

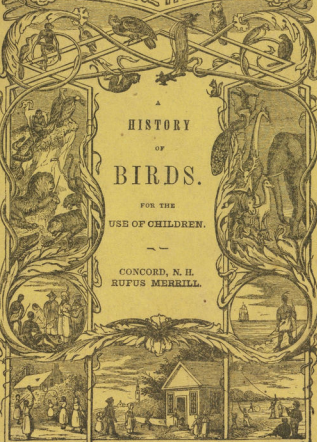
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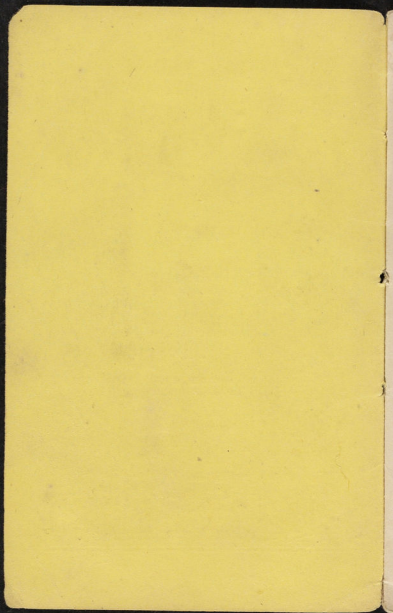
MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

A HISTORY OF BIRDS.

FOR THE
USE OF CHILDREN.

CONCORD, N. H.
RUFUS MERRILL.





THE
NATURAL HISTORY
OF
BIRDS.



ILLUSTRATED WITH CUTS.



CONCORD, N. H.
PUBLISHED BY RUFUS MERRILL.



The Peacock.

The peacock is one of the most magnificent of the whole feathered creation. It was introduced into Europe from the south of Asia more than two thousand years ago. It lives about twenty years, and does not acquire its beautiful plumage till three years of age.—See page 12.

HISTORY
OF
BIRDS.



OF BIRDS IN GENERAL.

QUADRUPEDS in their general structure have much relation with that of man ; but the structure of birds is in most respects entirely dissimilar from both. One obvious mark of distinction between this class of animals and the quadruped part of the creation is, that instead of hair, birds are covered with feathers, and these appear to be nourished and kept in order in a different manner from the hair of animals. Lest the feathers should spoil by exposure to the air, the bird is furnished with a gland situated on the rump of the animal, containing a peculiar oil, which it presses out with its beak, and occasionally anoints its feathers. In water-fowl, this oil is so abundant that it even imparts a degree of rancidity to the flesh, and we see that their coat of feathers is rendered by it completely water-proof.

The wings of birds are remarkably strong. The flap of a swan's wing would break a man's leg, and a similar blow from an eagle has been known to lay a man dead in an instant.

The sense of seeing in birds is remarkably acute, and though they have no external ear, but only two small orifices or ear-holes, yet they do not appear to be deficient in hearing. The scent of some species is exquisitely delicate. The voice of birds is much louder in proportion to their size than that of other animals; for, in fact, the bellowing of an ox is not louder than the scream of a peacock.

The legs, the wings, the bones, and every part of the body are much lighter, firmer, and more compact in birds than in other creatures. Their lungs are extended all over the cavity of their body.

Carnivorous birds, like carnivorous quadrupeds, have but one stomach, and that well calculated for digestion. Those that feed on grain have, in addition to the crop or stomach, where their food is moistened or swelled, a gizzard, which is a very hard muscle, almost cartilaginous or gristly, and which they commonly fill with small stones, where the food is afterwards ground, in order to its complete digestion. Birds are subject to few diseases.

There are some birds which are called birds of passage, and which by migrating make a habitation in all parts of the earth; but in general every climate has birds peculiar to itself.

Birds are much longer lived than quadrupeds. The swan is said to live near three hundred years. They are, however, greatly inferior to quadrupeds in sense and docility.

The rapidity with which birds move from place to place is one remarkable circumstance attending them.

The hawk, and many other birds, occasionally fly at the rate, perhaps, of not less than a hundred and fifty miles in an hour. Major Cartwright ascertained, from repeated observation on the coast of Labrador, that the velocity of an eider duck's flight is ninety miles an hour. Even the crow moves twenty-five miles within that space of time; the swallow ninety-two miles; and the rapidity of the swift is supposed to be three times greater than that of the swallow. A falcon belonging to Henry IV. of France made its escape, and in twenty-four afterwards was found at Malta, one thousand three hundred and fifty miles distance; so that, as hawks do not fly by night, he must have hourly flown nearly seventy-five miles, even supposing him to have been immediately discovered at Malta, and the days to have been at the longest.



