

THE ORIGIN OF FEATHERS AND POWERED FLIGHT

According to The Generally Accepted Version of "Down From Trees"
Dinosaur Jim, Undated writing

A group of small theropod dinosaurs, being a curious lot, had mastered the knack of tree-climbing after hundreds of centuries of climbing trees "to have a look around". However, there was a problem: they could safely get up, but always did poorly on the trip down. Many slipped (or were pushed) suffering permanently crippled arms or legs, and other injuries— to say nothing about addled brains.

One day they heard that eventually creatures to be called "apes" would get the contract to evolve into people, creating a need for birds to put in cages, shot on field and marsh, and get boiled eggs from. So they decided that, since they had already spent a good deal of time up in trees, they may as well have a go at becoming birds (a fortunate decision, to be sure, since the opportunity may well have been seized upon by illiterate amphibians, or worse, fish, with rather unsavory results). Elegant theropods were definitely the correct stuff to make birds from.

These noble little beasts knew birds were supposed to fly, but being "forerunners" didn't know exactly how it should be done, so instead of climbing down from their lookout trees they began jumping down and became airborne for at least short periods of time, but they had no control of direction. They could only go down.

They were very unhappy with the result, always ending up in a wretched heap directly below the tree. Evolution remained dormant; nothing happened but contusions and scabs. Something was obviously wrong, or completely missing from their technique.

They didn't know what it was, but continued jumping. They sensed that if humans were to enjoy the sublime pleasure of singing birds, and have millions of starlings perch in the tree over their topless Volkswagen, they would have to get things rolling by succeeding in the bird thing. Somehow, they MUST become Ancestors. But a basic problem confronted them.

They really didn't know what a bird was supposed to look like. It hadn't been invented yet so the design was still up for grabs. They cast about for a model and came up with a Pterosaur, which turned out to be a rather disgusting, naked, dusty looking thing, not at all inspirational to have around. Worse still, it couldn't sing (no Pterosaur skeleton has ever been found with a fossil voice box attached).

They tried a few other ideas and finally came up with the notion of feathers, and were then faced with the problem of how to produce them on their scaly hides. After a heated debate (in fact, the beginning of the bakkaristic transition from cold to warm bloodedness) they concluded the key to the problem was "air". They scrambled back up into their trees to meditate on the significance of the air between their perch and the ground.

However, observed from a solid perch, the importance of air remained obscure, so they decided to experiment with it. They resumed jumping down. It was a terribly battering thing, but seemed the only way they could force feathers to grow on their (now) scabby hides.

Fortunately, a presently undescribed form of Paleoserendipity flexed its muscles for an ambitious group over in Bavaria. They worked out in an old forest where many rough, granite boulders lie scattered about on the forest floor.

As various adventurous individuals there jumped out of trees and bounced off the abrasive rocks, their scales became scuffed up, split, and shaggy, more rapidly than previously reported among their family. This was encouraging. They were soon very fuzzy, instead of smooth and slick like wet snakes.

A survival advantage of their fuzzy bodies was that of staying warm longer after 5 o'clock. They could work, feed and reproduce (particularly reproduce) long after sundown without stiffening up from cold night air. Evolution accelerated as they put in long hours, especially pursuing that last named, obviously important, activity so valuable to evolution—reproduction.

Each slipping ricochet off the rough rocks stretched their hides in a different place, stimulating their fuzzy scales to fan out and grow faster. Finally their fluff was so thick they were scarcely recognizable as reptiles, and wouldn't have been, except that some conservative relatives came over from England for a visit and one bold chap remarked, "Well, I'll be damned--Feathers!"

And there they were, feathered reptiles. The whole mob got roaring drunk from joy, and couldn't have climbed back up in their trees if it hadn't been for the stabilizing influence of punctuated equilibrium which steadied their evolutionary jump towards birds. There was still work to do. They had succeeded with the first step, without realizing what had happened to them (that's the way evolution sneaks up and grabs a taxon).

The next step was learning to fly, and of course, sing, which, as birds they would be expected to do. So they went back up into the trees to learn how to fly with their fuzzy hides. For now that they knew they had feathers, it would be a simple matter, or at least so they thought.

To hurry things along, they resorted to pushing one another off their perch and as each one fell, the fear of bouncing off the sharp rocks caused it to scream and frantically beat its feathered arms up and down in fright. Of course those terrified screams, crude as they were, marked the origin of Birdsong.

In time they noticed that arm-flapping delayed their drop, softening the inevitable skull-cracking smash into terra firma, and although evolution is normally scheduled as either: a slow process; or one bumping along in a few, widely spaced punctuations of equilibria, this ambitious Bavarian crowd,

was so innovative and clever they learned to fly in three years and eleven days.

However, this triumph was not without its losses and sorrows. Many of the duller individuals were slow learners, never mastering the knack of pumping their bodies around through the air. A few giddy individuals sailed too far out from shore and, with their rubber bands unwound, dropped into a lagoon where lithographic limestone was being prepared. They were promptly included. Entombed in such fine stuff, some ended up as famous fossils, whereas, their agile, clever, flying relatives were never preserved to gain fame for their remarkable accomplishment of Powered Flight.

We derive most of our knowledge (food for lively controversy that it is) from this dull witted segment of the feathered reptile population, for some of them have been dug up and named *Archaeopteryx*, and other things.

Contemplating their marvelous, though very flat, remains has provided fuel for endless heated debates, and long hours of deep concentration through microscopes.

So that, my dear Christopher Robin, is how birds were invented during Middle Earth.

Pooh, et al.

Editor's note:

Note how clever his references are to two topics that caused him a great deal of heartburn professionally:

1) bakkaristic - refers to Bob Bakker, who was sort of the antichrist to dad. Bakker came up with extraordinary theories about dinosaurs being warm blooded, tending their young, hunting in packs and so on. Of course, the fact that he looked like a Berkeley drop out didn't help his stock any.

2) punctuated equilibrium - clever reference there to a revision to Darwin's theory of what must be called in contrast continuous gradual evolution. Dad wasn't sure of the idea but here he didn't show any heartburn.

I think he may have written this after he read my "Also Sprach Zarathustra" which also was a spoof make out of a mixture of facts, blended in outrageous proportions. I don't know that but his sentence, "A visitor from England said, "By damn, there are feathers" (words to that effect) came straight out of ASZ.

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