



With the exception of the fish, the class Aves is the largest vertebrate group. Over thirty-five birds are singled out in the Bible, making Aves the group with the largest number of individuals represented in Scripture. The list of unclean birds in the Jewish dietary laws (Lev. 11:13-19) is the most complete list of any group of animals in the Bible.†

The living members of the class Aves have been organized into as many as thirty orders. For convenience, this text categorizes birds into general groups according to appearance, activities, and habitats.

### Flightless Birds

Though all birds have wings, there are many flightless birds. The ostrich is the tallest living bird, reaching a height of 2.5 m (8 ft). It lives in the dry African grassland. Its slender, flexible neck and long, powerful legs are naked, but the body is covered with long, luxuriant feathers, often used to adorn hats. A passage in Job 39 describes the fact that the female will often cover her eggs with sand during the day when she goes feeding. Ostriches can



Ostrich female (left) and male (right)

kick powerfully and can cut off fingers with their bills. Swift runners and fierce fighters, they do not hide their heads in the sand when threatened; however, when surprised, they will often place their heads near the ground, looking carefully at whatever disturbed them. Other common flightless birds include emus and kiwis.

The elephant bird of Madagascar, a creature that became extinct in the mid-1600s, stood 3 m (10 ft) tall and probably weighed 455 kg (1000 lb).



New Zealand's kiwi

Penguins are fitted in a "tuxedo" of tiny, dense feathers and a layer of fat under their skin, enabling them to thrive in the icy waters and on the ice floes of Antarctica. Using paddle-shaped wings, penguins swim gracefully; and, being social birds, they usually travel in large flocks.

### Birds of Prey

The birds of prey are certainly the "kings of birds." The power, grace, and deadly efficiency of these aerial hunters have won them the admiration of mankind. Birds of prey can be placed into three groups: daytime hunters, carrion feeders, and night hunters.

Eagles, hawks, and falcons are daytime hunters. Their basic method of hunting involves sitting upon a high perch or floating in the air and scanning the surroundings with keen eyes. When food is sighted, they begin a high-speed dive, and then, with their razor-sharp talons, they grip the prey and snatch it from the ground or the water. The force of the dive may stun or instantly kill the victim. The hunter may feed where it is or carry its meal to some inaccessible spot before eating.

The eagle is often mentioned in the Bible. The imperial eagle, now scarce in Palestine, and the golden eagle were probably the most common during Bible times. In the Bible are references to eagles as majestic birds (Ezek. 17:3), as builders of high solitary nests (Jer. 49:16), and as strong, fast fliers (Exod. 19:4; Deut. 28:49; Prov. 23:5; Jer. 4:13; Rev. 12:14). Daytime birds of prey often seen in North America include the large golden eagle, having a wingspan of 2 m (6.5 ft), and the red-tailed hawk.

Vultures generally have a bad reputation because they feed on carrion (dead bodies). The griffin vulture, the largest raptor in Israel and probably the most common vulture in Palestine, is the one most often referred to in the scripture. Until a few years ago the vulture population in Palestine was quite large, but the modern practices of hunting and proper disposal of dead

bodies have considerably reduced the vulture population. These vultures are also poisoned by eating rats that have died from poison put out by farmers. The turkey vulture, or "buzzard," is a bare-headed scavenger often seen circling the kills of other predators in North America. All vultures serve an important role in helping to clean up dead animals.

As the eagles and hawks dominate the day, the owls rule the night. The owl has special equipment for night hunting: soft flight and body feathers enable the bird to fly and dive upon its prey without making a sound; large eyes in the front of the head give it keen vision and depth perception; amazing night vision and keen ears can detect the slightest movement in the grass. Common owls include the barn owl, with its white heart-shaped face, and the great horned owl, whose "horns" are actually tufts of feathers.



Barn owl

### Game Birds

Game birds, such as the turkey, quail, pheasant, partridge, dove, and chicken, frequently appear on the dinner table. Their tender breast meat or "white meat" is actually their flight muscles. The white meat lacks the abundant blood supply (with its supply of food and oxygen) that the other muscles have. Thus the flight muscles of these birds fatigue quickly, allowing them to fly only in quick bursts before tiring and gliding to a landing.

