

Compare and Contrast Nonfiction Stories: Extinct Birds

The Dodo Bird: A Symbol of Extinction

The dodo bird lived on the island of Mauritius, off the southeast coast of Africa. Because the bird went extinct in the 17th century, there are no photos available. Drawings, paintings, written accounts, and a handful of specimens give us a rough understanding of its appearance and behavior. What we do know about the dodo bird is that it stood more than three feet tall, weighed about 40 lbs., and was flightless. It most likely lost this trait because it didn't need to fly: There were no predators on the island, and fruit and seeds provided abundant food sources.

Things started to change for the dodo bird in 1505 when the Portuguese arrived on the island. After that, the bird, which weighed about 50 lbs, became a welcome source of food for sailors. Along with humans came pigs, monkeys and rats, which made meals of the dodo bird eggs. Since the species had never seen humans before, none of the dodo birds on the island were afraid of humans, yet another reason they became such easy prey.

The last reported sighting of a dodo bird was in 1688, in the hunting records of Isaac Johannes Lamotius, who was the governor of Mauritius. All that remains of the dodo bird today are a dried head and foot at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and skeletal remains. In recent decades, several excavations on the island have allowed scientists to assemble complete skeletons of the dodo bird.

Because it took so little time after human contact for this animal to go extinct, the dodo bird has become a symbol of the role of humans in protecting endangered animals.



Illustration of a Dodo bird by Louis Figuier from 1873

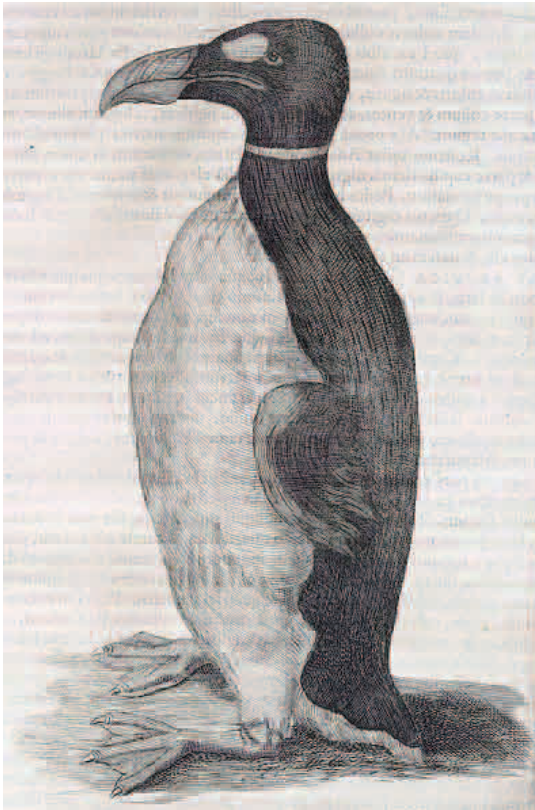
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The Last of the Great Auks

The Great Auk is an extinct species of bird that covered a large range of the North Atlantic coast, from Iceland to northern Spain. Though it was flightless, it was a powerful swimmer and used its skills in the water to hunt crustaceans, one of the staples of its diet. It stood a little under 3 feet tall and weighed about 11 pounds. It nested along the coast in colonies consisting of thousands of birds. The colonies were so dense that sailors reported being able to spot the shore based on the sight of the black and white birds.

The Great Auk was hunted by sailors and fisherman for more than 100,000 years. Because they were flightless and rather clumsy on land, they were easy to catch. The bird's eggs and feathers were also in high demand in Europe, further reducing the bird's population.

By the early-1800's, the population of Great Auk colonies had dwindled significantly. Iceland was the home of the last known colony of Auks, who were killed for their skins in 1835. One of the very last birds was caught on St. Kilda island in Scotland in 1844 by three sailors. A large storm passed through the area and the men killed the Great Auk, believing it was a witch who caused the storm.



There is only one illustration drawn from life, by Ole Worm, dating from 1655.

The cultural significance of the bird has been discovered in recent history. Cave paintings featuring Great Auks were found in France dating back 20,000 years. The Great Auk was also an important symbol for Native Americans. A person buried in Newfoundland around 2000 BC was found surrounded by more than 200 Great Auk beaks, believed to be part of a ceremonial burial.

About 80 specimens of the Great Auk exist today, found in museums around the world.

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Now, it's time to **compare** and **contrast** these two stories! Fill out the compare and contrast diagram below with details from the text.

Title _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Both:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Title _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

