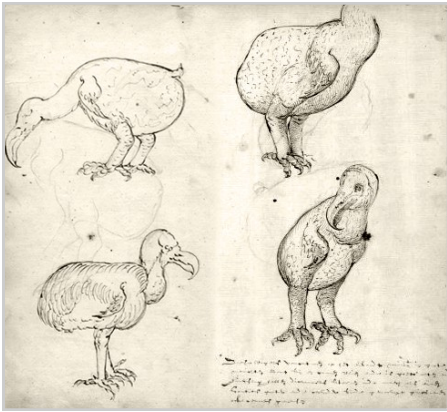


EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#32 DODO



THE FIRST KNOWN ILLUSTRATION
OF A DODO
from the Journal of the ship *Gelderland*
1601- 1603

The Dodo, *Raphus cucullatus*, was a flightless bird endemic to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. Related to pigeons and doves, it stood about a meter (3.3 feet) tall, weighed about 20 kilograms (44lb), lived on fruit, and nested on the ground.

The Dodo has been extinct since the mid-to-late 17th century. It is commonly used as the archetype of an extinct species because its extinction occurred during recorded human history and was directly attributable to human activity.

The first known descriptions of the bird were made by the Dutch. They called the Mauritius bird the *walghvogel* ("wallow bird" or "loathsome bird") in reference to its taste. Although many later writings say that the meat tasted bad, the early journals only say that the meat was tough but good, though not as good as the abundantly available pigeons. The name *walgvogel* was used for the first time in the journal of vice-admiral Wybrand van Warwijck, who visited the island in 1598 and named it Mauritius.



A Dodo reconstruction in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History
Photo: "Ballista"

The origin of the word *dodo* is unclear. Some ascribe it to the Dutch word *dodoor* for "sluggard", but it more likely is related to *dodaars* ("knot-arse"), referring to the knot of feathers on the hind end. The first recording of the word *dodaerse* is in captain Willem van Westsanen's journal in 1602. Thomas Herbert used the word *dodo* in 1627, but it is unclear whether he was the first; the Portuguese had visited the island in 1507, but, as far as is known, did not mention the bird. According to the *Encarta Dictionary* and *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, "dodo" derives from the

Portuguese "*doudo*" (currently *doido*) meaning "fool" or "crazy". However, the present Portuguese name for the bird, *dodô*, is taken from the internationally used word *dodo*.

The Dodo was a close relative of modern pigeons and doves. Analysis suggests that the Dodo's ancestors diverged from those of its closest known relative, the Rodrigues Solitaire (which is also extinct), around forty to sixty million years ago. As the Mascarenhas Archipelago is of volcanic origin and less than ten million years old, both birds' ancestors most likely remained capable of flight for a considerable time after their lineages' separation. The same study has been interpreted to show that the Southeast Asian Nicobar Pigeon, *Caloenas nicobarica*, is the closest living relative of both the Dodo and Réunion Solitaire.



Nicobar Pigeon
Photo: "Tomfriedel"

For a long time, the Dodo and the Rodrigues Solitaire (collectively known as "didines") were placed in a family of their own, the Raphidae. This was because their relationships to other groups of birds (such as rails, Rallidae) had yet to be resolved. Current opinion tends toward including the didines as a *subfamily* Raphinae in the pigeons and doves (Columbidae).

In October 2005, part of the Mare aux Songes, the pre-eminent site for Dodo remains, was excavated by an international team of researchers. The many remains found included bones from birds of various stages of maturity. Several bones, obviously belonging to the skeleton of one individual bird, were found preserved in a natural position. The findings of these researchers were made public in December 2005 at the Natural History Museum of the Netherlands. Prior to this, few associated Dodo specimens were known, as most of the material found consisted of isolated and/or scattered bones. Dublin's Natural History Museum and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, among others, have specimens assembled from these disassociated remains, and a Dodo egg is on display at the East London museum in South Africa.

Until recently, the most intact remains, currently on display at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, were one individual's partly skeletal foot and head which contain the only known soft tissue remains of the species. In June 2007, exploration of a cave in Mauritius discovered the most complete and well-preserved Dodo skeleton ever.



Plaster cast of a dried Dodo head & leg at the Brighton Museum (UK)

Photo: Ed Schipul

The works of early artists show the Dodo to have had greyish plumage; a 23cm (9") beak with a hooked point; very small wings; stout yellow legs and a tuft of curly feathers high on the rump. They were very large birds, weighing about 23kg (50lbs).

The sternum was not strong enough to support flight; so these ground-bound birds evolved to take advantage of an island ecosystem with no predators.

The traditional image of the Dodo is of a fat, clumsy bird, hence the synonym *Didus ineptus*, but this view has been challenged in recent times. Today's scientists are generally of the opinion that the old drawings showed overfed captive birds. Mauritius has marked dry and wet seasons, so the Dodo probably fattened itself on ripe fruits at the end of the wet season to enable it to survive through the dry season when food was scarce. Contemporary reports speak of the species' "greedy" appetite; and that in captivity, with food readily available, they became overweight very easily.



The Dodo Tree

The fruit of the Tambalacoque, *Sideroxylon grandiflorum*, also known as the "dodo tree", was hypothesised by Stanley Temple to have been eaten by Dodos, and that only by passing through the Dodo's digestive tract could the seeds germinate. He

claimed that the Tambalacoque was now nearly extinct as a result of the Dodo's disappearance. In an effort to prove his theory he force-fed seventeen Tambalacoque fruits to Wild Turkeys; of these, when planted, three germinated. However, Temple did not try to germinate any seeds from control fruits not fed to turkeys, so the effect of feeding the fruit to turkeys was unclear. Temple also overlooked reports on Tambalacoque seed germination by A. W. Hill in 1941 and H. C. King in 1946, who found the seeds germinated, but very rarely, without abrading.

Like many animals that have evolved in isolation from significant predators, the Dodo was entirely fearless of people. This, in combination with its inability to fly, made it easy prey for humans. However, there are many reports of the bad taste and toughness Dodo flesh, while some other local avian species were praised for their taste. The first humans to arrive on Mauritius brought with them animals such as dogs, pigs, cats, rats, and Crab-eating Macaques, all of which plundered the Dodo nests, while humans destroyed the forests where the birds lived. The impact these animals, especially the pigs and macaques, had on the Dodo population is currently considered to have been more severe than that of hunting. The 2005 expedition's finds are apparently of birds killed by a flash flood. Mass mortalities like this would have further jeopardised a species already in danger of becoming extinct.



Dodo Skeleton
Natural History Museum,
London, England
Photo: Heinz-Josef Lücking

Although there are scattered reports of mass Dodo killings for the provisioning of ships, archaeological investigations have so far found scant evidence of human predation of these birds. The bones of at least two Dodos were found in caves at Baie du Cap, which were used as shelters by fugitive slaves and convicts in the 17th century, but due to their location in high, broken terrain, they would not have been easily accessible to Dodos naturally.

There is some controversy surrounding the extinction date of the Dodo. Roberts & Solow state that "the extinction of the Dodo is commonly dated to the last confirmed sighting in 1662, reported by the shipwrecked mariner Volkert Evertsz" (Evertszoon), but other sources suggest the more conjectural date of 1681. Roberts & Solow point out that because the last sighting prior to 1662 was in 1638, the Dodo was probably already very rare by the 1660s, and thus a disputed report from 1674 cannot be summarily dismissed. Statistical analysis of the hunting records of Isaac Johannes Lamotius give a new estimated extinction date of 1693, with a 95% confidence interval of 1688 to 1715. Considering more circumstantial evidence, such as travellers' reports, and the lack of confirmed reports after 1689, it is likely the Dodo became extinct before 1700. Therefore, it can be taken that the Dodo became extinct little more than a century after its discovery in 1581.

By the early 19th century it seemed altogether too strange a creature, and was believed by many to be a myth. However, with the discovery of the first batch of Dodo bones in the Mare aux Songes swamp, and the subsequent reports written about them by George Clarke, the government schoolmaster at Mahébourg, from 1865 on, interest in the bird was renewed. In the same year in which Clarke started to publish his reports, the Dodo was featured in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. With the popularity of the book, the Dodo became a well-known and easily recognisable icon of extinction.

Today the Dodo is used by many environmental organisations, such as the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Jersey Zoological Park, founded by the late Gerald Durrell on Jersey in the Channel Islands, to promote awareness and protection of endangered species.



17th Century Illustration of a Dodo
'Dronte', was the 17th century Dutch name
for the Dodo

Artist unknown

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

