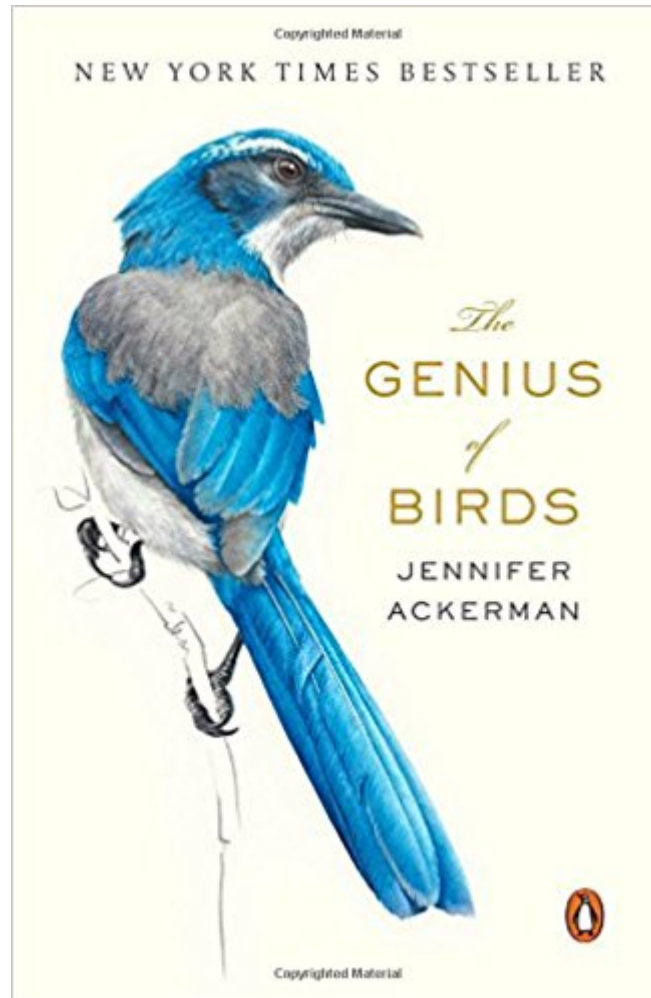




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The Genius Of Birds



Synopsis

An award-winning science writer tours the globe to reveal what makes birds capable of such extraordinary feats of mental prowess. Birds are astonishingly intelligent creatures. According to revolutionary new research, some birds rival primates and even humans in their remarkable forms of intelligence. In *The Genius of Birds*, acclaimed author Jennifer Ackerman explores their newly discovered brilliance and how it came about. As she travels around the world to the most cutting-edge frontiers of research, Ackerman not only tells the story of the recently uncovered genius of birds but also delves deeply into the latest findings about the bird brain itself that are shifting our view of what it means to be intelligent. At once personal yet scientific, richly informative and beautifully written, *The Genius of Birds* celebrates the triumphs of these surprising and fiercely intelligent creatures.

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Customer Reviews

"[A] gloriously provocative and highly entertaining book. Jennifer Ackerman provides a masterly survey of research in the last two decades that has produced a revolution in our understanding of bird cognition. *The Genius of Birds* [is] important not only for what it says about birds, but also about the human ingenuity entailed in unraveling the mysteries of the avian brain. It is at once a book of knowledge but also a work of wonder and an affirmation of the astonishing complexity of our world." —*Wall Street Journal* "Lovely, celebratory. For all the belittling of bird brains, [Ackerman] shows them to be

