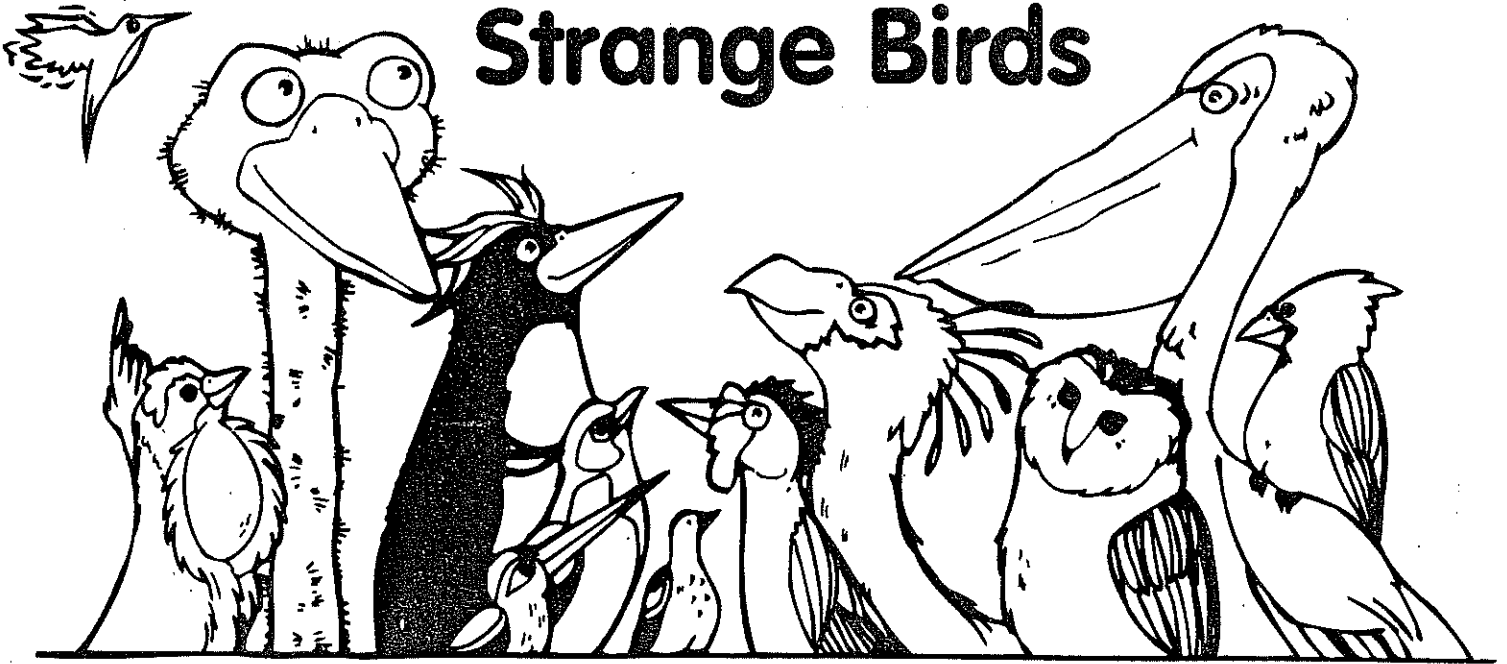


# Strange Birds



Birds can be found in every part of the world. About 9000 kinds of birds live on land or water. Every bird has feathers, two legs, a beak, wings (although some birds can't fly), and hatches from an egg. However, in the bird world there are extreme differences in size, color, speed of flight, migration, song, diet, nest building, and types of beaks and feet.

Some birds are so different from others they can be labeled as "strange birds." Their strangeness can come from their courting behavior; nest building; parenting; land, water, or air speed; songs or other abilities. Let's examine a lineup of some of these bird characters.

All birds have wings, but not all birds can fly. The emu, penguin, kiwi, and ostrich are examples. The inability of the great auk and dodo to fly caused them to become extinct soon after man and his dogs discovered them. Many birds that can't fly are large and have good defenses against predators. The African ostrich is the largest bird, often growing to a height of 8 feet and a weight of 300 pounds. The ostrich is also the fastest land bird. It can run 35 miles per hour and reach

50 mph for a short distance. The ostrich, along with the cassowary, defends itself by kicking. A well-placed kick can kill a human or even a lion.

The largest flying bird is the South American Condor, almost 5 feet long with a wingspan up to 11 feet. Contrast that to the hummingbird which can be as small as 2 inches long and weigh one-tenth of an ounce.

But the hummingbird can hover in the air and it can do one thing no other bird can do—fly backward.

The wandering albatross has the greatest wingspread, almost 12 feet. However, it is not the greatest traveler. That honor belongs to the Arctic tern—which migrates from the Arctic to Antarctica, a round trip of 22,000 miles per year, almost equal to the circumference of the earth.

The sky is the birds' highway. While most birds are fast on wing, they can't approach the common swifts of Europe. These birds fly 70 miles per hour and reach 100 mph in short bursts. Nor can they come close to the golden eagle with its diving speed of 180 mph.

Most birds don't fly too high. That can't be said of geese. Migrating

flocks have been seen at heights of almost six miles. The South American Condor uses its great wingspread to reach heights of 4 miles.

The loon would rather swim than fly. In its watery element it can outswim a fish and dive to a depth of more than 150 feet. With that ability, one wonders why it makes such lonely sounds.

Birds are not very smart. Being called a "bird brain" is not a compliment. Many birds are weird acting, especially when they are looking for a mate. Birds often dance to attract females. The male bowerbird of Australia builds an archway and places shells and other objects to attract a mate.



The nests of birds can range from works of art to bare ground. The mound bird of Australia makes a large pile of dead plants and dirt. The female lays her eggs in the mound and covers them. The decaying plants produce enough heat to hatch the eggs. But just to make sure, there are visits to check the temperature. If it's too hot, the mound is opened to let it cool off.

Birds are usually good parents. But not the cowbird. She lays her eggs in another bird's nest and lets it do the hard job of hatching and feeding. Sometimes this sneaky act doesn't work with the yellow warbler. The warbler recognizes these are not her eggs. She builds a cover over the bottom of the nest and lays a new clutch of her own eggs.

An example of a good parent in the bird world is the lotus bird of Australia, which will carry its chicks under its wings when danger threatens.

Birds are admired for their graceful

flight and songs. Each kind of bird has its own sound or song. The bobwhite and whippoorwill are named for the sounds they make. The mockingbird imitates the songs of other birds. It is said the mute swan never uses its voice in captivity.

Birds live a fast-paced life. Most of them live only a few years. This is not true of the raven. Its life span approaches that of three score and ten that humans average. Some macaws also live 60 years or more.

Birds are beneficial to humans in many ways. So what if a few of them are strange? Their beauty and lovely songs make them a joy to see and hear.

### Bibliography

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