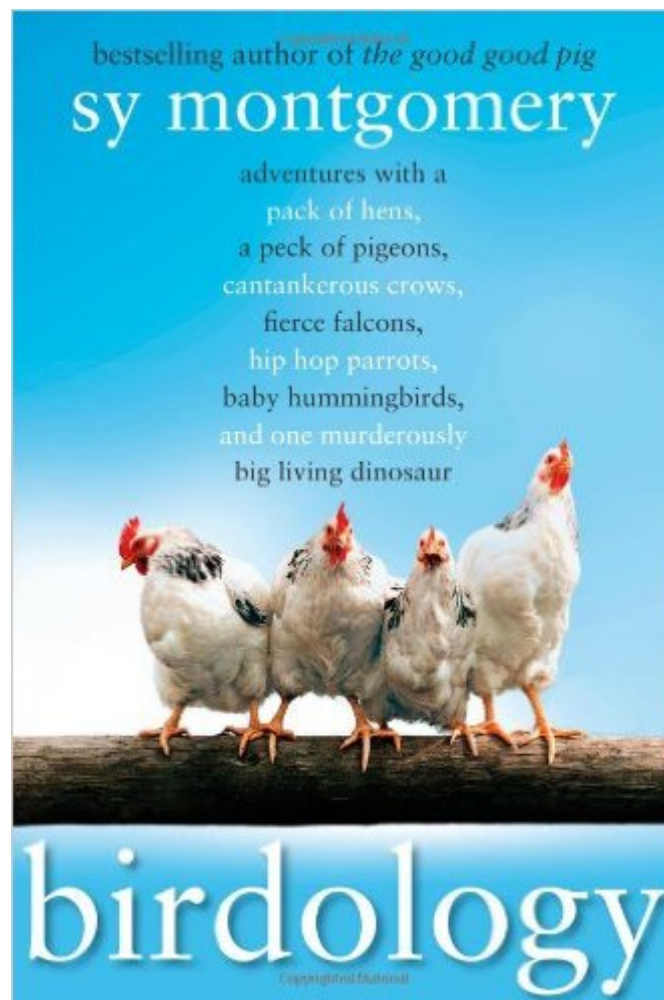


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# Birdology: Adventures With A Pack Of Hens, A Peck Of Pigeons, Cantankerous Crows, Fierce Falcons, Hip Hop Parrots, Baby Hummingbirds, And One Murderously Big Living Dinosaur (t)





## Synopsis

Meet the ladies: a flock of smart, affectionate, highly individualistic chickens who visit their favorite neighbors, devise different ways to hide from foxes, and mob the author like she's a rock star. In these pages you'll also meet Maya and Zuni, two orphaned baby hummingbirds who hatched from eggs the size of navy beans, and who are little more than air bubbles fringed with feathers. Their lives hang precariously in the balance—but with human help, they may one day conquer the sky. Snowball is a cockatoo whose dance video went viral on YouTube and who's now teaching schoolchildren how to dance. You'll meet Harris's hawks named Fire and Smoke. And you'll come to know and love a host of other avian characters who will change your mind forever about who birds really are. Each of these birds shows a different and utterly surprising aspect of what makes a bird a bird—and these are the lessons of *Birdology*: that birds are far stranger, more wondrous, and at the same time more like us than we might have dared to imagine. In *Birdology*, beloved author of *The Good Good Pig* Sy Montgomery explores the essence of the otherworldly creatures we see every day. By way of her adventures with seven birds—wild, tame, exotic, and common—she weaves new scientific insights and narrative to reveal seven kernels of bird wisdom. The first lesson of *Birdology* is that, no matter how common they are, *Birds Are Individuals*, as each of Montgomery's distinctive Ladies clearly shows. In the leech-infested rain forest of Queensland, you'll come face to face with a cassowary—a 150-pound, man-tall, flightless bird with a helmet of bone on its head and a slashing razor-like toenail with which it (occasionally) eviscerates people—proof that *Birds Are Dinosaurs*. You'll learn from hawks that *Birds Are Fierce*; from pigeons, how *Birds Find Their Way Home*; from parrots, what it means that *Birds Can Talk*; and from 50,000 crows who moved into a small city's downtown, that *Birds Are Everywhere*. They are the winged aliens who surround us. *Birdology* explains just how very "other" birds are: Their hearts look like those of crocodiles. They are covered with modified scales, which are called feathers. Their bones are hollow. Their bodies are permeated with extensive air sacs. They have no hands. They give birth to eggs. Yet despite birds' and humans' disparate evolutionary paths, we share emotional and intellectual abilities that allow us to communicate and even form deep bonds. When we begin to comprehend who birds really are, we deepen our capacity to approach, understand, and love these otherworldly creatures. And this, ultimately, is the priceless lesson of *Birdology*: it communicates a heartfelt fascination and awe for birds and restores our connection to these complex, mysterious fellow creatures.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

