

Unusual birds rarely seen on bird stamps

While the title of these occasional articles on unusual birds rarely seen on bird stamps is appropriate, the species chosen this time is quite bizarre. It is of course unique as any species is but the Hoatzin of South America boasts a number of strange features which renders it rather special.



The Hoatzin, with the complex Latin name of *Opisthocomus hoazin*, has baffled scientists since its discovery in 1776 and has never been comfortably allied to any other group of living birds. It was initially thought to be part of the Galliformes, a large family including game birds and such-like suggesting that the Hoatzin was some type of Pheasant. More recently, some researchers have allied it to the Cuckoos or Turaocs but the evidence to support this is somewhat ambiguous. It thus has its own order and family and the similar generic name originates from the Greek “wearing long hair behind”, a reference to the strange crest of stiff feathers some 4cm – 8cm long which tend to remain erect in a loose manner. The whole bird (head to tail) measures approximately 65cm (a little over two feet) and weighs about 800gms.



Hoatzins inhabit much of the Northern countries in South America, thus east of the Andes in Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Guyana. They favour thick forest close to streams, rivers and lakes with perhaps 80% of their diet consisting of new growth of green leaves and buds. Their digestive system has been compared to that of ruminants (cows, sheep, goats, etc.) in that they are the only known birds to have a foregut where the plant material ferments. This often endows the birds with an unpleasant odour. Their digestive system has been The birds tend to forage in the early morning and again in the evening in social groups but spend much of the day resting and digesting their food.



Another remarkable aspect of Hoatzins is the behaviour of the young. Nests consist of a flat platform of twigs and sticks constructed in the rainy season and above water; if successful, nest sites are often used in subsequent years. Two to four eggs are laid and chicks quickly attain a layer of dark brown down, opening their eyes 24 hours after hatching and becoming quite mobile after three days. While they can move around the nest using their wings and quite large feet, they only attain flight feathers after about three weeks. Growth is slow in the young birds and diet is thought to be an influence in this factor.

Young birds will jump out of their nests when only a few days old to avoid the attention of predators which often include monkeys or raptor species. The chicks typically fall into the water below the nest and can swim a few metres to the safety of a branch or other vegetation from where they can clamber back up to the nest area.



This escape routine is greatly helped by the extraordinary double claws on the fore-edge of each wing as shown above and in the first stamp illustrating this article. Indeed, this particular feature at one stage prompted early systematists to suggest that the Hoatzin was in fact descended from the ancient reptilian-like feathered dinosaur *Archaeopteryx* which had three functional claws on each wing but this has since been refuted by suggesting the Hoatzin claws evolved relatively recently as an aid for the young to clamber back to their nest sites.



This stamp from Bhutan readily illustrates an image of what *Archaeopteryx* might have looked like but it might be tempting to think some artists have used the Hoatzin to create the images of the prehistoric bird. There are in fact over eighty stamps with some quite fanciful images of *Archaeopteryx* and I dare say some people assemble just these as a special part of a collection.

There are less than twenty stamps illustrating the Hoatzin and as might be expected, most of these come from South America, especially Guyana who boasts ten in all. Inevitably some countries show the bird on their stamps even if they are African but the illustrations are most acceptable.

Happily the species is relatively secure but there will be threats in some parts of its range from agricultural developments and it must be remembered that the species is very sedentary and reluctant to migrate to more favourable habitat if its home range is threatened.



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