



About Birds and Birding

Taxonomy

KINGDOM: *Animalia* (Animals)

PHYLUM: *Chordata* (Animals that have a dorsal hollow nerve cord, a notochord, and gill clefts. These three structures are found in the early developmental stages of all chordates.)

SUBPHYLUM: *Vertebrata* (Vertebrates: Animals with backbones)

CLASS: *Aves* (Birds)

ORDER: The class *Aves* is divided into approximately 29 orders (some scientists use 24 or 27 orders). For example, the order for perching birds is *Passeriformes*.

FAMILY: Each order is further divided into families. For example, jays are a perching bird in the *Corvidae* family.

GENUS and SPECIES: Each family has a number of genera (plural for genus) and each genus usually has a number of closely related species. A species is a population of organisms of which all the members are able to breed amongst themselves.

The Eastern Blue Jay belongs to the genus *Cyanocitta* and species *cristata*, hence, its Latin scientific name is *Cyanocitta cristata*. Using scientific names allows scientists all over the world to be sure they are talking about the same species since common names are different among different languages. For a list of North American bird species that includes the scientific name, go to the American Ornithologists' Union website at www.aou.org.

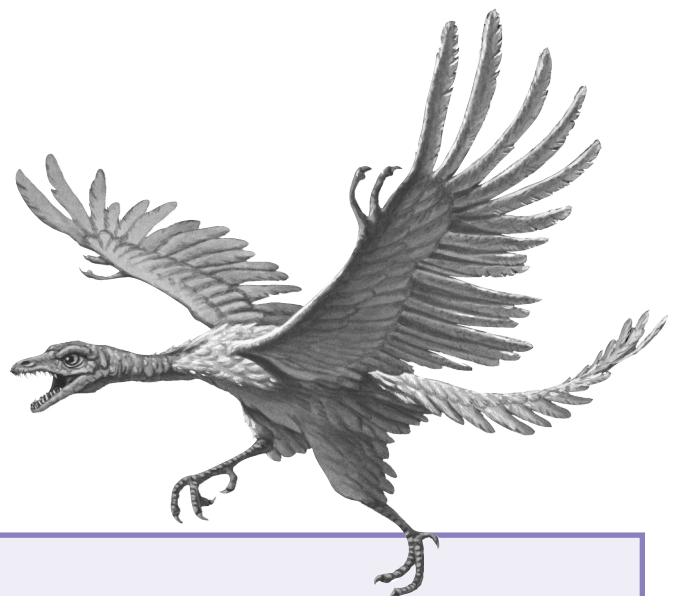
Common Characteristics

Although birds are incredibly different in size, shape, color, and behavior, they all share certain characteristics.

Feathers

All birds have feathers, and they are the *only* living animals that have them. Feathers not only allow birds to fly, but they also keep their skin dry, help to streamline the body for flight, and provide excellent insulation.

Birds have many different types of feathers, from stiff contour feathers to soft and fluffy down feathers. The **flight feathers**, on the wings and tail, form the flying surfaces and make flight possible. The contour feathers cover the bird's body and are lightweight yet strong. Underneath the contour feathers are the small down feathers that provide great insulation.



Evolutionary History

A*rchaeopteryx* is perhaps one of the earliest birds in existence. Fossil records indicate this bird lived during the age of dinosaurs, about 160 million years ago. In addition to its reptilian features, such as sharp teeth, scales, and claws, *Archaeopteryx* also had feathers.

Illustration courtesy of Joe Tucciarone