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Interesting Facts Of Bird-Life

By Professor Julian Huxley
In The Strand Magazine

Man happens to be the most successful of a whole series of diverse and fascinating experiments to deal with the problems of the world; but we are not therefore the most beautiful or the most ingenious.

Birds branched off from reptiles somewhere about a hundred million years ago, and were remodelled for flight, so that their forelimb was irrevocably converted into a wing. They clung obstinately to one important character of their reptilian ancestry—the shelled egg, and thus debarred themselves from ever being born into the world at such an advanced state of development as is possible to man and other higher mammals.

In respect of their minds just as much as their bodies, birds have developed along other lines than mammals. Mammals have gradually perfected intelligence and the capacity for learning by experience, and the power and fixity of the instincts have diminished; birds have kept instinct as the mainstay of their behaviour, and while they possess some intelligence, it is used merely to polish up the outfit of inherited instincts. The front part of their brain, known to be the seat of intelligence and learning, remains relatively small, while other parts, known to be the regulating machinery for more automatic and emotional actions, are in birds relatively larger than in four-footed creatures.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which birds differ from men in their behaviour is that they can do all that they have to do, including some quite complicated things, without ever being taught. Flying, for instance, with all its complexity of balance and aeronautical adjustment, comes untaught. Young birds very frequently make their first flight when their parents are out of sight. The stories of old birds "teaching" their young to fly seem all to be erroneous. Some kinds of birds, once their young are full-fledged, do try to lure them away from the nest, but this is merely to encourage them to take the plunge. There is no instruction by the old bird, and no conscious imitation by the young.

Still more wonderful is it that a bird should be able to build its nest untaught. Young birds, mating for the first time, can make perfectly good nests, and nests of the usual type found among their particular species. Some people suggest that the young birds may have gained the necessary knowledge from contemplating the structure of the nest in which they were brought up, but this theory is negatived by the facts. The young brush-turkey of the Australian region scrambles out of its tunnel immediately upon hatching, and does not bestow so much as a look upon the mound of rubbish and decaying leaves that formed its nest, yet when the time for mating comes, it will build a mound just as its ancestors have done. Moreover, young birds reared by hand in artificial nests will later build the proper kind of nest for their species. A finch will have the impulse to weave coarse material into a rough cup, and then to line this with a finer material; the tailorbird takes leaves and sews them together; and the house-martin collects mud or clay and constructs a cup against the side of a cliff or a house.

Birds in a state of broodiness will have the impulse to sit on eggs, but if eggs are not available, then on something else. Crows have brooded on golf-balls, gulls on brilliantine tins, and penguins on lumps of ice.

Contrary to general opinion, birds have no real affection for their young. They have a strong, emotional, irrational concern, not entwined with reason, memory, personal affection, and foresight. When a nestling dies there is no sign of sorrow, although there may be some agitation if a whole brood is stolen. When a chick becomes ill, it is definitely neglected. It would seem that the bird is only impelled to parental action when there is some activity, like gaping or squawking, on the part of the children.

Perhaps the familiar cuckoo provides us with the completest proof of the dissimilarity of birds' minds with our own. A young cuckoo, having been deposited as an egg in the nest of some other quite different species of bird, and having hatched out in double-quick time, proceeds to evict all the rest of the contents of the nest, whether these be eggs or young birds. It has a slightly hollow, hyper-sensitive back, and the touch of any object there drives him frantic, so that, no matter what it is—eggs, young birds, nuts or marbles—he walks backward and upward to the edge of the nest and tilts it overboard. It is neither cruelty nor malice aforethought, it is merely instinct.

When the foster-mother comes home, she is not distressed in the least, but sets about at once feeding the changeling, and paying no attention to her own offspring, even though some of them may be dangling just outside the nest. Even when the young cuckoo grows into a creature entirely different from its foster-parents, and so bulky that they have to perch on its head to feed it, the older birds do not seem disconcerted as human beings certainly would.

The well-known "broken-wing" trick is usually set down as a remarkable example of intelligence, but all the evidence points to this, too, as being merely instinctive—a trick not invented by the individual bird but patented by the species. It is, in fact, on a par with the purely automatic "shamming dead" which many insects practice, and is the inevitable outcome of the animal's nervous machinery when it is stimulated in a particular way.

Besides instinctive actions, we could multiply instances of unintelligent behaviour among birds. If a strange egg is put among a bird's own eggs, the mother may either accept it or intelligently turn it out of the nest and continue to sit. But a quite common reaction is for it to turn the strange egg out and then desert the nest.

