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# ZOOM

IN ON THE USA

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## AMERICAN BIRDS

Ornithology is the scientific study of birds. It can be a full-time occupation, or a life-long hobby. Those who become hooked are willing to go far out of their way to observe birds in their natural habitat. They will spend hours on end standing motionless knee-deep in water, wrap up in the most uncomfortable cover-ups or freeze on viewing platforms mounted among the branches of trees to lull the attention of birds. All who have done it, know what patience and determination it requires. But patience is rewarded. Bloodless "hunting" with cameras yields great results. Fabulous pictures of birds flying, eating, nesting, feeding their young, and hunting have been taken by ornithologist-photographers.

Before cameras were invented, it was only the artist's brush and paints that could render the beauty of these

winged creatures in the wild. The first man to paint and describe the birds of the new world was Alexander Wilson, a Scottish-American ornithologist, poet, naturalist and illustrator, who lived in the 18th century. At the beginning of the 19th century his legacy was continued by a French-American John James Audubon whose amazing work "The Birds of America," is still considered an unsurpassed artistic depiction of American bird species. At the beginning of the 20th century U.S. states started choosing their official state birds. Today, in addition to great films, photographs and paintings, we need to make sure that these beautiful creatures are treated with due respect and that their natural habitat is protected so that we may never fear that some of them may become extinct. For man has always been fascinated with birds.



In This Issue: American Birds

Zoom in on the USA

# STATE BIRDS



(left: a cardinal bird, in the middle: a pair of goldfinches, , a bluebird, a wild turkey, right: prairie chickens, a meadowlark. All Photos © AP Images

In 1926 Kentucky was the first state to name a state bird. The chosen species was the cardinal. For the next four years the other states followed in Kentucky's footsteps, campaigning and holding popular votes to choose their state birds. The results were interesting. The cardinal turned out to be the greatest hit. Six other states voted in favor of the same bird, so now it is the state bird of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. Other birds chosen by more than one state are: the western meadow lark (6 states), the mockingbird (5), the robin (3), the Eastern goldfinch (2), the bluebird (2), the chickadee (2), and the wild turkey (2).

Color is perhaps the most predominant characteristic that distinguishes wild birds, even before size or wing span. From the head, chin, bill and neck, to chest, flanks, and abdomen, to wings and tail we can see the most spectacular and sophisticated combinations of colors and hues, sometimes on a very tiny body. The intensity of colors can be stunning as well. Take the fabulous red in the most popular state bird - the cardinal (see the photo above.) Males are bright red all over with only one other color - the black patchy band running from the eyes to the throat on both sides of the bill. Females are more colorful. They have a grayish patch on the face and throat, are brownish above and dull tawny or pale buff below. Their crest, wings and tails are reddish and the feathers under wings are pinkish red.

Colors and plumage change depending on the season of the year thus adapting the bird to different weather conditions. For example, the Alaska willow ptarmigan (Alaska state bird) grows hair like feathers on its feet, which allows the bird to glide across snow as if he were wearing snowshoes. The pelican, the state bird of Louisiana, changes the color of its neck. It is white in winter and brown in other seasons.

Birds have a lively, active and bellicose disposition. They are beautiful songsters. Some of them are great imitators, like the mockingbird (state bird of Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas.) They sing and they whistle, they perform dazzling air shows and dances, especially during courtship. All these characteristics earned birds the reputation of free, carefree, happy creatures, which explains such sayings as "free as a bird," or "happy as a lark." Some birds, like the cardinal and lark are soloists, and others, like the eastern goldfinch prefer choral performances. The love of staging may cause a problem for the singer as the beautiful voice attracts not only admirers but enemies: weasels, skunks, snakes, owls, and hawks.

It is not only us, humans, who are interested in birds' behavior, habitat and habits. Birds are watching us very closely, too. They are curious and inquisitive. Their small size and ability to fly give them an advantage and facilitate the task. The Arizona state bird, the cactus wren, is a master inspector of cracks, crevices, containers, and ... trash.

Birds' eating habits are another interesting subject. Most wild birds are very cautious and wary of people, but the chickadee, state bird of Maine, Wisconsin and Massachusetts, will eat from the hand. Young pelicans are fed from their parent's pouch and quickly learn to select the type of food they like most. When hungry, the state bird of New Mexico, the roadrunner, will quickly run (as its name suggests) in pursuit of lizards, scorpions, tarantulas and mice. The flycatcher, the Oklahoma state bird, would much rather dine on grasshoppers and crickets than on flies. But the hermit thrush, the state bird of Vermont, is the most amazing. Hermit thrushes catch ants and place them in their feathers beneath their wings. Why they do this is unknown. Either the formic acid in ants helps them fight parasites or they just store ants for later consumption during migration.



