

Bird Ways

Roger E. Rondeau
Dayton, Ohio

Birds are part of the allure and the voice of nature. They're beneficial in so many ways. They control the bug population by feeding on mosquitoes and other detrimental insects, they get rid of carcasses, they pollinate our plants, and germinate our shrubs and trees with their droppings. They sustain us. Geese, ducks, chickens, turkeys, quail, pheasant, and partridge alight on our dinner tables. Chickens even feed us before they're born. Birds also save lives, like the canaries that warn us of toxic air in coal mines or the carrier pigeons that delivered our military messages during WW1 and WWII.

But, as a bird watcher and word lover, I'm at a loss as to why birds don't get any linguistic respect. As attractive as birds are, why are almost all avian words so unattractive? If you felt a need to insult someone, it would be duck soup to use any of the flock of negative bird idioms and phrases. Take the noun 'birdbrain,' that word perches all birds on the same stupid tree. Also, the male of many birds is a cock, which is the basis of several unflattering expressions like cockeyed, cocky, cocksure, cockamamie, and worse. And how about the word 'hawk'? This bird is a soaring, majestic hunter while the word means to bring up phlegm, to hard sell something, and to politically push for war. There's a long list of ugly bird words and phrases to choose from: chicken livered, chicken feed, hawk-nosed, pigeon-toed, dumb dodo, loony, old buzzard, hen-pecked, old crow, old coot, no spring chicken, pile of guano. You could also flip someone the bird.

Some other words that fail to flatter our feathered friends: chicken feed, chicken out, lame duck, sitting duck, dead duck, ugly duckling, empty nester, jail bird, strange bird, odd bird, silly goose, cold turkey, wet hen, wild goose chase, quack (a charlatan doctor), grouching (complaining), albatross (a burden, usually around someone's neck), peacock (a vain person), magpie (a talkative person), jay (another idle chatterer), killing two birds with one stone (sharia law for the birds), winging it (not trying hard), have a bird (be agitated), lay an egg, eat crow, for the birds, egg on your face.

Besides 'wise as an owl,' 'eagle eye,' 'free as a bird,' complimentary bird words are as rare as hen's teeth.

There are a few other types of birds worth mentioning: rude birds, like the mocking bird; sad birds, like the blue bird; and gregarious birds, like the velcrows.