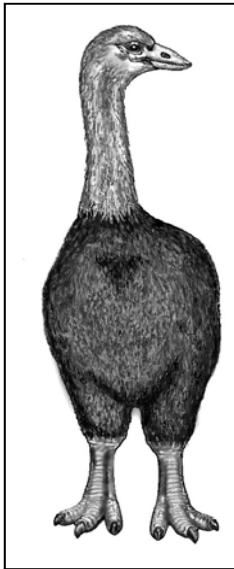


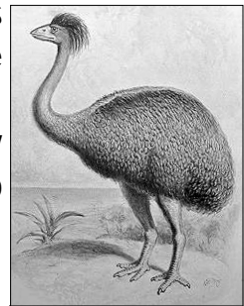
EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD
#10 THE ELEPHANT BIRDS OF MADACSCAR
Aepyornithidae



Aepyornis maximus
restoration
Image: "Acrocynus"

Elephant birds are an extinct family of ratites comprising the genera *Aepyornis* and *Mullerornis*.

They were giant flightless birds native to Madagascar, and have been extinct since at least the 16th century. *Aepyornis* was the world's largest known bird, believed to have been over three meters (10 feet) tall and weighing close to half a tonne (454 kilograms, or 1,000 pounds). Remains of *Aepyornis* adults and eggs have been found; some have a circumference of over one meter (three feet) and a length up to 34 cm. Their volume is about 160 times greater than that of a chicken egg. Like the Cassowary, Ostrich, Rhea, Emu and Kiwi, *Mullerornis* and *Aepyornis* were ratites; they could not fly, and their breast bones had no keel.