To quote one of the people in *Birdology: Adventures with a Pack of Hens, a Peck of Pigeons, Cantankerous Crows, Fierce Falcons, Hip Hop Parrots, Baby Hummingbirds, and One Murderously Big Living Dinosaur*, Sy Montgomery's goal in this book is allow readers to "experiences the divinity of creation revealed in the birds." Montgomery profiles chickens, cassowaries, hummingbirds, hawks, pigeons, parrots, and crows, each with its unique personality quirks and traits. The end result is a delight to read, especially for avid birders or ornithologists. *Birdology* isn't a natural history of birds or observations of them in the wild. Ironically, most of the birds Montgomery meets live in captivity of some sort, from her chickens (the "Ladies") to hawks used for falconry (only the cassowaries were truly wild birds). In fact, each chapter seems to focus both on a different species of bird and a person who knows it well, such as a pigeon racer or hummingbird vet. I had mixed feelings about this. Obviously, birds are at their fullest in the wild, and that's where it would really be great to see them. At times, *Birdology* feels a bit too much like a book about "people and their birds." On the other hand, focusing on these particular birds allows Montgomery to really get to know them well and provide detailed observations. For example, after years of watching her hens in her backyard, she has noticed that certain personality traits are passed from one generation to the next - what we would call culture. Chicken culture - imagine that! While Montgomery loves her birds, she resists the temptation to anthropomorphize them. In fact, the best parts of *Birdology* discuss how birds are different from humans in ways we don't yet fully appreciate. Many birds still have strong instinctual impulses, from the gull chicks who incessantly peck at red objects to the

overwhelming urge birds of prey have to hunt (known as "yarak"). She also suggests Alex, the famous African Grey Parrot, had trouble learning some colors because parrot vision recognizes a broader spectrum of colors than does our own. I do wish Montgomery had chosen more birds to profile, especially when the goal of her book is to give readers some sense of what it means to be a bird. Some of the stories of the more familiar birds have been told in different forms elsewhere. For example, the discussion of Alex the Parrot is also the subject of *Alex & Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Uncovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence--and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process*. Other birds, such as pigeons and crows, are fascinating if not exotic. It would have been nice for example to have had a chapter on penguins, a very different type of bird, or the great wandering albatrosses (the subject of Carl Safina's wonderful *Eye of the Albatross: Visions of Hope and Survival*). There are so many types of birds - over 10,000 species - so it's impossible to cover them all, but I definitely felt there was room in the book for a few more. Reading *Birdology*, one gets the feeling that it would be really fun to just be Sy Montgomery. Some of the relationships she's had with birds are truly magical. She doesn't just describe the birds, but also tries to share how it felt emotionally to be in the presence of such wonderful animals. I thought it fascinating for example to hear her describe the hawk as master and the human handling it as the servant. For those of us who haven't been able to spend much time with birds, *Birdology* conveys that sense of wonder. Note: If you want a straight up natural history of birds, I might suggest David Attenborough's *The Life of Birds* or Colin Tudge's *The Bird: A Natural History of Who Birds Are, Where They Came From, and How They Live*. The latter is a bit dry, but comprehensive.

Having read "The Good, Good Pig" by the same author, I was excited to try her book on birds. What a treat! You'll learn the truth about birds you thought you knew, and meet some new ones you probably never even heard of. Highly recommended.

Naturalist and acclaimed author Montgomery's rhythmic and lyrical subtitle conveys the feel of this entertaining, eye-opening book about birds and the people who love them. If you're one of those who think crows are just raucous marauders and pigeons no more than rats with wings, this book may transform your thinking. "Not much gets past a pigeon. They notice details that humans miss: one study found that pigeons could learn to recognize the difference between the painting style of Manet and that of Monet faster than many college students. At one time, the U.S. Coast Guard trained pigeons in helicopters to spot orange life vests at sea; they outperformed human spotters three to one." One wonders why they are no longer used but Montgomery doesn't go into this. She

