



## EPISODE 7

# The Spooky World of Birds

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**INTRO:** Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

**CHRISTA ROLLS:** First, I wanted to let you know that I have a free guide to learning all about bird identification. After going through this workbook, you'll know about the five keys to bird identification: size and shape, color and pattern, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sound. When you understand the main components of identifying a bird, you'll begin to feel more confident with your birding and identification skills. This process will not just help you with identifying birds by sight and sound easier, but it will also help deepen your connection with nature. To get this free guide, just visit the podcast show notes at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Birds are crazy creatures. The fact that there are so many in the world, and they're so different from each other, is the coolest.

This was a really fun week for me, and I had a lot of fun prepping for it, because I got to look up a whole bunch of interesting facts about birds that I want to share here with you.

Before I get into some of these perceived spooky or scary birds, I'm going to first get into why they might have preconceived notions about them and then I'm going to dispel those notions by talking about some cool facts about them. There are seven kinds of birds that I'm going to be chatting about – ironic, lucky number seven. Anyway, let's begin.

So, the first bird on my list is the shrike.

Shrikes look like other songbirds in how they perch and carry themselves, with feet not particularly big, body around the size of an American Robin, but its sharp, curved bill implies something unique about this particular bird. Shrikes feed on small reptiles, small mammals, other birds, and insects, which sounds mighty impressive for a bird not much bigger than your two hands formed together.

However, their secret is that they lie in wait for their prey, catching them by surprise from above by clamping down on the neck or skull of the unsuspecting victim with their sharp beak. They then take their prey, which can sometimes be as large as them, to skewer or impale them on thorns, barbed wire, whatever is sharp and pointy nearby, to allow them time to enjoy their meal.

Since this behavior is unique to shrikes, if you find an animal impaled on a bush, tree, or other pointed object, keep a lookout for these masked butcherbirds, as they're been called. The first time I saw a lizard impaled on an acacia bush, I thought oh my gosh, who is running around doing this to the local wildlife. I mean, I was horrified. Then, I learned that Loggerhead Shrikes frequented the area and I even got to see one that day visiting the same lizard I exclaimed about earlier.

There are a couple of things about shrikes that make them especially interesting from a behavioral and adaptive point of view. First, shrikes have

been known to imitate the songs of other birds to draw them in. To me, this is diabolically genius on their part, and ensures they're able to find some kind of meal, even if small rodents or invertebrates are more scarce.

Although they're carnivorous, they don't have the big talons that raptors like hawks and eagles can use to simply carry their prey away. To make up for their lack of leg strength, they've adapted to killing their prey efficiently and setting them up as the perfect buffet for them to consume. Pretty clever!

Research conducted by Dr. Diego Sustaita (SUSS-THAI-TAH) and other researchers from the University of Connecticut and the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research, shed even more light on how shrikes do their foraging work. In their research, they looked at the kinematics, or the science behind how things move, in how Loggerhead Shrikes kill their prey. Why look at how things move? Well, shrikes aren't just great at capturing and getting their prey ready to eat, as soon as they clamp down on their prey's neck, they roll their head from side to side, beating their prey about, with great force to sufficiently paralyze their prey.

This is likely how they're able to capture such large prey compared to their body size! More than 30 species of shrikes exist in the world. In North America, we have the Loggerhead Shrike and the Northern Shrike, found in the southern part of North America and the Northern part of North America, respectively. (<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rsbl.2018.0321>)

Oh, and any references I make to publications or resources will be linked in the show notes at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Next, let's talk about the mysterious crow. Why do we call a group of crows a murder of crows and what's with the morbid terminology used to refer to a large group of them?

By all intents and purposes, a group of any bird is a flock, but some birds have adopted inventive nicknames when they're seen in a group, including the phrase a murder of crows. While it was thought that crows were associated with death because they scavenge and will show up to places where animals

are dead or dying, the background is actually more fanciful. In Medieval Times, hunters came up with interesting and varied names for different animals to distinguish among different groups, and a murder of crows stuck over time, even though some of the other words Medieval people came up with are long since unused.

These social and intelligent animals are nothing to fear, despite what Alfred Hitchcock tried to portray in his thriller flick, the Birds. Which, if you've never seen it, is a 1960's film where birds inexplicably start attacking innocent people on the street. Bottom line, if anyone tells you they're afraid of crows or think they're creepy because they eat carrion, are commonly considered a murder when they're in a group, or think they'll randomly start pecking their eyes out, you can tell them about how interesting crows and other corvids are instead.

Corvids are some of my favorite kinds of birds, and it doesn't take much to see why. Their curiosity and intelligence is so fun to watch and try to work out. Just the other week I was reading about the New Caledonian Crows, that take pieces of the leaves and other substrate in their habitat to create tools for collecting food out of various hidey holes. They'll even add a little hook at the end of their tool, if the situation warrants it, something that hasn't been documented in other birds, just primates. Crows have even figured out how to open nuts with shells they couldn't crack with their own beak. Either they fly to a great height and drop it in the road to crack it open, or, they'll even put nuts under car tires to wait for the vehicle to do the work for them. Talk about smart birds!

