

The Artistic Life of Birds

In this course we will look at bird behavior and see how artistic choices have influenced their everyday behavior and survival: mate selection, nest building, chick raising, communication and more.

We tend to look at birds as works of art or symbols of power in art, but birds themselves create astounding works of art. In doing so they offer us a new way to understand the origins of art and why art is essential to us. Birds existed on earth long before humans and were already pursuing artistic goals. An often-overlooked aspect of birds is the importance of beauty in their lives. New scientific work shows that beauty or aesthetic values may actually determine the evolution of bird species. Survival of the fittest is not enough; it is now survival of the most beautiful. Are birds' vivid colors and lilting songs mere chance developments? Even Darwin had trouble explaining the excessive beauty so prevalent in nature.

We will look at the Bower birds building sculptures to attract a mate, we will watch cranes doing elaborately choreographed dances to secure their pair bonds, grebes dancing so intensely that they rise out of the water, we will hear prairie chickens and grouse "booming" strange sounds to establish territories, song birds trilling love songs, penguins presenting aesthetically shaped rocks as gifts to potential partners, birds that completely change feather color to match the seasons. Is there a kind of beauty that all species—even humans—appreciate equally? Come decide for yourself while observing the many forms of art birds create as well as the fabulous images of the birds in action.

SYLLABUS:

Class 1 – Introduction and Birds as Artists

We will look at an 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 even were on earth? Are Bower birds the first known artists? We will discuss these questions and many more. We will look at the extraordinary sculptures made by birds.

Class 2 - Birds as Architects

We will look at bird architecture, the amazing nests they build; the unusual shapes, locations and strategies. Does the aesthetics of the design affect their winning a mate?

Class 3 – Birds as Dancers

Courtship displays. Bird choreography is astounding. We will watch the crane ballets performed in the snow, birds of paradise pirouetting in feather tutus, flamingo dancing in groups of a thousand, grebe courtship dance 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? We'll look at birds that sing, birds that boom, birds that drum, birds that mimic. And Birds as Designers – Camouflage. How does a bird know how and when to change the colors of its plumage to match the season? How do the vividly colored parrots blend into the foliage of the rainforest? Why are some birds' eggs spotted and some plain?

Class 5 – Cognition in Birds

How advanced are communication skills in birds? How good are they at problem solving? Do birds use tools? What is the role of mimicry? Just how smart are birds?

Class 6– Conclusion

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 wonderful avian world – how can we think otherwise?

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

Wednesdays: 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon, 6 weeks: February 28 through April 5

Location: Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville