



An Albatross is legendary and mythical – and not just in the game of Golf.

In Golf, which for some of us is a good walk in pleasant well maintained surroundings, usually with friendly company– with occasional interruptions – it's about a level of achievement. But it's also a fabulous but threatened bird.

I'm not one of the initiated but understand that whilst there is competition between the players, the golfers aim (or dream) is to beat "par" [coming from the Latin for equal]. Par is the predetermined number of strokes that a proficient golfer should need to complete a "hole" so that scoring is by comparison with par – over, under, or



level with it. There are three levels of par, the shortest “holes” are usually par three’s, mid length are typically par four’s and the longest are par fives. With an average of 4 per the 18 holes, the total is often 72 but can be 70 or 71.

Arising out of its history and American influence it seems, bird names are used to describe achievements against par. A “birdie” is a hole in one shot under par and an “eagle” is by two under. An “albatross” is the very rare event of 3 under par only possible on a 4 or 5 par hole. So rare that it’s only been achieved 981 times in

recorded tournaments since 1870. It was most recently achieved by Ron Fisher at the BMW/PGA at Wentworth on 21st September 2019 and previously by Padraig Harrington at the WGA/SHBC at Sheshan 6th November 2010. There is also a “condor”, an extremely unusual/ not achievable (?) 4 under par on a par five (possibly downhill with a strong wind behind you and incredible luck ?)

As a rare event, the Albatross is named after the equally rare event of seeing the legendary and mythical bird. Of the 22 species recognised by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) on their “Red List”, 15 are threatened with extinction [that’s “critically endangered”] and 7 are “endangered or vulnerable”. Threats are from humans and their pets and activities such as being caught in fishing nets.

They are truly remarkable creatures, varying by species, but with a wingspan of up to 3.6 metres (11.5 feet) and can weigh up to 12 Kg’s (26lbs). The wingspan is the longest of any bird allowing them to cover remarkable distances and for incredible periods of time, months even years, without touching land – a single flap of their wings can take them for miles, they make great use of thermal soaring, despite their weight.

Thermals are columns of warm rising air, a mass of buoyant air created by uneven heating of Earth’s surface from solar radiation providing “lift” for birds and gliders. Essentially birds use thermals by finding and circulating in a spiralling path within the columns of rising air to gain altitude, without having to flap their wings, which conserves energy especially for long flights using the height to then glide to their destination, and by repeating this process. The Albatross can use a feature of their nostrils to seek changes in air speed. One individual was recorded as flying over 13,000 miles in just 46 days foraging and finding food over the vast expanses of the Southern Ocean. In the decline glide, without use of wings they can travel at 160 kph.

It can take them some years but, when they do mate, it’s for life, with a lifespan of up to 70 years. They perform intricate and lengthy courtship dances, despite their flat feet, to find a mate and then to reaffirm their pair bonds. The sounds of courtship are described as “nasal braying – eh eh, mooing, moaning, whining, grunting and growling” – I guess you have to be another albatross to be appreciative although some sounds may be familiar !





I said that the bird was legendary and mythical. Historically seafarers considered the Albatross to be an omen of good luck and any harm done to them, or their absence, would cause bad luck. Seen from below it has the look of a Christian crucifix to believers.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” a lengthy poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1789) is about a story told by an older man who has returned from a long eventful sea voyage. An Albatross had brought joy, good fortune and a fair wind behind the sails but once he had thoughtlessly killed it with a crossbow all aboard were made to suffer. The shooting was an ill omen resulting from the bird’s death. The act of violence cursed the ship, the wind died leaving the ship stranded and the crew eventually perishes.

It is only when he repents his action that the wind returns. He acknowledges his mistake, he tries to make amends and seeks redemption – friendly spirits possess the bodies of the dead men and guide the ship toward land. In the end the ship sinks with the bodies of the dead sailors but he survives.

You may have your own views on the outcome but the intention is to warn readers of the dangers of acting without regard for the consequences. It suggests that some peace can be found by taking responsibility for your mistakes but it also shows that the consequences of rash actions can last for the rest of your life. He is still haunted by mistakes and warns readers to learn from his example.

Well known quotes from the poem :

“All things great and small: for the dear God who loves us; he loves and made them all”.



“Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink” – experience at sea.

Sailors returning home with tall stories abound from those times but modern research, in the Observer archives, found that the poem was based on a real person, a sailor named Simon Hatley (born 1685) who had witnessed the killing of a “Black” Albatross on a vessel called the “Speedwell”. He had been picked up by a Spanish ship when lost at sea, taken to Lima (Peru) and caught up by the “Spanish Inquisition”. Official retained records found him under “Spontaneous Conversions”. [The Spanish Inquisition was satirised by the tv series Monty Python, but wasn’t much fun in reality as in these words which suggest conversion by torture]

And, supporting the “tall stories” comment, Simon Hatley was on a ship with Alexander Selkirk, the marooned sailor whose story inspired Daniel Defoe’s “Robinson Crusoe”, but also and remarkably with the writer William Denyer whose work Jonathan Swift drew on for “Gulliver’s Travels”.

“Tall” stories are much loved as are “Nursery” rhymes which carry important “messages”.

A favourite one is Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, about a vain emperor who gets literally exposed to the people – with some relevance today ?

If you have a story to tell, long or short or tall, it would be welcome here at windlesham.life