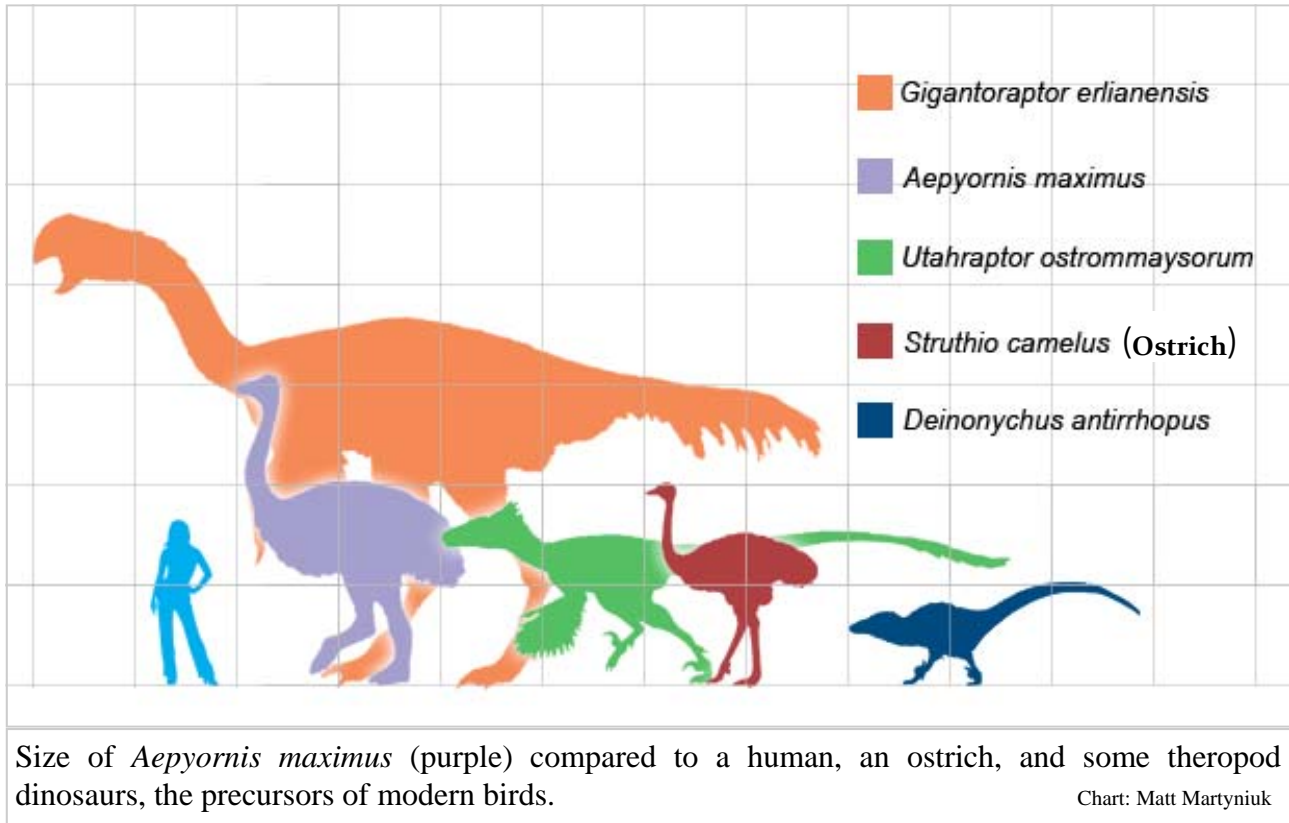


Another
Restoration of
Aepyornis maximus
Artist unknown

It is often believed the extinction of the *Aepyornis* was as a result of human activity. However, they were probably not only elusive but widespread, occurring from the northern to the southern tip of Madagascar, yet their eggs were vulnerable. A recent archaeological study found pieces of eggshell among the remains of human fires, suggesting that eggs regularly provided meals for entire families. It is not known if there were "fady" (taboos) against killing adult birds, although there is indeed evidence they were killed. Animals arriving with the human colonists, such as rats and dogs, may also have preyed upon the eggs and thus contributed to the decline of the species.

The exact time period when they became extinct is also not certain, as tales of these giant birds may have persisted for centuries in folk-memory. There is archaeological evidence of *Aepyornis* from a radiocarbon dated bone circa 120AD which shows signs of butchering, and there are radiocarbon dated shells from about 1000AD. An alternative theory states that humans hunted the elephant birds to extinction in a very short time, but this is unlikely given the size of Madagascar. It is also possible that a secondary effect of human impact was the transfer of hyperdiseases from human companion animals such as poultry and Guineafowl, as the bones of these domesticated species have been found in subfossil sites on the island, where *Mullerornis* sp. and *Aepyornis maximus* remains have been found.

A third viable theory to explain the demise of the Elephant Birds, first hypothesised by Attenborough in 1961, is climate change, which has caused increased drying of Madagascar starting ten thousand years ago and continuing to the present, and to which the impact of humans might have added.



In English *Aepyornis maximus* is commonly known as the 'Elephant Bird', a term that apparently originating from Marco Polo's account of the Rukh in 1298, although Polo was apparently referring to an eagle-like bird strong enough to "seize an elephant with its talons". The ancient Malagasy name for the bird is "Vorompatra", meaning "bird of the Ampatres". The Ampatres are today known as the Androy region of southern Madagascar. Indeed, Etienne de Flacourt wrote in 1658: "vouropatra - a large bird which haunts the Ampatres and lays eggs like the ostriches; so that the people of these places may not take it, it seeks the most lonely places".



Etienne de Flacourt
(1607–1660)
French governor of
Madagascar 1648-1655.

Occasionally sub-fossilised eggs are found intact. The National Geographic Society in Washington holds a specimen of an intact *Aepyornis* egg that contains the embryonic skeleton of the unborn chick. Another giant *Aepyornis* egg is on display at the Harvard Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, MA. While yet another

'Aepyornis' egg is preserved at the Grant Museum of Zoology at London University. The BBC television personality David Attenborough owns an almost complete fossilised eggshell, which he pieced together from fragments he personally found in Madagascar while filming for one of his splendid natural history programmes.



Sir David Attenborough
Photo: "Wildscreen"



Aepyornis eggs
Muséum national d'Histoire
Paris
Photo: "FunkMonk"

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA