The origin of flightless birds

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Some organisms in nature have lost an organ or the ability to use an organ. This is commonly observed in insects that have lost their wings on islands[1,2] and blind cave fish.[3] Moreover, the loss of sight in cave fish is just a variation capable of rapid reversal, as shown when researchers mated blind cave fish from one cave with other strains of blind cave fish, and their offspring had eyes.[4]

Origin of flightless birds on islands

The origin of flightless birds, especially those found on islands, is also a challenge because evolutionists believe it is a form of evolution.[5] Flightless birds are known from Madagascar, Australia, New Zealand, islands of the south-west Pacific, South America, and elsewhere. Many of these birds went extinct during the past 2,000 years, likely because of human hunting. For instance, many scientists think the giant moa of New Zealand went extinct 400 years ago when it was colonized by the Polynesians. There were several flightless birds in New Zealand at the time, but the moa was the largest, standing 3–3.7 m tall and weighing about 240 kg. Moa skeletons have been found by the hundreds in New Zealand swamps indicating just how common they once were. Moreover, Feduccia, an evolutionary ornithologist, notes that there are or were flightless birds on numerous islands across the South Pacific—at least one flightless species on almost every large island, including the remote Hawaiian Islands.[6]

How were these birds able to colonize these disparate areas? Creation science has three options. First, people carried the birds with them for food on a long voyage and some escaped or were allowed to escape after they arrived on a distant island. Second, the ancestors of these birds could fly and their descendants became flightless and increased in size after arrival. Third, the birds could never fly, but they were carried to these isolated areas on log or vegetation mats soon after the Flood.

Cserhati reports that the white-throated rail flew to several islands in the south-west Indian Ocean from Madagascar and Mayotte and rapidly lost their ability to fly—several times on different islands under specific conditions.[7] Mayotte is part of the Comoros Archipelago between north-west Madagascar and south-east Africa. Specific conditions favouring their survival are the lack of predators and other animals that would compete for food. The authors of the original article in *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society* believe the loss of flight demonstrates 'evolution'. But how can this be, since it is a loss of function and information rather than a gain?

Flightlessness believed caused by regulatory DNA

Many evolutionists now believe the reason for flightlessness was a change in regulatory DNA that controls flight and not from mutations in protein-coding genes.[8] Regulatory DNA determines when and where genes are turned off or on, often due to environmental cues. To establish their case that the loss of flight arises from changes in regulatory DNA, the researchers used DNA that did not code for proteins and found that it was responsible for turning off genes for flight, which would eliminate the mutational mechanism. However, the researchers were not specific about how changes in regulatory DNA caused a loss of flight. Moreover, they admitted that mutations in protein-coding genes could be the cause of flightlessness in some species.

The researchers, of course, put an evolutionary spin on it, claiming that that such a loss of flight in so many birds is due to 'convergent evolution', defined as: "the independent evolution of similar phenotypes in divergent taxa".[9] However, there are several problems with this. First, one researcher said that whatever the cause, it seems like an 'easy' change:

> "Rather, the ancestors of ratites [the diverse group of flightless birds] probably could fly and tinamous retained that ability, while related birds lost the ability, mostly because of changes in regulatory DNA, he says. 'My hunch is that it's relatively easy to lose flight.'"[10]

Moreover, the change could occur quickly:

> "How much time is necessary for flying birds to lose their powers of flight has been a subject of some controversy. In the past it has often been thought that vast time spans were required—tens of millions of years perhaps; but it now seems more likely that the evolution of

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Figure 1. *Gastornis*, a large flightless bird from the Eocene of Wyoming, USA

> flightlessness and the concomitant attainment of large size, as seen dramatically in the ratites, needs relatively little time, especially on islands."[11]

In other words, 'convergent evolution' in the case of 'acquiring' flightlessness is just an evolutionary name put on a process both creationists and evolutionists agree happens.

Second, the molecular mechanisms of this are not well understood.[9] However, since flightlessness seems to occur so easily, rapidly, and often, how likely is it to be the result of *random* mutation and natural selection?

Finally, the researchers admit that the opposite, the regaining of flight, such as what many believe happened with the tinamous, is problematic:

> "The alternative—a single loss of flight at the base of the paleognaths, followed by a regain of flight in tinamous—appears implausible given evidence for repeated losses of flight across birds and the lack of any evidence for regains of flight after loss … ."[9]

If it is easier to lose flight than regain it, then it clearly is much harder again to gain flight for the first time. As such, this disparity counts as evidence *against* microbes-to-man evolution.

Implications

Evolutionists now attribute the loss of flight (or at least in most cases) to changes in regulatory DNA, and believe it could happen quickly and easily. This suggests that the change in the regulatory DNA could simply be part of the variety built into some birds at Creation. Flightlessness then could have resulted from environmental cues, often associated with isolated islands, that turned off regulatory DNA, when flight was unnecessary.

The suggestion that flightlessness was built in at Creation is shown by the existence of flightless birds in the Cenozoic fossil record, such as *Gastornis*, an extinct genus from the early Cenozoic that was 2 m tall (figure 1). These birds are undoubtedly from the Flood,[12–17] and represent pre-Flood birds.

The new research reveals the likelihood that post-Flood flightless birds made it to the remote locations by flying. Since it could be difficult to fly long distances over water, the flying birds could have found refuge on the remaining log or vegetation mats left over after the Flood.[5,18] One factor favouring the existence of these post-Flood log or vegetation mats is that many creatures (e.g. insects that cannot fly long distances, as well as many mammals, amphibians, and reptiles) also made it to remote islands, including the Hawaiian Islands and Madagascar.[19] The Hawaiian Islands are among the most isolated set of islands in the world, but they have an incredible endemic diversity of organisms, including spiders, land snails, crickets, fruit flies, molluscs, and various birds.[20] It seems that log or vegetation mats are a plausible way to colonize the Hawaiian Islands.

Even evolutionists are forced to believe that vegetation mats must have aided the transport of numerous exotic creatures over large water bodies.[21,22] Their problem is generating so many vegetation mats that are large enough to do the job. However, this is not a problem for the biblical model, as the Flood would generate more than enough log mats.

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