The Ostrich.

The ostrich is a bird very anciently known, since it is mentioned in the oldest of books. It has furnished the sacred writers with some of their most beautiful imagery; and its flesh was, even previous to the days of Moses, apparently a common species of food, since we find it interdicted, among other unclean animals, by the Jewish legislator.

The ostrich is generally considered as the largest of birds; but its size serves to deprive it of the principal excellence of this class of animals, the power



of flying. The medium weight of this bird may be estimated at seventy-five or eighty pounds, a weight which would require an immense power of wing to

elevate into the atmosphere; and hence those birds which approach the size of the ostrich, cannot possess the faculty of flight. The head and bill of the ostrich somewhat resemble those of a duck; the neck may be compared to that of a swan, but is much longer; the legs and thighs resemble those of a hen, though the whole appearance at a distance bears a strong resemblance to that of a camel. It is usually seven feet high from the top of the head to the ground, but from the back it is only four; so that the head and neck are above three feet long.

The plumage is generally black and white, though some of them are said to be gray. The greatest feathers are at the extremities of the wings and tail, and the largest are generally white. The next row is black and white. There are no feathers on the sides, nor yet under the wings, nor on the thighs. The lower part of the neck is covered with small feathers of different colors. The head and the upper part of the neck are covered with hair. At the end of each wing there is a kind of spur, almost like the quill of a porcupine. It is an inch long, of a horny substance, and hollow. There are two of these on each wing; the largest of which is at the extremity of the bone of the wing, and the other a foot lower. The legs are covered before with scales. The end of the foot is cloven, and has two very large toes.

The ostrich is found in the torrid regions of Africa and Arabia, and in the warmest parts of South America. It chooses the most solitary and horrid deserts, where there are few vegetables to clothe the surface,

of the earth, and where rain never comes to refresh it. In these places ostriches are seen in large flocks, which at a distance appear like a regiment of cavalry, and have often alarmed a whole caravan. In Southern Africa they are exceedingly troublesome to the farmers, as they will destroy a field of wheat so effectually as not to leave a single ear behind.

The ostrich is the most voracious animal in the world. It will devour grass, hair, leather, iron, stones, or any thing that is given it. The eggs of this bird are very large, some of them being above five inches in diameter, and weighing above fifteen pounds. It is a curious fact that these eggs often contain a number of small, hard, oval-shaped pebbles, about the size of a pea, and of a yellow color. They are sometimes set and used as buttons. They lay from thirty to forty eggs in a season.

The plumage is considered very valuable, and the Arabians train up their best and fleetest horses to pursue the ostrich. As soon as the hunter commences the pursuit, the silly animal, instead of going off in a straight line, takes his course in circles, while the hunters still make a small course within, relieve each other, meet him at sudden turns, and continue the pursuit for two or three days together. At length, spent with fatigue and famine, he endeavors to hide himself from his enemies by covering his head in the sand or in a thicket.

Ostriches are sometimes bred in flocks, as they are easily tamed. When thus domesticated, they play and frisk about with much vivacity, and are tractable

and familiar with those who are acquainted with them. The strength of the ostrich enables it sometimes to carry a man on its back. Moore, an English traveller, relates that he saw in Africa a man travelling on



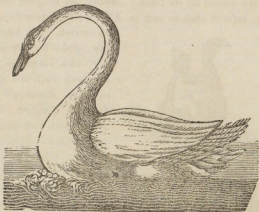
an ostrich. M. Adanson saw, at the factory at Podor, two ostriches, one of which went at a speed to have distanced the fleetest English race-horse, with two negroes on its back. It is common, in villages where the ostrich is tamed, to see the negro children amuse themselves by riding about on them.



The Swan.

So much difference is there between this bird when on land and in the water, that it can hardly be supposed the same; for in the latter, no bird can possibly exceed it for beauty and majestic appearance. When it ascends from its favorite element, its motions are awkward, and its neck stretched forward with an air of stupidity; it has the air of being only a larger sort of goose: but when seen smoothly gliding along the water, displaying a thousand graceful attitudes, and moving at pleasure without the smallest apparent

effort, there is not a more beautiful figure in all nature. It will swim faster than a man can walk.



