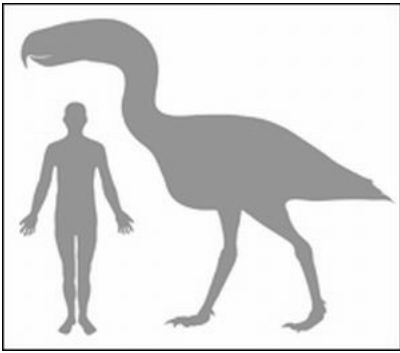
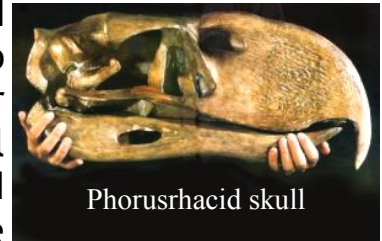


## FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY...STING LIKE A BEE

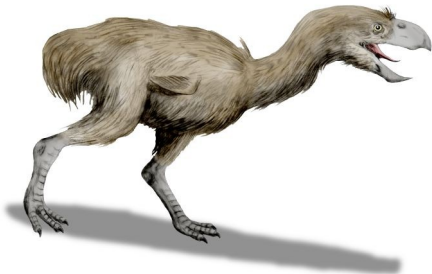


A recent article in the scientific journal PloS ONE hypothesises that the three metre high extinct *phorusrhacids*, or Terror Birds, of South America used their “hatchet-like” skulls to bring down prey.

By using computer modelling of a Terror Bird skull the researchers determined the predatory tactics used to acquire food. Their engineering analysis showed that the skull configuration almost certainly meant the birds used their massive head and hooked beak to cut into the flesh of their prey like an axe, rather than taking bites to disable it.



Phorusrhacid skull



*Paraphysornis brasiliensis*  
One of a number of prehistoric  
“Terror Bird” species  
Illustration: Nobu Tamura

According to the report’s co-author, Stephen Wroe of the University of New South Wales, these heavyweight birds acted more like a bobbing, weaving Muhammad Ali than a wading in and slugging it out Joe Frasier. Like Ali they had height and reach advantage and would jab away until they wore their prey down.

*Phorusrhacids* evolved in South America about sixty million years ago. They were very agile and could run at an estimated speed of 48kph (30mph).

Terror Birds thrived as the largest land predator on the continent until soon after South America collided with North America some three million years ago, after which they declined and became extinct.

R.V.C.