has a lot of territory to cover. Beginning with her own 20-year flock of chickens, Montgomery celebrates birds - their individuality, biology, and abilities. She opens each chapter with specifics - the people involved and the birds they are involved with - then ranges into the science surrounding the species, exploring their specialized anatomy and the many behavior studies. Enraptured by her free-ranging chickens, affectionate hens who exhibit individual personalities, she intertwines an intriguing account of their lives and habits with results of studies on chicken communication and rooster behavior. But things change when a new flock of chickens takes up residence beside her own. "Everything the Rangers do is writ large. My hens are gentle, subtle; they are Ladies. The Rangers are drama queens." Observation drives her to the stunning conclusion that chicken culture is passed down through generations in one flock "of unrelated chickens of different breeds." Covered with persistent leeches, torn by thorns, Montgomery bleeds and sweats through the rainforests of Australia in search of the big, flightless, elusive cassowary. Genetically alien to us, birds are descendants of dinosaurs and the ancient cassowary is the best exemplar. At the opposite extreme are the tiny, dynamic hummingbirds. Montgomery visits a woman who raises and frees orphaned hummingbirds near San Francisco (which has 400 species!). Designed for flight, birds are almost more air than substance, and hummingbirds take this biology as far as it can go. Almost two weeks old, two baby siblings "weigh less than a bigger bird's single flight feather." If they survive they will be able to "hover, fly backward, even fly upside down." Some hummingbirds can dive at more than 60 miles per hour. Montgomery feeds us marvels of hummingbirds while the birds are fed every twenty minutes, without fail, all day long (everyone gets to sleep through the night). Though starvation is never far away, fledging is even more terrifying as there is nothing a hummingbird hates more than another hummingbird, and that includes any hapless fledglings not their own. Then Montgomery learns falconry, a fraught experience for a dedicated vegetarian and animal lover, but the thrill of the hunt opens new vistas. "A raptor's vision is the sharpest of all living creatures," she tells us. An eagle at 1,000 feet can spot prey across three square miles. Flight demands such quick comprehension that, because of specialized brain circuitry "birds capture at a glance what it might take a human many seconds to apprehend." "Raptors see in such fine detail that humans need microscopes to begin to imagine it." Birds are also thought to see colors we cannot even describe. At Irene Pepperberg's lab (famous for Alex, the African grey of *Alex and Me*) Montgomery sits in on a training session. Asked to name the color of various objects, the young subject bird seems annoyed and frustrated. On a hunch, one of the experimenters paints all his orange toys the same color orange and the frustration disappears. For her birthday Montgomery went dancing with Snowball, made famous from a YouTube video (if you haven't seen it, do). Snowball lives in a rescue home

with a lot of other parrots because he fell in love with his previous owner's daughter and was violently offended when she left him and went away to college. The crows wind things up. Smart toolmakers and users, crows are less beloved for their urban winter roosting habits. In Auburn, NY, the winter population is 28,000 people, 50,000 crows. And they prefer downtown. Why is a matter of some speculation - warmth from the asphalt and concrete, perhaps, or the excellent dumpster dining, or the bright lights that make predators visible. Montgomery visits the place when the city fathers decide to rid themselves of the crows once and for all. Montgomery's stories are funny, sad, poignant and fascinating. Her writing is engaging and she shares vast swaths of the latest research. Which brings up my only complaint. I would have liked some chapter notes. There is an index and a useful chapter-by-chapter bibliography, but notes referencing specific studies would have been handy. I would have liked to know more about the Monet-discerning pigeons, for example. Particularly as Montgomery more than once notes the conflicting results of bird studies (i.e., the amazing mechanics of migration). However, this minor quibble in no way diminishes the pleasure of the read. I defy anyone to read this book and look at pigeons, crows, or even hummingbirds, those tiniest dinosaurs, in quite the same way again.

I loved reading this book, which is a well balanced blend of science and up close personal adventures with birds. Years of experience with birds went into the writing. Besides raising her own brood of personality filled chickens, Sy pursued the giant, dinosaur-like cassowary in an Australian jungle, helped rescue a baby hummingbird the size and weight of an air bubble, partnered with a hawk trained to hunt with humans, kept vigil as homing pigeons raced back to their loft, danced with Snowball the YouTube sensation cockatiel, witnessed thousands of crows roost together in one very overwhelmed small town, and talked with loquacious parrots and the language researcher who trained them and worked with the renowned parrot Alex. Birdology gave me a fascinating glimpse into what we can know about the hearts and minds of a species with surprising amounts of individuality, social awareness, and intelligence.

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