uniquely impressive machines. —*New York Times Book Review* “Richly researched. —*The Genius of Birds* provides engrossing evidence that will have readers looking at birds in a completely new way. —*The Daily Progress* “A lyrical testimony to the wonders of avian intelligence. —*Scientific American* “Ackerman is a pro at parsing scientific concepts in an accessible style, and her lyrical writing underscores her appreciation for the beauty and adaptability of birds. —*BookPage* “Ackerman writes with a light but assured touch, her prose rich in fact but economical in delivering it. Fans of birds in all their diversity will want to read this one. —*Kirkus Reviews* “Ackerman offers plenty of interesting tidbits and backs them up with the relevant history or science, using footnotes to avoid cluttering the text with anything that might slow a reader down. This is one of those terrific books that makes a scientific topic fun without dumbing it down. —*Washington Independent Review of Books* “I love birds; always have. The only thing better than love is love plus deep appreciation. The *Genius of Birds* is a journey of deep appreciation for the beautiful geniuses all around us, in our gardens, sharing our air, and sharing more of our minds than we might have expected. —*Carl Safina*, author of *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* “Delightful, revolutionary, and illuminated by the clean, curious gaze of an intelligent seeker, *The Genius of Birds* is fueled by awe and always, its close cousin, deep respect for the condition of life. It’s a book that demands a moral consideration of the world. —*Rick Bass*, author of *The Ninemile Wolves* and *For A Little While: New and Selected Stories* From the Hardcover edition.

JENNIFER ACKERMAN has been writing about science, nature, and human biology for almost three decades. Her most recent books include *Sex Sleep Eat Drink Dream: A Day in the Life of Your Body*; *Ah-Choo: The Uncommon Life of Your Common Cold*; *Chance in the House of Fate: A Natural History of Heredity*; and *Notes from the Shore*. A contributor to *Scientific American*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and many other publications, Ackerman is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in Nonfiction, a Bunting Fellowship, and a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

The Genius of Birds, by Jennifer Ackerman is a gamechanger for the way in which the curious reader will think concerning birds. Perhaps you thought birds were cute but not very bright, for example. Get ready to change your mind when you read in chapter one about "007", a corvid (kind

of crow from New Caledonia), who goes through 8 steps, using tools, within two and a half minutes to get to a piece of food, after one scrutiny of this puzzle. Many types of birds are very smart, in the manner which humans are smart. Interestingly, the birds which take the longest to raise in the nest are the smartest and have the biggest brains (with the appropriate neurons). This section discusses the brilliance of some kinds of birds. Here you will find the tool users and others, such as the kees, who love clowning around and horseplay. As an illustration of this, the author mentions a kee who was seen rolling up a doormat and pushing it down a flight of steps. The writing by the author Jennifer Ackerman is at times beautiful (as when she is describing the rainforest at nightfall), or laugh-out-loud funny (she discusses attempts by a bird biologist to measure intelligence in his test subjects by disguising himself, wearing at different sessions: a kimono, a wig, sunglasses, or walking with a limp, or hopping. They always recognized him). I was totally rolling when I read this, thinking of Peter Sellers in the Pink Panther movies. She is always fresh too, with new news on birds right up to this year. As things have changed dramatically in what we know about birds within the past ten years, this book is welcome as an overview, now. This is a book for bird lovers of all sorts. There is a section about the social aspect of birds, subtitled "twitter". This is fascinating too. The reader will learn about how different types of birds bond, and how they teach their young to perform certain important actions they will eventually need to survive. Also discussed is how some types of birds teach others in their particular "group" techniques they have been trained. , Incredibly, researchers have taught certain birds to open feeders in a special manner. They then were able to watch and track as their trained birds performed the tasks in the woods. The birds they had trained managed to train additional wild members to do exactly as they did, What collaborative little creatures! Further on, you learn about vocal virtuosity. I particularly love bird song, as I find it incredibly uplifting. I didn't know that birds must be tutored to sing however. I understand this now, from this book. In this chapter you learn that among Thomas Jefferson's favorite pets were his mockingbirds. Later, when you read about Honey Child, a hand raised mockingbird, your jaw will drop with amazement at the repertoire of his songs, which he would add to and occasionally drop throughout the length of his life. Woodpeckers, wrens, jays, you name it, Honey Child is worth the read! You will learn that this intricate process of vocal learning is termed "advanced", because, it's done "our way", eg., the way humans teach their children, and the way children learn to selectively speak. The male songbirds who have better songs appeal to the females more, too. As the author writes, "Listening for super-sexy syllables allows female canaries to rule out males with poor bilateral co-ordination" This is important, if you are a lady canary! Read on, through this award-winning author's book, to learn about birds who decorate: "the bird artist", birds who can map: "a mapping mind" and finally,

