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American Birds

There are more than 800 species of birds that spend all or part of their lives in the United States.

National Parks are among the best places to observe birds. Nearly every imaginable bird habitat, from arctic tundra to tropical rainforests, are represented in American National Parks. National Parks provide critical breeding, migratory stop-over and wintering habitat for a great variety of birds.

Bird watching is a popular pastime of Americans. Devoted birdwatchers 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.

Today, in addition to making documentaries, photographs or paintings, we also have to make sure that these beautiful creatures are treated with due respect, and that their natural habitat is protected so that they live a long and healthy life, and our future generations will also have a chance to admire them.



Photo © AP Images

Bald Eagle, the National Bird

Symbol of the United States

The bald eagle first appeared as an American symbol on a Massachusetts copper cent coined in 1776, but Congress did not choose it as the national emblem until 1789. It was seen as a symbol of strength, courage, freedom, and immortality; and, unlike other eagles, the bald eagle was indigenous only to North America.

The word "bald" does not mean that this bird has no feathers. Instead, it comes from the word piebald, an old word which means "marked with white."



Protection

In 1963, there were only 417 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the entire lower 48 states (all the states excluding Alaska and Hawaii). Today, there are more than 9,700 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the lower 48, and that number is growing every day.

In August 2007, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the bald eagle from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. The recovery of the bald eagle is due to the reduced use of pesticides such as DDT as well as specific habitat protection and management actions.

Rescue

Three-day-old bald eagle chick Ele (shown right) is fed by the hands of an animal keeper at the San Francisco Zoo Avian Conservation Center in San Francisco.

Hatched from DDT-contaminated eggs retrieved from wild nests on Santa Catalina Island, these chicks would probably have perished due to the thin egg shell associated with DDT contamination. The chicks were placed back into wild nests the following week where adult parents raised them. Since 1991, the San Francisco Zoo's Bald Eagle Recovery Project has released 70 bald eagles on Santa Catalina Island and Santa Cruz Island, contributing to the recovery of this species in these areas.



Challenger, an Ambassador for his Species

Challenger, a non-releasable American bald eagle was rescued and has been cared for by the American Eagle Foundation, a non-profit organization. Challenger is trained to free-fly into major league sports stadiums during the presentation of the National Anthem. He has also performed at various official ceremonies, and appeared in TV shows. With his performances, Challenger has raised a great level of public awareness about the need to restore and protect the bald eagles. Read his story at

<http://www.eagles.org/about/Our-Special-Eagles/challenger.php>

Learn more about bald eagles and their protection:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/eagle/>

American Eagle Foundation: <http://www.eagles.org/contents4.html>

Challenger spreads its wings on stage during the "We Are One: Opening Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial" in Washington, D.C., on January 18, 2009. (All photos © AP Images)



The Great Seal of the United States

The most prominent feature on the obverse side of the Great Seal is the American bald eagle supporting the shield, or escutcheon, which is composed of 13 red and white stripes, representing the original States, and a blue top which unites the shield and represents Congress. The motto, E Pluribus Unum (Out of many, one), alludes to this union. The olive branch and 13 arrows denote the power of peace and war, which is exclusively vested in Congress. The constellation of stars denotes a new State taking its place and rank among other sovereign powers.

More about the Great Seal in the publication of the U.S. Department of State at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/27807.pdf>

State Birds



Cardinal

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), the mockingbird (5), the robin (3), the eastern goldfinch (2), the bluebird (2), the chickadee (2), and the wild turkey (2).



A western meadowlark



A pair of American goldfinches

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 them the reputation of free, carefree, and 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.



Black-capped chickadee



Robin, also known as redbreast



Eastern bluebird

(All photos © AP Images)

Birds in Arts

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. At the beginning of the 19th century, the French-American John James Audubon published his amazing work "The Birds of America," which is still considered an unsurpassed artistic depiction of American bird species.

John James Audubon was always fascinated by nature and especially birds. After going bankrupt with his business, he devoted himself to 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. Many people regarded it as the greatest picture book ever produced. Today original editions sell for millions of dollars at auctions. (see images on page 4)

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.

Learn more about Audubon's work at http://www.audubon.org/bird/BoA/BOA_index.html

Activity Page

Exercise 1

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

- A) To put the cat among the
- B) To be up with the
- C) One doesn't make the summer.
- D) A-pecked husband.
- E) A in the nest.
- F) As the flies.

Birds: lark, swallow, crow, pigeons, cuckoo, hen

Exercise 2

Match the meanings with the proverbs from Exercise 1!

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



Above: Virginian partridge under attack by a young red-shouldered hawk. Plate 76 from *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon. Restored 2008 by RestoredPrints.com.
Left: mourning dove (scan of modern reproduction of *The Birds of America*) (Images from Wikipedia)

Exercise Key: http://hungary.usembassy.gov/quiz_key.html

Zoom is available online at

<http://hungary.usembassy.gov/zoom.html>

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Glossary (in order of appearance in text)

habitat - natural home

to breed - to produce young

to migrate - to travel regularly from one part of the world to another

on end - continuously

to lull - to calm or send to sleep

to yield - to give, produce

indigenous - native, belonging to a place

pesticide - a chemical substance to kill pests (small animal or insect that harms or destroys cultivated plants, crop, etc.)

DDT - a powerful insecticide (a chemical that kills insects). Its use is restricted by law due to damaging environmental effects

to hatch - to break through the egg

contaminated - mixed with harmful or

poisonous matter

to perish - to die

non-releasable - cannot be let free

major league - (here) the top division of different sports

awareness - knowledge or understanding

to inaugurate (formal) - to introduce someone important into a new job or office by holding a special ceremony

obverse - the side, as of a coin or medal, bearing the main design; opposed to reverse

to allude [to] - to refer to

to denote - to mean; to be a mark of

to vest [in] (formal) - to give legally a right or power

sovereign - independent and self-governing

bellicose - ready to quarrel or fight

disposition - a general tendency of character, behavior; nature

dazzling - to make unable to see by throwing strong light in the eyes (also used figuratively, i.e. non in its original or literal sense)

to render - (here) to depict

to surpass - to go beyond

depiction - portray, picture

garish - too bright; showy