This bird has long been rendered domestic. Its color is entirely white, and it generally weighs full twenty pounds. Under the feathers is a very thick down, which is made an article of commerce, for purposes of both use and ornament.

This beautiful bird is as delicate in its appetites as it is elegant in its form. Its chief food is corn, bread, herbs growing in the water, and roots and seeds, which are found near the margin. At the time of incubation, it prepares a nest in some retired part of the bank, composing it of water plants, long grass, and sticks: the male assist in forming it with great assiduity. The swan lays seven or eight white eggs, one every other day, much larger than those of a goose, with a hard shell. It sits six weeks before its

young are excluded ; which are ash-colored when they first leave the shell, and for some months after. It is not a little dangerous to approach the old ones, when their little families are feeding among them ; their fears as well as their pride seem to take the alarm, and when in danger, the old birds carry off the young ones on their backs. A female has been known to attack and drown a fox, which was swimming towards her nest : they can throw down and trample on youths of fifteen or sixteen. It is long lived ; having been known to live a hundred years.



The Spoonbill.

The spoonbill of Europe is white ; but the American spoonbill is of a beautiful reddish color. Its



name is derived from its bill, which is six inches or more in length, and of the shape of a spoon. Their chief food is fish, which they often take from other birds in the manner of the bald eagle.

They also destroy frogs and snakes in great numbers, for which purpose their bills are admirably adapted. They are much prized in some places on this account.

The Peacock.

To describe in adequate terms, the dazzling beauties of this elegant bird, would be a task of no small



difficulty. Its head is adorned with a tuft, consisting of twenty-four feathers, painted with the most exqui

site green, mixed with gold: the head, throat, neck and breast are of a deep blue, glossed with green and gold; the wings are of a reddish brown, as are also the quills, some of which are variegated with black and green; but the distinguishing character of this singular bird is its train, which rises just above the tail, and, when erected, forms a fan of the most resplendent hues: the two middle feathers are sometimes four feet and a half long, the others gradually diminishing on each side: the shafts, white, and furnished from their origin nearly to the end with parted filaments of varying colors ending in a flat vane, which is decorated with what is called the eye. The real tail consists of short, stiff, brown feathers, which serve as a support to the train. When pleased or delighted, and in sight of his females, the peacock erects his train, and displays all the majesty of his beauty: all his movements are full of dignity; his head and neck bend nobly back; his pace is slow and solemn, and he frequently turns slowly and gracefully around, as if to catch the sunbeams in every direction, and produce new colors of inconceivable richness and beauty, accompanied at the same time with a hollow murmuring voice expressive of desire. The cry of the peacock, at other times, is often repeated and very disagreeable.

The peacock has in some countries been esteemed as an article of luxury; but whatever there may be of delicacy in the flesh of a young peacock, it is certain an old one is very indifferent eating. Peacocks were highly esteemed by the Romans, and the

Bible mentions them among Solomon's importations from the East.

Like other birds of the poultry kind, the peacock feeds upon corn; but its choice is barley. There is, however, scarcely any food that it will not at times covet and pursue; it lays waste the labors of the gardener, roots up his choicest seeds, and nips his favorite flowers in the bud. It lives about 20 years.



The Bittern.

The bittern is common to all our sea and river marshes, though no where numerous; it rests all day



among the reeds and rushes, and unless disturbed feeds and flies only during the night. In some places it is called the *Indian hen*. It utters sometimes a

hollow guttural note among the reeds, but has nothing of that long booming sound for which the European bittern is so remarkable. When disturbed they rise with a hollow *kwa*, and are then easily shot down, as they fly heavily. Like other night birds, their sight is most acute during the evening twilight; but their hearing is at all times exquisite. They make their nests in swamps, laying four eggs in the long grass.



The Toucan.

This bird is about the size of a jackdaw, with a large head to support its monstrous bill; this bill is as large as the rest of its whole body. He is easily tamed, and will become very familiar, and eat almost any thing offered to it; in general it feeds on fruits.



In its wild state it is a noisy bird, and is perpetually moving from place to place in quest of food, going northward or southward, as the fruits ripen.

Grapes, however, seem to be one of its most favorite articles of food. If these are plucked from the stalk, one by one, and thrown to it, the toucan will catch them with great dexterity, before they fall to the ground.

generally appoint one to watch during the night. While they are asleep, he sits perched at the top of a tree above them, and makes a continual noise, resembling ill articulated sounds, moving also his head, during the whole time, to the right and left. For this reason the South Americans give to the toucan the name of *Preacher Toucan*.

The toucan builds its nest in the holes of trees, that are formed by itself, or that from accident it meets with, and lays two eggs; and no bird better secures its young from external injury. It has not only birds, men and serpents to guard against, but a numerous train of monkeys, still more prying, mischievous and hungry than all the rest. The toucan, however, sits in its hole, defending the entrance with its great beak; and if the monkey venture to offer a visit of curiosity, the toucan gives him such a welcome, that he is soon glad to make his escape.

This bird is a native of Guiana and Brazil, and is said to be in great request in South America, both from the delicacy of its flesh, and on account of the beauty of its plumage, particularly the feathers of the breast. The skin of this part the Indians pluck off, and, when dry, glue to their cheeks, and this they consider as an irresistible addition to their beauty.



The Hoopoe.

The hoopoe is a handsome bird of the parrot kind. It has long feathers upon its head, which makes it



look somewhat like a fine lady, with a gay cap on. There is only one species known to Europeans. It weighs about 12 ounces, and is 12 inches in length, the extent of its wings being 19 inches across. The

distinguishing character of this bird is a beautiful crest of about two inches high, of a pale orange, tipped with black, and which he can erect at pleasure. The food of this bird is insects. It is a solitary bird, two of them being seldom found together.



Bird of Paradise.

This bird appears to the eye of the size nearly of a pigeon, though in reality the body is not much larger than that of a thrush. The head, the throat, and the neck are of a pale gold color. The body and wings are chiefly covered with beautiful brown, purple, and gold feathers. The uppermost part of the tail feathers is of a pale yellow, and those beneath are white and longer than the former; for which reason the hinder part of the tail appears to be all white. But what chiefly excites curiosity are two

long naked feathers which spring from the upper part



of the rump above the tail, and which are usually about two feet long. These are bearded only at the

beginning and the end; the whole shaft, for about one foot nine inches, being of a deep black, while the feathered extremity is of a changeable color.

This bird is a native of the Molucca islands, but is found in greatest numbers in that of Arou. The inhabitants are not insensible of the pleasure they afford, and give them the name of *God's birds*, as being superior to all that he has made. They live in large flocks, and at night generally perch upon the same tree.



The Woodcock.

The woodcock is about as large as a pigeon, with a bill three inches long. The crown of the head and back of the neck are barred with black. It flaps its wings with some noise when it rises, and its flight is pretty rapid, but neither high nor long; its descent is so sudden that it seems to fall like a stone. It principally feeds on worms and insects, which it draws out of the mud with its long bill. Its flesh is universally admired.

The female builds a rude nest on the ground, and generally lays four or five eggs.



Stormy Petrel.

The petrel is about the size of a house swallow. The general color of the plumage is black, except about the rump, which is white. Stormy petrels have been seen in flocks which have been estimated to contain at least a hundred and fifty millions of them. They are always to be found on the shores of Britain, and seem to be diffused all over the world. They sometimes hover over the water like swallows, and sometimes appear to run on the top of it: they are also excellent divers.



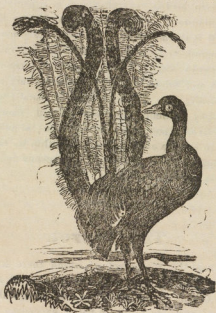
They skim along the hollows of the waves, and through the spray upon their tops, at the astonishing rate of sixty miles an hour. They are very clamorous, and are called by the sailors *Mother Carey's Chickens*, who observe they never settle or sit upon the water but when stormy weather is to be expected. They are found in most parts of the world; and in the Feroe islands the inhabitants draw a wick through the body of the bird, from the mouth to the rump, which serves them as a candle, being fed by the vast proportion of oil which this little animal contains. This oil it is supposed to collect from the ocean by means of the feathers on its breast.

There are about twenty species of foreign birds of this kind. In the high southern latitudes, one is found which is of the size of a goose, and on that account called the *Giant Petrel*.

The Lyre Bird

OF NEW HOLLAND.

This singular bird lives almost wholly on the ground, like our common poultry. It will, indeed, occasionally perch on trees; but the structure of its



claws, and its appearance and habits show clearly that the ground is its most proper home.

