007 outing, *The Man with the Golden Gun*, written in early 1964. Bond travels to Jamaica to kill arch-villain Francisco 'Pistols' Scaramanga. They meet for the first time in a Kingston bordello where a young woman named Tiffy runs the café. The Kling-klings – Jamaican Grackles – arrive just before Scaramanga.

"At once, from the direction of the Lignum Vitae tree, two large black birds, slightly smaller than ravens, whirled in, circled the interior of the café amidst a metallic clangour of song unlike the song of any other bird in the world, and untidily landed on the counter within reach of Bond's hand. They strutted up and down imperiously, eyeing Bond without fear from bold, golden eyes and went through a piercing repertoire of tinny whistles and trills, some of which required them to



Brown Pelican

ruffle themselves up to almost twice their normal size."

Scaramanga – the man with the golden gun – makes his entrance and tension fills the room:

"The kling-klings, Joe and May, smelled the same electricity. With a tremendous din of metallic squawks, they fled for the open window, like black thieves escaping into the night.

"The explosions from the Colt .45 were deafening. The two birds disintegrated against the violet backdrop of the dusk, the scraps of feathers and pink flesh blasting out of the yellow light of the café into the limbo of the deserted street like shrapnel."

Now that's how to introduce a villain. Readers learn all they need to know about Scaramanga. Killing the two playful birds in such a vicious fashion not only makes 'Pistols' all the more dastardly, but it makes his later confrontation with Bond inevitable.

Scaramanga soon takes aim again – at another bird. On a train ride through a mangrove swamp with Scaramanga and several gangsters, "[Bond] watched a Turkey Buzzard a thousand feet up, circling. He put himself into the mind of the John Crow, watching out for a

squashed toad or a dead bush rat. The circling buzzard had found its offal. It came lower and lower. Bond wished it bon appetit. The predator in him wished the scavenger a good meal. He smiled at the comparison between them. They were both following a scent. The main difference was that the John Crow was a protected bird. No one would shoot back at it when it made its final dive."

**Bond and bird**

It's worth noting that Fleming refers to the vulture both as a Turkey Buzzard and a John Crow (the Jamaican nickname). He then draws a parallel between Bond and bird, predator and scavenger, that shows Fleming's appreciation for birds in much



Common Yellowthroat



Goldeneye Villa seen from the sea

“FLEMING SAVED SOME OF HIS FINEST BIRD DESCRIPTIONS FOR HIS FINAL 007 OUTING, THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN, WRITTEN IN EARLY 1964”

the same manner as he did with the pelican slaying in *Live and Let Die*.

By mentioning that the vulture is a protected species, Scaramanga's killing of the bird three pages later becomes that much more horrible, even as it seals Scaramanga's fate:

"A hundred yards ahead, a turkey buzzard rose from beside the line, and after a few heavy flaps, caught the inshore breeze and soared up and away. There came the boom of Scaramanga's gun. A feather drifted down from the great right-hand wing of the big bird. The turkey buzzard swerved and soared higher. A second shot rang out. The bird gave a jerk and began to tumble untidily down out of the sky. It jerked again as a third bullet hit it before it crashed into the

cane. There was applause from under the yellow roof."

As with the killing of the Belted Kingfisher in *For Your Eyes Only*, the senseless slaying of the vulture is celebrated by those who witness it, underscoring their heartlessness.

Fleming's knowledge of birds and his affection for them shines through in his 007 fiction. By having his antiheroes use those same birds for target practice, the killings become that much more barbaric. And the villains have unwittingly signed their own death warrants.

After all, James Bond always declares open season on anyone who wantonly kills a bird. Small wonder he was named for an ornithologist.

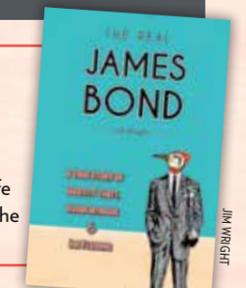


**About the author**

Jim Wright is an author, blogger, and longtime birding columnist for *The Record* in New Jersey. A prize-winning writer, his books include *The Nature of the Meadowlands*, *Jungle of the Maya*, and *Hawk Mountain*. In his spare time, he spies on birds. Follow his adventures on Twitter @realjamesbond and read his blog: [realjamesbond.net](http://realjamesbond.net)

**About the book**

*The Real James Bond* is the true story of identity theft, rare birds, rare books and real-life spies. Packed with archival photos and interviews with Bond's colleagues, this biography examines the life of the ornithologist who introduced the world to the exotic birds of the West Indies.



**FEMMES OF A DIFFERENT FEATHER**



Claudine Auger played Domino Vitali in *Thunderball*, 1965

Although 'bird' is the by-now hackneyed term for the attractive women who populate Fleming's novels, the thrillers featured two of these human birds. Both women were beautiful femme fatales named for birds of the West Indies.

Domino Vitali (*Thunderball*) was named for the Common Yellowthroat, once known in Jamaica as the Domino Bird because the black feathers around its eyes resemble the domino mask so popular with comic-book heroes and carnival-goers.



Jane Seymour played Solitaire in *Live and Let Die*, 1973, seen here with some bloke

Fleming named Solitaire (*Live and Let Die*) for the Rufous-throated Solitaire (a thrush with a beautiful, almost haunting call). You are most likely to hear this elusive bird in the Blue Mountains, where Fleming would occasionally go birding on muleback - the mountains were too far away and too steep to traverse, and the roads over the mountain ranged from primitive to non-existent.

Fleming came up with the name after his in-law, Guy Charteris, visited Fleming and his wife at Goldeneye in early 1953 and said he was fascinated by the solitaire and its eerie flute-like song.