sparrows: "sparrowville". This is a book to curl up with in the winter, or to take along on your cruise. It doesn't really have photos, just a few sketches of birds opening each chapter, but that is not the point of this book. *The Genius of Birds* is about behaviors, patterns, reversal learning, which bird is the "world's dumbest"--yes, it has an offering for that, but not the author's (and I cracked up at that part!!!), the importance of studying birds in their natural environment to learn more and better understand them, and plenty more. *The Genius of Birds* is a big read, but nothing in it is wasted on the willing reader. I applaud Ackerman for taking me outside and to all sorts of amazing places, when she wrote this uplifting, extraordinary book about beautiful, beautiful birds.

Birds are not the little feathered automatons we once believed, says this fascinating book. Their brains may be small, and they are built differently from mammalian brains, but they can still execute prodigious feats of intellect--tool-making, map-making, memory, and the creation of beauty. The study of bird intelligence is more complex than you might think. Even the definition of intelligence is a daunting task, with much room for controversy. Most fascinating to this reviewer was the question of whether intellect correlates to the survival of an individual or a species. Perhaps the answer is 'it depends.' Author Jennifer Ackerman writes in a somewhat dry manner, but she makes the extensive research on bird intelligence accessible and leaves the reader wanting more. How do birds carry out those vast migrations, how do they find their way home, why do male birds pour their hearts out in song and why do female birds choose their mates by these efforts? These and many other questions are explored, with no final answers, but the raising of more questions. Why does the bower-bird build elaborate, artistic structures to impress potential mates? Do birds appreciate beauty itself? Well, you can't stop reading. The book is extensively referenced for readers who want to pursue the topic in more depth. I only wish the author had included some illustrations--the basic anatomy of the avian brain would have been helpful. Or, some of the tools birds make. Or those incredible "bowers" that bower-birds build for their music and dance performances. Still, this is an outstanding book and I recommend it highly. Reviewed by Louis N. Gruber.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher for a review. This book tries to do four things, with varying levels of success. While it has a lot of interesting material, my main complaint is that it's hard to read due to the abrupt shifts of topic and style, and also quite a lot of repetition. Personally, my main interest is in the nature of animal intelligence. The book presents a lot of experimental results in this area, which are extremely interesting. However there is little serious discussion of the meaning of intelligence, it's just defined as ability to innovate. While that's certainly one aspect, it

doesn't cover anything. For example, the author discusses why Barbados bullfinches are so much smarter than the closely-related grassquit. She totally misses the irony when describing the difficulty of answering the question because while bullfinches are easy to catch, it's almost impossible to catch the "stupid" grassquit. Clearly there are different dimensions to intelligence. I thought of that in relation to turkeys, which the author lists among the least intelligent birds. While that may be true by some measures, I can testify from experience that it takes a lot more thought to hunt a turkey than a mammal or waterbird. On a related note, the neuropsychology is discussed only in general, superficial terms. The author's interest is clearly behavioral. The book does a much better job in the other three areas it covers. It is a fine account of how bird researchers conduct their work, showing the tedium, frustration, cleverness and occasional breakthrough. It's an inspiring, realistic account of actual science. The author also introduces us to many observers of birds in the wild. While this is excellent in communicating the excitement of serious birding (as opposed to the less intense birdwatching), the author does not do a good job of description. The reader never feels as if he or she is there. Finally the book contains a lot of autobiography and travelogue of the author's global wanderings in search of birds and the people who study them. While a bit more description would have been welcome here as well, the stories themselves are interesting enough to stand on their own. Overall, I found this hard to read, but with many rewarding parts. I recommend it to anyone interested in how scientists work or with a deep interest in birds. If intelligence is your main interest, you'll find some useful points in this, but too few and too superficial to satisfy.

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