It is about as large as the partridge of New England. Its general plumage is of a dull brown, incli-

ning to red on the quill feathers. The tail, which is much longer than the body, consists of feathers of different sorts, so arranged as to form, when raised in an erect position, a figure nearly of the shape of the ancient lyre. But the engraving will convey a better idea of its tail than any description.

The lyre bird is very shy, and is especially fond of the mountains. The inhabitants of New Holland even call it the *mountain pheasant*. Its voice is far more melodious than either the bird of paradise or any domestic fowls, which it strongly resembles in manners and habits. It begins its song very early in the morning, for which purpose it usually ascends some rocky eminence, and erects its tail. Sometimes it sings its own song, in a natural tone; at others, it is said to imitate every other bird within its hearing. After singing about two hours, it descends again into the lower regions.



The Parrot.

It is said that the parrot, of which there are many species, was first introduced into Europe by Alexander the Great. It is one of the most beautiful of the feathered race, its plumage being exceeding varied, and of the most vivid hues.

But its chief attraction is to be found in its ability to utter articulate sounds, a gift which it possesses in far greater perfection than any other bird.

A distiller, who had been greatly injured by the malevolence of an informer that lived opposite to him, taught his parrot the ninth commandment, which the bird kept continually repeating, to the entertainment of those neighbors who were acquainted with the ungenerous part the despicable man had acted.



Willoughby tells us that "a parrot belonging to king Henry VII., who then resided at Westminster, in his palace by the Thames, had learned many words

from the passengers who took water at that place. One day, sporting on his perch, the poor bird fell into the stream, at the same calling, as loud as he could, 'A boat! twenty pounds for a boat!' A waterman, hearing the cry, made to the place where the parrot was floating, and, taking him up, restored him to the king. As the bird was a favorite, the man insisted that he ought to have a reward equal to his services, rather than his trouble, and as the parrot had cried twenty pounds, he said the king was in honor bound to pay it.

"The king agreed to leave it to the parrot's determination; which the bird hearing, instantly cried out, '*Give the knave a groat!*'"

The Ostrich.

BY MARY HOWITT.

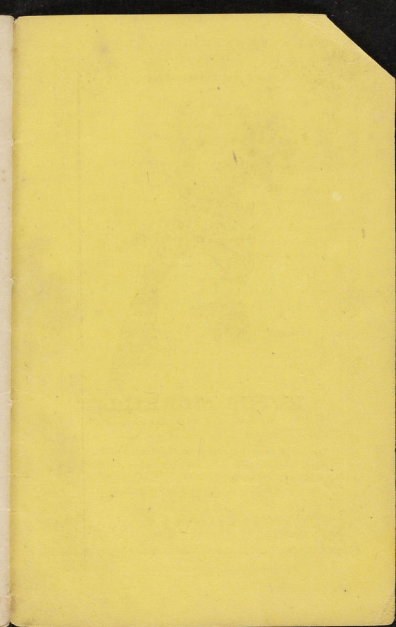
Not in the land of a thousand flowers,
 Not in the glorious spice-wood bowers,
 Not in fair islands, by bright seas embraced,
 Lives the wild ostrich, the bird of the waste'

Go to the desert—his dwelling is there,
 Where the breath of the simoon is hot on the air;
 To the desert—where never a green blade grew,
 Where never a shadow a broad tree threw,
 Where the sands rise up, and in columns are wheeled
 By the winds of the desert, like hosts on the field;
 Where the wild ass sends forth a lone dissonant bray,
 And the herds of the wild horse speed on through the day—
 The creatures unbroken, with manes flying free,
 Like the steeds of the whirlwind, if such there may be.

Ay, there in the desert, like armies for war,
 The flocks of the ostrich are seen from afar,
 Speeding on, speeding on o'er the desolate plain,
 While the fleet-mounted Arab pursueth in vain'

But 'tis joy to the traveller who toils through the sand,
 The egg of the ostrich to find in the sand;
 It is sustenance for him when his store is low,
 And weary with travel he journeyeth slow
 To the well of the desert, and finds it at last,
 Seven days' journey from that he hath passed.

Strong bird of the wild! thou art gone like the wind,
 And thou leavest the cloud of thy speeding behind;
 Fare thee well—in thy desolate regions farewell!
 With the giraffe and lion we leave thee to dwell.



The Blue Jay.



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