Next, why are owls the thing you hear and see in spooky movies at night? How do owls turn their head all the way around, cause that's kind of spooky right?

Do you know which bird that was? The Eastern Screech Owl! Owls are some of the first animals that come to mind when I think of Autumn, and that might be the case with you, too! They're masters of the night, and maybe this is why they're associated with spooky scenes in movies sometimes. I mean, imagine hearing a Screech Owl alone in the woods – that's a bit startling at first! Until you realize it's a way cool bird.

While owls are so often associated with autumn, this is likely for a number of reasons. One, as the leaves begin to fall from leaf-bearing trees, owls are easier to spot as they hide away during the day or while eating their dinner. This is also when juvenile owls are looking for territories of their own, so owls are quite vocal in the fall, since owls need to communicate with each other to let others know which space is theirs and to keep out of it. It's also believed that since more weather inversions happen this time of year, which is when warmer, less-dense air moves over cooler air – this is also why you'll see low lying clouds or fog in the mornings – allows sound to travel farther, meaning you might be able to hear owls easier just because the conditions are right.

When I worked as an environmental educator, people would most often ask about owls and their twirly heads, like the girl from the exorcist. Of course, owls can't turn their heads all the way around. In reality, it's only about 2/3 of the way, which is still pretty extensive considering we'll pull a muscle if we go much further than halfway. This adaptation is truly incredible because of other factors going on with owls. Since they're nocturnal and prefer to hunt once the sun is low in the sky or gone altogether, they need nice big eyes to help them better see in the dark. Those big eyes can't swivel around in their head like our eyes can. We can look up and down and see in our periphery all without moving our head at all, but owls don't have that ability. There are literally muscles and ligaments holding the owl's eyes in place to ensure they don't come right out with how large they are compared to the owl's head. This means they need a nice, twisty neck so they can see around them easily.

Now, getting back to Owl sounds. There are around 220 owl species in the world, and 19 of them are in North America. Owl sounds are a lot of fun because they're a variety of screeches, hoots, and rasping sounds. Take the Barred Owl for example, which says, who cooks for you, who cooks for you all.

That was a little embarrassing, but why don't I let you hear the actual clip.

\*Barred Owl Call Playing\*

I remember in my first month ever learning bird sounds, I would listen to the Barred Owl over and over giggling, making my dad wonder whether it was actually part of my work at all. Also, show of hands, how many of you thought Mourning Doves were owls at one point or another growing up? I know I did.

Let's take a quick break to hear from Orietta Estrada and Tykee James about the Black and Latinx Birders Scholarship Fund.

**\*\*Black and Latinx Birders Scholarship Fund 1-minute recording\*\***

Now, back to spooky birds and demystifying them.

One question I've gotten a time or two is: what's the deal with vultures eating dead things?

Vultures are without a doubt some of the most misunderstood birds in the bird world. Sure they like to eat dead things and literally drive their entire neck and body up into the carcass of a dead animal to get all the tasty goodness within. But incredibly, it's not just the meat they feast on, but the bones themselves. Vultures have a very specific kind of acid in their stomach to help them digest the bones they consume, which typically makes up about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their entire diet.

This pertains to the birds we have in North America, specifically the Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, and California Condor. However, there are vultures, like the Palm-nut vulture found in Sub-Saharan Africa, that loves to feast on meaty palm nuts. But, they're also so much more than what they eat!

These incredible animals play a really important role in the ecosystem, cleaning up carcasses by scavenging their remains, and any potential diseases or bacteria associated with the dead animal. This scavenging, however, does make them more vulnerable to roadside collisions and makes them susceptible to compounds they're consuming in the dead animal's body. If an animal consumed pesticides or herbicides, for example, those chemical compounds are exemplified in the vulture's system.

You've heard me talk about the five keys to bird ID a bunch of times, and of course, one of those keys is the sound a bird makes. Vultures lack a syrinx, or a

bird voice box, so they are silent most of the time. However, they do have the ability to grunt and hiss – let’s take a listen to this Turkey Vulture.

\*Turkey Vulture sound\*

It’s not often that you’ll hear this noise, and it’s often directed at one of their fellow vultures while feeding or finding a good place to take a rest. Oh, and by the way, these sounds I’m playing are from Xeno Canto – a site I’ll link to in the show notes – which has loads of really wonderful bird sounds and bird dialects around the world.

Last Christmas I was in Tanzania and I’ll never forget sitting in our vehicle watching about thirty vultures circling around a dead zebra while we ate our lunch. We watched the way they used their incredible senses to soar over from great distances and come in for landing, which is impressive to watch for such large birds.

Ok, now that we’ve chatted about some North American birds, let’s move to some other parts of the world and see what else this wild world offers.

Do vampire finches actually drink blood?

Off the coast of Ecuador are the famed Galapagos Islands. The Galapagos are famous for their unique wildlife, especially their birds, of which are the Galapagos Finches, a group of 18 finch species that vary greatly in beak diversity. Of these finches is the Vampire Finch, and no I’m totally not kidding.

