

The HOATZIN

The hoatzin (pronounced wätzēn [Aztec]) is a mysterious bird in a category all on its own. It has been called 'unique', 'enigmatic', 'special' and 'weird'. Because some of its characteristics are so unusual, scientists are uncertain of its origin and relationship to other birds.

Hoatzins live in tropical swampy areas. Their ideal habitat is slow-moving or standing water such as mangrove swamps, flooded forests, or oxbow lakes (which are formed when rivers change their course and the former river channels become isolated). They like the hot, humid climate of the lowland Amazon Basin.

Hoatzins are very social birds and live together in large groups. They are also very territorial. Every bird from a particular colony will defend its territory loudly, chasing away intruders with a hoarse croaking cry, screeches and hisses, even engaging in mid-air fights. They are most active in the morning and evening whereas during the day they hide away in the thick foliage to escape the heat.

These birds are strange and exotic. They look like mythical birds because of their dark red eyes, bright blue faces and the large spiky crests of feathers on their heads. They are about the size of a pheasant, and have small heads, long necks and beautiful earthy-coloured feathers which camouflage them well. They have dark tails of long white-tipped feathers. They do fly but not for long distances, as it requires a lot of effort and they are clumsy in the air. Rather, they prefer to jump and scramble about in the branches of the trees they live in, using their long, heavy tails and large wings for balancing.

One of the strangest things about the hoatzin is that it is a total vegetarian. It eats leaves, fruit and flowers. Accordingly, its digestive system is more like a cow's than a bird's! It has a sac in its gullet where microbes break down the vegetable matter that it has swallowed. The food then progresses to a second area for further digestion. The hoatzin can find food everywhere around it in the lush rainforest and, unlike most other birds, can spend hours roosting and relaxing while its food digests. The disadvantage of this is the strong, unpleasant, musky smell that is evident all around the bird and gives it the nickname 'Stinkbird'.

The birds breed in the rainy season. They make their nests on low or mid-level branches in trees that overhang water. There can be up to thirty nests in a single tree. They can have between one and six eggs although two is usual, and the incubation period is about a month. Other hoatzin, apart from the breeding pair, will help to incubate the eggs. The nests are large, made of dry sticks and are somewhat loose and scruffy-looking. This is often because a new nest is built on top of a previous one. Hoatzin chicks stay in the nest for only two or three weeks. They are born with two claws on each wing. With the help of these to grip, the chicks can scramble out along branches while they are still fairly young. They use an amazing escape strategy if a predator, such as a tree snake, approaches the nest. The chick will drop down into the water below and swim underwater to safety using both its feet and its wings. Later, with the help of its wing claws, it will scramble back up to the nest using an instinctive sense of direction. As the chick matures and learns to fly, its claws diminish and it can no longer swim.



Besides snakes, other predators of the hoatzin are tayras (a type of weasel), monkeys, and large birds of prey such as falcons, hawks and eagles. Tayras and monkeys, in particular, will target the eggs and young chicks still in the nest. However, potential predators are discouraged by the putrid smell of the adult bird.

Humans have been known to hunt hoatzins for their meat but only if desperate. They are not a popular source of food because of their foul smell. Although Hoatzins are not endangered, their habitat, the Amazonian rainforest, is continually being encroached upon for other human activities.

Headings and Trigger words

Use this column to write down a heading and trigger words to summarise each paragraph. (see CSI Stage 5B for more details)

Baby Hoatzin by Hilton Ayrey

The baby Hoatzin chick was in trouble. He didn't know about tree snakes but he sensed danger from the reptile that was slithering towards him on the branch that overhung the mangrove swamp. Where was his mother now when he needed her? He scrambled out of his nest and edged his way along the branch, desperate to get further away from the unblinking eyes that kept sliding towards him.

Now there was nowhere else to go, nowhere but down into the shiny, stagnant water below. Instinct took over. He released his grip on the branch and dropped down into the water. The water was a shock. Down into it he went, a murky different world of waving greenery and strange objects floating towards him. Curious eyes stared at him, but they were not threatening like the ones he had just escaped.

He knew he could not breathe down here and he didn't try. Once again, a knowing greater than himself took over and he pushed against these new, wet surroundings with his feet and his tiny wings. Somehow he knew where to go and what to do. He headed towards the reeds where the water ended and then he came to the surface, out into the fresh air.

He fought his way through the reeds growing in the water by the river bank and made it onto dry land. The familiar nest was above him and his mother was back, squawking and shrieking, looking for him. He had to get back up there and he had to do it quickly. The slithery tree snake that had been coming for him had moved on but he knew there would be other predators lurking.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Make up your own title for this story.
2. Fill in the flow chart for the story structure.
3. Write about what you think might happen next to the baby Hoatzin.
4. Story Map - draw a map of the settings in this story showing where all the action happens.
5. Upgrade the baby Hoatzin so that has some additional features to defend itself against tree snakes. Use diagrams and labels to show your interesting ideas.

STORY STRUCTURE

Setting: Where does the story take place?

Characters: Who are the characters in the story?

Problem: What is the problem in the story?

Feelings: How do the characters feel about the problem?

Action: What actions do the characters take?

Outcome: How did the story end?

Themes: Is there a lesson in the story?