



Excerpts from the Introduction to *The Genius of Birds*

For a long time, the knock on birds was that they're stupid. Beady eyed and nut brained. Reptiles with wings. Pigeon heads. Turkeys. They fly into windows, peck at their reflections, buzz into power lines, blunder into extinction.

[...]

That view is a gone goose. In the past two decades or so, from fields and laboratories around the world have flowed examples of bird species capable of mental feats comparable to those found in primates. There's a kind of bird... that hides up to thirty-three thousand seeds scattered over dozens of square miles and remembers where it put them months later. There's a species that solves a classic puzzle at nearly the same pace as a five-year-old child, and one that's an expert at picking locks. There are birds that can count and do simple math, make their own tools, move to the beat of music, comprehend basic principles of physics, remember the past, and plan for the future.

In the past, other animals have gotten all the publicity for their near-human cleverness. Chimps make stick spears to hunt smaller primates and dolphins communicate in a complex system of whistles and clicks. Great apes console one another and elephants mourn the loss of their own.

Now birds have joined the party. A flood of new research has overturned the old views, and people are finally starting to accept that birds are far more intelligent than we ever imagined—in some ways closer to our primate relatives than to their reptilian ones.

[...]

In judging the overall intelligence of animals, scientists may look at how successful they are at surviving and reproducing in many different environments. By this measure, birds trump nearly all vertebrates, including fish, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. They are the one form of wildlife visible nearly everywhere. They live in every part of the globe, from the equator to the poles, from the lowest deserts to the highest peaks, in virtually every habitat, on land, sea, and in bodies of freshwater. In biological terms, they have a very big ecological niche.

As a class, birds have been around for more than 100 million years. They are one of nature's great success stories, inventing new strategies for survival, their own distinctive brands of ingenuity, that in some respects at least, seem to far outpace our own.

[...]

What kind of intelligence allows a bird to anticipate the arrival of a distant storm? Or find its way to a place it has never been to before, though it may be thousands of miles away. Or precisely imitate the complex songs of hundreds of other species? Or hide tens of thousands of seeds over hundreds of square miles and remember where it put them six months later? (I would flunk these sorts of intelligence tests as readily as birds might fail mine.)



Kishi Ganku, *Eagle* (detail), ca. 1802, hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 57 1/8 × 21 3/4 in (145.1 × 55.2 cm). National Museum of Asian Art, Freer Gallery of Art Collection, Purchase—funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Willard G. Clark (F1995.15a-g).



A World of Edo Art
Creatures of the Sky

Maybe *genius* is a better word. The term is from the same root as *gene*, derived from the Latin word for “attendant spirit present from one’s birth, innate ability or inclination.”

[...]

[R]ecently, *genius* has been defined as “[...] doing well what anyone can do badly.” It’s a mental skill that’s exceptional compared with others, either of your kind or another kind. Pigeons have a genius for navigation that far, far, exceeds our own. Mockingbirds and thrashers can learn and remember hundreds more songs than most of their fellow songbird species. Scrub jays and nutcrackers have memories for where they put things that make our capacity look meager.

In this book, *genius* is defined as the knack for knowing what you’re doing—for “catching on” to your surroundings, making sense of things, and figuring out how to solve your problems. In other words, it’s a flair for meeting environmental and social challenges with acumen and flexibility, which many birds seem to possess in abundance.

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