

BIRD BEHAVIOR: BIRD AS ARTISTS

In this course we will see how artistic choices have influenced bird behavior and survival: mate selection, nest building, chick raising, and communication. New scientific work shows that beauty or aesthetic values may determine the evolution of bird species. Yet Darwin had trouble explaining the excessive beauty so prevalent in nature.

We will look at the birds building sculptures to attract a mate; watch cranes dancing to secure their pair bonds and grebes dancing so intensely they rise above the water; we will hear prairie chickens and grouse “booming” strange sounds to establish territories; songbirds trilling love songs; penguins presenting aesthetically shaped rocks as gifts to potential partners; birds that change feather color to match the seasons. How do birds think? Is there a kind of beauty that all species, even humans, appreciate? Come decide for yourself, while observing the many forms of art birds create.

Class 1 – Birds as Artists- Introduction to the exciting new theory of evolution as survival of the most beautiful and how it relates to Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. Is art necessary for the existence of all living creatures? Did art begin thousands of years before humans were on earth? Are Bower birds the first known artists?

Class 2 – Birds as Architects - We will discuss the amazing nests birds build, the unusual shapes, locations, materials and strategies.

Class 3 – Birds as Dancers – Courtship displays. We will watch cranes performing ballets in the snow, birds of paradise pirouetting in feather tutus, flamingoes dancing in groups of a thousand, grebe courtship dances in water, and tiny manikins’ leaps and flips.

Class 4 – Birds as Musicians – Is it the song or the sound? Is it the length or the complexity of the song? Are some patterns of sound appealing to all species, from birds to whales to humans? Birds that sing; birds that boom; birds that drum; birds that mimic.

Class 5 – Birds as Fashion Designers – Camouflage. How does a bird know how and when to change the colors of its plumage to match the season? How do vividly colored parrots blend into the rainforest’s foliage? Why are some birds’ eggs spotted and some plain?

Class 6 – Birds as Navigators – Why do birds migrate and how do they do it? Who flies the farthest, who flies the highest? The mystery of flight. Do they use quantum physics to see the earth’s magnetic fields?

Class 7 – Bird Vision – Birds may have the sharpest vision of any animal. They can see many more colors and patterns than humans. They can use Ultraviolet color and Polarized light.

Class 8– Cognition in Birds -- Bird Brains – How are bird brains different from human or from other animal brains? Do birds have a soul? Are they conscious? Can they recognize themselves in a mirror? Can they plan ahead? Remember? Solve problems?

Does beauty matter to our lives and to the future of life on earth? Looking at the art, architecture, sculpture, music, and dance of the avian world, how can we think otherwise?

LEADER: Wendy Worth is an art historian and has an MA in conservation biology.

FORMAT: Virtual

MAXIMUM: Unlimited

THURSDAYS 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. 8 sessions starting September 29th through November 17th