A domesticated game bird often mentioned in the Bible is the dove. The word *dove* is used loosely for all the small members of the family Columbidae, and the word *pigeon* is used for all the larger members. *Turtledove* refers to members of



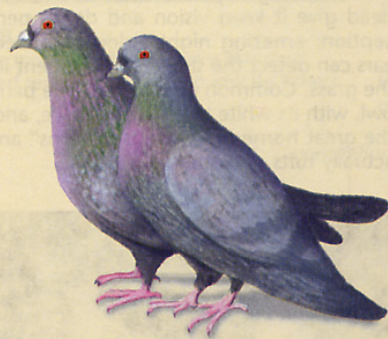
Turkey vulture

† This listing also includes the bat, a "fowl" that is classified not as a bird but as a flying mammal.



a particular genus of doves. The writers of Scripture used the dove as a symbol of beauty (Song of Sol. 1:15; 5:12) and gentleness (Matt. 10:16), as an illustration of panic (Hosea 7:11), and as an example of lamenting—because the cooing of a dove sounds like human sighs (Isa. 38:14; 59:11; Ezek. 7:16).

Doves and pigeons are easily raised and were a common food source for the poor in Bible times. They were also sacrificial animals. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple, they offered two turtledoves in accordance with their social status and the Law, which states, "If she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles [turtledoves], or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering" (Lev. 12:8).



Rock doves

### Water Birds

The water birds fit into three groups: the swimming birds, the diving birds, and the wading birds.

Ducks and geese, familiar swimming birds, have oval-shaped bodies supported by a pair of short legs with webbed feet. This group includes the mallard duck with its distinctive green head; the wood duck with its "hood" of feathers; and the beautiful mute swan, a pure white bird with a long, elegant neck.

The gannet, a diving bird, can soar to a height of 90 m (295 ft), arch over, and plummet headlong toward the water. Open wings perform subtle course adjustments until impact, when the wings fold against the body. The bird pierces the water and snaps up a fish. The pelican is a comical diving bird with a pouch on its lower bill for holding its catch. It plunges into the water from much lower heights and scoops up its scaly meal, allowing the excess water to drain out.

The final group contains the wading birds such as the heron, flamingo, crane, and egret. With long necks and long, stilt-



Gannet diving sequence

like legs, these birds can see above the plants along the water's edge while they carefully look for fish and other organisms that may be snatched, speared, or filtered from the water.

### Songbirds

Sparrows, wrens, orioles, and robins belong to the largest group of birds—the songbirds. Their common names, such as chickadee, pewee, cuckoo, and towhee, are actually imitations of the birds' songs. Many songbirds have short bills for eating seeds and berries. Others consume insects, and a few songbirds are predators. Male songbirds attract females with their vocal abilities.

The male cardinal is a dazzling red songbird with a bold crest on its head. The female of the species is drably colored. The mockingbird has a gray and uninteresting appearance, but its song and mimicry are brilliant. A menace to any cornfield, the crow (a black bird with a long beak) feeds upon the crop, supplementing its diet of insects, berries, young birds, and even small mammals. Unfortunately for farmers, crows are intelligent birds unintimidated by scarecrows.

Most songbirds are small, but the raven sometimes measures 69 cm (27 in.) long. Other members of the same family include the crow, rook, magpie, and jay. Ravens are frequently referred to in the Bible. Noah first sent the raven, a strong flier, from the ark. The raven did not return because it was able to sustain itself, a sign that the waters were receding (Gen. 8:6-7). God chose ravens to feed Elijah by the brook Cherith (1 Kings 17:2-6). While the raven is thought to be one of the most intelligent of all birds, it is also one of the least likely to give up food since it hoards food for later meals. That is why ravens can often be seen carrying large morsels in their beaks. This makes the raven's actions all the more remarkable and God's provision more miraculous.

### Domesticated Game Birds

Benjamin Franklin described the turkey as "a bird of courage, [that] would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British Guards, who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on." Had Franklin had his way, the turkey rather than the bald eagle would have become America's national emblem. He disliked the eagle due to its tendency to occasionally steal food from other birds and to scavenge on dead animals. Although the turkey is a fine bird, it would seem a little unpatriotic to eat the national symbol for Thanksgiving.

The red jungle fowl is a ground-dwelling bird of Southeast Asia. Its head and bill are decorated with red flaps of tissue. Its body feathers range from gold to black. Many centuries ago these birds were domesticated or selectively bred by man and trained to fight one another, perhaps as the first spectator sport. Through careful breeding, they became a major source of meat and eggs. By 1500 BC, the bird had spread into Central Europe. Today's descendants of the red jungle fowl are common barnyard chickens. By New Testament times, the chicken was a common domestic bird in Israel. Probably the best-known scriptural reference to a rooster is the one in Matthew 26, which records that Peter denied his Lord three times before the cock crowed.



Red jungle fowl



Domestic rooster



Elijah Fed by the Ravens, Rafel Govertsz. Camphuysen, From the Bob Jones University Collection