# THE SKY WAS THE LIMIT



His one life could easily make biographies for several people. An ornithologist, a painter, a hunter, a pioneer, a musician, a writer, a naturalist, a dancer, a businessman, a loving husband and father, a man of fashion - **John James Audubon** was all these.

Born on April 26, 1785 in what today is Haiti, he was soon orphaned by his mother, a French/Spanish Creole. As his parents were not married - in fact his father Jean Audubon was married to another woman - he was adopted by his father when they went to live in France. There, in the woods near Nantes, the young boy discovered his interest in birds and natural life. In France he also learned music and dance. His father wanted him to pursue a marine career, but the boy was not fond of the sea. Instead, he would bring home "treasures", such as birds eggs, from his walks in the woods and started drawing them.

When he was 18, the Napoleonic Wars were raging in Europe and Jean Audubon, fearing that his son would be conscripted, sent him to his farm and sugar plantation in Pennsylvania. The young, handsome John Audubon was happy there. He spent his days in the woods, observing birds, hunting, and drawing. He met and fell in love with his neighbor, Lucy Bakewell, who shared his interest in nature. They married and had two sons, but their happiness was marred by financial problems. The trading business which Audubon ran to make their living ended in bankruptcy, and Audubon was even imprisoned for debt. Yet, it was in this difficult time of his life that he made an important decision.

From then on he would devote himself to what he loved the most - drawing and studying birds. He made a promise to himself that he would paint all the birds of North America.

He kept his word. Painting all North American bird species was not an easy task. It took him 14 years of hard work. Many times he destroyed paintings he was not pleased with and painted them over. Finally, with 435 life-size watercolors he traveled to England to have them published. In London they were an overnight success. The English were fascinated with the amazing beauty of his paintings which depicted birds in their garish colors and in their natural habitat. The pictures were realistic and artistic, full of life and motion. The cost of publishing "The Birds of America" was tremendous and the undertaking was only possible through assistance of many people, including the king. The book was published, in a large format called Double Elephant. Many people regarded it as the greatest picture book ever produced. Today original editions sell for millions of dollars at auctions.

John Audubon's achievement was not only artistic, but scientific as well. He discovered twenty-five new species of birds and a dozen new subspecies. His contribution to ornithology was recognized by his contemporaries and he was elected to the Royal Society of London, thus becoming the second American to enjoy this honor (the first was Benjamin Franklin.)

The paintings themselves are of great artistic value, but due to their old age (nearly 200) and sensitivity to light, they are extremely fragile. The New York Historical Society, where the watercolors are kept, exhibits a limited number of them once every 10 years.



Photos from Wikipedia

# ACTIVITY PAGE

## Win a Prize! October 2009 CONTEST

What bird is known for its ability to imitate our speech?

Send the answer (with your home address) to:  
[madridirc@state.gov](mailto:madridirc@state.gov)

Deadline: November 30

## Win a Prize!

The answer in the September contest was:

Home - our place on earth ("Home is where the heart is")  
House - the building in which we live

Thank you for participating

# ZOOM

IN ON THE USA

## About ZOOM

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Embajada de EE. UU.  
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28006 Madrid

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08034 Barcelona

## Exercise 1

Please put the missing name of the right bird (from the list below) in the following proverbs:

- To put the cat among the ...
- To be up with the ...
- One ... doesn't make the summer.
- A ...-pecked husband.
- A ... in the nest.
- As the ... flies.

lark, swallow, crow, pigeons, cuckoo, hen.

## Exercise 2

Now match the meanings with the proverbs from Exercise 1:

- A husband who is dominated by his wife.
- To get up very early.
- To say or do something which causes trouble.
- The distance from one place to the other measured as a direct line.
- One fact does not prove something.
- A child whose parentage is doubtful.

## Exercise 3

Answer these questions:

- What "houses" do birds build to live in?
- What do we call a group of birds flying together?
- What verbs can you use to describe how birds sing? Here are some hints:
  - i - p
  - t - - - l
  - a r - - -
  - h - - - l -
  - c - - -
  - o - t

## Glossary (in the order of appearance)

lull - calm or send to sleep  
yield - produce  
mockingbird - a long-tailed grayish songbird noted for its mimicry of the calls and songs of other birds  
robin - a large thrush typically with a red-dish breast  
bluebird - an American songbird of the thrush family, the male of which has a blue head, back, and wings  
chickadee - a small bird with distinctive black cap and throat  
wing span - the full extent of wings from end to end  
tawny - of an orange-brown or yellowish-brown color  
buff - a yellowish-beige color  
plumage - a bird's feathers collectively  
ptarmigan - a northern grouse of mountainous and Arctic regions  
bellicose - demonstrating willingness to fight  
wren - a small short-winged songbird  
conscript - enlist compulsorily into to an army  
Double Elephant - a size of paper 50 inches tall

(from *The New Oxford American Dictionary*)



A bald eagle  
Photo © AP Images