

Feral February Episode 16 – The bird that thinks it is a cow

Description

Throughout the month of February, which I am calling “Feral February,” I am going to do something a little bit different – I’m going to create a series of theme posts every week day about my favourite things in the world: Animals.

Today’s animal is the hoatzin.

The hoatzin is not as flashy as the other birds found in the Amazon, like the toucans or macaws, but every animal has its unique quirks and adaptations – and the hoatzin is no exception.

This bizarre-looking bird has a rather funky mohawk crest along its head, a neon-blue face, red eyes, large wings and a fan-shaped tail. Its feathers are brown, black and cream coloured, giving it the appearance of a very oddly put together bird.



Hoatzin. Photo courtesy of E. B. Pivorun. [Source](#).

The small bird, roughly the size of a small turkey, dwells in the trees and swamps of the Amazonian river basin, and feeds almost entirely on leaves. Few species of birds can accomplish this, due to the gastrointestinal requirements needed to extract nutrition from plant matter. But thanks to its large stomach, it digests leaves like cows feed on grass. The hoatzin is also known as the “stink bird” because it gives off a distinct manure-like smell, created from the leaves it eats and how it digests them – using bacteria in their stomach like a cow.

Because of the space needed in their bodies for a huge stomach and crop to help digest the leaves, their flight muscles are small for a bird their size and have difficulty flying even short distances. To compensate, hoatzin live in groups of up to a dozen animals, but groups as large as 40 do occur.

Daily dose of trivia:

Hoatzin chicks have tiny claws at the end of their wings, similar to that of *Archaeopteryx*, that are used to climb through vegetation. Nests are over water, so that the young, if there is danger, can dive into the water, swim to safety and use their wing claws to climb a tree and make their way back to the nest.

Also, no one is sure where the hoatzin belongs taxonomically. It has wing claws as a chick like *Archaeopteryx*, looks like a pheasant, has similar traits to the cuckoo and more. So, for now, they have their own organizational family called Opisthocomidae (meaning “those with long hair behind” in Greek).

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