But because birds are mainly instinctive and not intelligent in their actions, it does not follow that their minds are lacking in intensity or variety: in fact, they experience a wide range of powerful emotions. There is an intense satisfaction in brooding and feeding its young; where there is danger, birds suffer very real fear; in song, the bird gives vent to a deep current of feeling; the emotions aroused during their courtship display often make them oblivious of danger; and they are as subject as men to the emotions of jealousy — rival cocks sometimes fight to the death.

Bird-mind has sufficient subtlety to indulge in play: birds have been seen dropping small objects in midair, and swoop down to catch them before they reach the ground, with the greatest evidence of enjoyment. Some birds, for example, the ravens, have a real sense of humor although of a rather low order. Two will combine to tease a dog or a cat, one occuping its attention from the front, and the other stealing behind to tweak its tail.

But being without the power of conceptual thought, birds still differ in a fundamental way from ourselves. Their emotion is not linked up with the future or with the past as in the human mind. Their fear is just fear: it is not the fear of death, nor can it anticipate pain, nor become an ingredient of a lasting "complex." They cannot worry or torment themselves. The bird mother is not concerned with the fate of an individual offspring; and when the young grow up and her inner physiology changes, there is no intellectual framework making a continuing personal or individual interest possible. Our powers of thought and our imagination bind up the present with the future and the past: the bird's life must be almost wholly a patchwork, a series of self-sufficing moments.

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—Mrs. R. F., Quebec.

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Finder of Missing Men

Mr. and Mrs. Harry Woodruff had been two days away from home on their automobile tour when Mr. Woodruff's mother passed away very suddenly. The road from Sarnia to Quebec has many turnings and where and how Mr. Woodruff's younger brother was to locate the tourists quickly was the question.

Twenty-one long distance telephone calls to fourteen points on their supposed route were necessary before Mr. and Mrs. Woodruff were found. The time lost and the distance away meant that they arrived home in barely time for the funeral. Had they thought to inform the home folks each day by long distance of their itinerary, much of the time and worry of locating them would have been saved.

Nowadays there is no point so remote that telephone service will not reach the missing party. All that is needed, and that at little expense, is to regularly keep in touch by long distance telephone.

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Plant Life Is Forever Thirsty

By Dr. D. T. MacDougal, in the Scientific Monthly (August, 1931).

The fundamental thirst of living matter has laid the foundation of wars between peoples, and has been the cause of racial migrations affecting civilization in the profoundest manner. The water problems of a city of over a million people in one American state have recently led to the expropriation and assignment of the water on one of the largest rivers, and a controversial discussion by the people of seven states occupying an area of half a million square miles. It is highly probable that among the earliest agreements between family or tribal groups were those as to the shared use of limited supplies of water. Plant life, especially, is forever thirsty, and when active, continually takes in and loses water.

The growing substance in tender root tips, in swelling buds, in the fragile wood-forming combium layer of tree trunks, and in enlarging fruits, may have as much as a hundred or a hundred and fifty parts of water to one of solid matter, but, as the liquid is being lost all the time, a continuous new supply is necessary. We can probably understand this condition by filling a drinking glass loosely with excelsior or wood-fiber packing, and then pouring in water until it rises to the brim. Water is similarly placed among the ultimate strands or particles of protoplasm, which—unlike the wood fibres—adhere by their poles like fragments of magnetized iron. These molecular clumps, or strands, unlike the wood fibres, also bind the water in much the same way as they hold to each other, so that it does not run out freely: when the water is forced out by pressure the fine meshwork or grouping of the molecules is broken up and the protoplasm is injured or destroye If instead of pressure the water should be slowly evaporated from the surface of the mass of living matter, the fibers would be brought closer together with an accompanying concentration of the sap which slows down the activities which constitute life. This is the universal effect of thirst.

Crop plants and forest and fruit trees obtain their water supply from layers of soil of varying depths. The roots of some species form great webbed sheets of wide extent just underneath the surface. Others send rootlets deep into the substream. The first habit is especially prevalent in places where the rainfall is used as soon as it soaks into the ground. Deeply penetrating roots take up large amounts of water: a sunflower with a leaf spread of about 11 square yards will evaporate about 75 quarts of water from its leaves during the course of development; a corn plant takes up about 16 quarts of water during its lifetime; a hemp plant twice as much. An acre of cabbage plants needs over two million quarts of water in a season. Two hundred beech trees on an acre require nearly double this amount. One of these trees loses about 80 quarts of water as vapor daily from its leaves.

Irrigation practice must put enough water into the soil to replace losses from the leaves and losses from the surface of the soil as well as the amount actually used or bound in the tissues. The farmer knows that over 600 pounds of water must be put into the soil to provide one pound of dry alfalfa, while the forester estimates that half a ton is necessary to make a pound of wood.