This bird is a subspecies of ground finch that lives on specific islands in the Galapagos, and it does, in fact, eat blood. While the majority of the time the vampire finch eats seeds and insects, it adapted to the sometimes low food amounts by supplementing its diet with blood.

No, don’t worry, if you visit the Galapagos, they won’t come after you, and it’s not your blood they’re interested in. Often, they’ll feed on Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies.

Researchers believe this adaptation started not because they magically became blood-thirsty one day, but rather because they wanted to pick bugs or parasites off of other birds, sometimes drawing blood. Long, hot, dry seasons have found these finches adapting to go to the larger birds for some sustenance.

These vampire finches have found the perfect way to extract enough blood to keep it flowing, but not so much that the birds fly away or die. While it seems particularly gruesome, it's more annoying for the boobies than anything, as it hasn't been found to have a particularly adverse effect on adult birds.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of being able to see vampire finches in action someday might be pretty slim, since the primary island they live on, Wolf Island, isn't open to tourists and is mostly available to researchers.

While it might seem particularly creepy that these birds drink blood, there are other birds in the world that do the same, like oxpeckers found in Africa, which pull ticks and other blood-sucking parasites off of animals like zebras or buffalo, and they'll also stick around to eat a little blood too. At one point, these relationships were probably more mutualistic, where the animals were mutually benefitting each other, so the zebra attracts a tick that isn't great for it, but the oxpecker comes and removes the parasite while also getting itself a meal. Win-win. Now, maybe not so much.

Are Cassowaries actually super violent?

In the northern part of Australian, and throughout the islands surrounding New Guinea, the Cassowary is a bird of many tales.

Even looking at them, you can immediately tell they're descendants of dinosaurs, since they look like they've stepped right out of the Jurassic Park movies. In Smithsonian Magazine, Jacob Brogan describes them as resembling a turkey fused with a velociraptor.

I think the first time I heard about Cassowaries was hearing, not some of the other cool facts about them like them being giant, six-foot tall flightless birds or



that they have big keratin helmets on the top of their head, but rather that they have a killer kick, literally. Cassowaries have been known to kill people by slashing at people with the sharp nail on the inner part of their toes, thus giving them the nickname “murderbird.”

This nail can be up to 4 inches long!! I mean, that’s crazy. Of course, Cassowaries aren’t just running around trying to slash at people in the forests where they live, but if they feel threatened or cornered, their defense, if they can’t get away from the perceived danger, is to kick at the predator. It just so happens that they have a crazy nail attached to those feet that they’re kicking with.

While at first this birds seem scary, they’re so interesting and really important for their local environment. Cassowaries are frugivores, meaning their diet consists mainly of fruits they forage for in the forest. Since the giant birds swallow the fruits whole, they are important disperser of the seeds that help replant trees and regenerate the forest. Awesome right?? The benefits that fruit and seed-eating birds have on seed dispersal is well-known, but who knew these massive birds also benefitted the area they roam, even without flying?

Did you know the feathers of certain birds are toxic? Hooded pitohuis (PIT-O-HOO-E).

Also in Australia and the islands around New Guinea is the Hooded Pitohui, one of the only living birds known to be truly toxic. I say living bird, because the Carolina Parakeet, extinct for decades, was also known to be toxic and inedible. Hooded Pitohuis have traces of something called batrachotoxin (BAT-RAT-CHU-TOXIN) is, a potent neurotoxin that can lead to paralysis and cardiac arrest. It’s the same toxin found in Point Dart Frogs in South America, too, which is how the name is derived, since batrachos means frog in Greek.

According to the research conducted on the topic, the birds (and the poison dart frogs, for that matter) get their toxicity from the beetles they eat, a special kind of beetle in the Melyridae family, instead of producing it themselves. How and why exactly these beetles produce toxins is as yet unknown.

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It's also worth mentioning that the traditional knowledge of the people who have lived off these lands for millennia has been critical in determining the species of beetles that carry these toxins and the reasoning for tingling or numbness that often accompanies contact with the Hooded Pitohui feathers. Without this information, scientists could have followed many leads that ended up being unrelated to the matter at hand.

Interestingly, the Pitohui birds don't solely eat these toxic beetles, and have a quite varied diet on other insects and beetles, so the question remains how the toxins are synthesized differently in the Pitohui bodies than other birds that may also be consuming the little rice-sized beetles. Bottom line, don't eat bird feathers or put your hands in your mouth after handling them.

This research by Jack Dumbacher's team is super interesting, so I'll be linking to that more in the show note as well.

And there you have it!

What birds, or bird stories, have you found especially spooky or scary? I'd love for you to let me know by reaching out to me on Facebook or Instagram!

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

To access information about the websites and materials I mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Next week, we have the wonderful opportunity to be joined by the President of the Western Bird Banding Association and Research Coordinator at the Costa Rica Bird Observatory, Holly Garrod! Holly is going to be sharing with us all about why bird banding is important, how to get involved with the WBBA, and how you can learn more about banding opportunities.

If you enjoyed this episode and want to get updates on the latest Birding Tools has to offer, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening now.

See you next time.