The plant is a complicated living mechanism that converts the energy of sunlight into power. Some of the energy is used in making compounds; but 98 per cent of the energy absorbed by leaves and other green expanses of the plant is used in evaporating water from the surfaces of the cells. The work of lifting water from the rootlets in the soil to the crown of tall trees, to heights as great as 400 feet, is done by power generated in this manner. This movement of liquid in the ascent of sap is as important as the circulation of our blood, although the movement is not a circulation. Watery solutions rise from the roots to the leaves where most of the liquid goes into the air as water vapor. Only a small fraction of the water which moves rapidly upward in the woody conduits of stems is bound or held in chemical combinations in the cells.

The green surfaces are held toward the sunlight partly by stiff, rigid stems, and partly by the force of water through the tiny cells. Sometimes the water is forced through the elastic cell walls at a pressure of a ton to a square inch. A stem, leaf, or flower, the cells of which are distended by such pressure, will have great rigidity and firmness.

The production of sugars and other organic substances in green leaves depends directly on the extent of green surfaces exposed to light. Over-extension of the surfaces will be followed by undue loss of water and a consequent wilting. Certain plants, such as cacti, are able to store water for years.

Pain

If a man, by causing pain to others, wish esto obtain pleasure for himself, he, entangled in the bonds of selfishness, will never be free from hatred.

Pocket guns about the size of fountain pens, which carry cartridges filled with tear-gas, are on sale on the Continent. They are intended for private use against bandits.

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Owl Laffs

Man is a rather peculiar creature. He shoots the birds and then turns around and spends millions of dollars to fight insects. Maybe some headaches are proof of brain, as scientists now inform us, but not the kind you have next morning. For years things have been getting better and better for the children, but often worse for the parents.

Clarke—"So Ethel returned your engagement ring?"

Harold—"Yes, she mailed it to me and had the nerve to paste the label on the outside of the package: "Glass, handle with care'."

Not Much To Be Thankful For

You think you've little to be thankful for, do you?

You're able to read this, aren't you?"

Well, that's a lot to be thankful for.

We've just been to a place where there are some blind men—they'll never see the beauty of God's world again in all their lives. They were soldiers, too—gave their eyes for their country.

If they could have their sight restored to them they would get down on their knees and praise God!

You would, too, if you were blind and had sight restored.

But you have your eyesight, so there's that at least to be thankful for.

Some of those boys are crippled, armless, legless, hopeless invalids for life—because they served their country. They haven't much to be thankful for, have they?

Yet most of them are so grateful for little favors done them, your heart would ache to see it.

Nothing to be thankful for?

Look around a bit and you'll probably find you are mistaken and that you have a lot to be thankful for.

Wife—"John, the bill collector's at the door."

Hubby—"Tell him to take that pile on the desk."

Kathleen—"Clarice always leaves a good impression on the boys."

Ellen—"Yes, the kind of lipstick she uses comes off very easily."

Nurse—"Bobby! What would your father say if he saw you'd broken that branch off?"

Bobby—"He'd say trees are not so well made as they were before the war."

Give a man enough rope and he will start manufacturing five-cent cigars. The less a man knows the tighter he clings to the things he thinks he knows. Don't take your undertaker too seriously when he asks you to drop over some time.

To Begin With

Owing to the absence through illness of the woman who taught the senior girls' Bible Class, the young assistant minister was asked to undertake the duties for the day. He consented, but before beginning he said, smilingly: "Now, girls, I want to conduct your class just as your teacher does, so you might tell me what she does first."

A short pause, then the answer from a pert miss of sixteen: "Well, she always kisses us all round!"

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Worth

It is not what he has, nor even what he does, which directly expresses the worth of the man, but what he is.

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A SINGLE SIP PROVES IT

HER FAT HAD TO GO

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Exercise is the enemy of fat. If you are overburdened with superfluous flesh, call up reserves of energy to fight it. Do as this lady did:—

"During the past six months, I have made steady improvement whilst taking Kruschen Salts. I have reduced 28 lbs. in weight during that period, and have benefited greatly from greater agility and liveliness—all directly attributable to that famous preparation."—Mrs. W. P.

You can take off fat with Kruschen Salts if you will take one-half teaspoon in hot water every morning before breakfast, modify your diet and exercise regularly.

While you are losing fat you will be gaining in energy—in endurance—in ambition. Your skin will grow clearer, and your eyes will sparkle with the good health that Kruschen brings. The old arm chair won't hold you any more—you'll want to be up and doing—you'll enjoy work and active recreation and you'll sleep like a top. You'll lose fat, and probably live years longer.

for BURNS
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