

Feathered FRIENDS

Meet the brilliant birds of the British Isles

 From the fastest flyer in the world, to a species found nowhere else on the planet, the British Isles are home to more than 280 types of birds, both great and small. And at times, our skies are alive with up to 600 different species, thanks to the visitors that fly here from far and wide, including the Arctic, Asia and Africa...

Puffin

There are more than 550,000 breeding pairs of puffins around the British Isles over the summer months, and "with its short legs, brightly coloured beak and clown-like feet, the puffin is hard to miss," says Chris Packham, Vice President of the RSPB. The seabirds arrive on the west coast of Scotland, Western Ireland, North Wales, south-west England and north-east England in April, forming huge breeding colonies on coastal cliff tops. Some colonies can be home to more than 200,000 birds!

Puffins lay their eggs in burrows dug into the soil, but they sometimes use empty rabbit burrows or cavities in cliffs, too. Amazingly, each puffin returns to the same burrow every year. Laying only a single egg, both puffin parents keep it warm for up to 45 days by sitting on it – and once the chick has hatched, they share the feeding duties, too.

Mega migration

"Incredibly, puffins use their short wings to fly underwater in search of fish. But having such short wings makes flying through the air a bit tricky – they have to flap their wings really quickly to keep themselves up," says Chris. The clever birds still manage to migrate thousands of kilometres to escape the winter cold, though – some making it as far as Morocco in Africa!

DID YOU KNOW...?

Puffins are a type of **auk**, medium-sized, short-winged, diving seabirds. Other auks include guillemots and razorbills.

It's not sunburn – the puffin's beak always turns red in the summer!

The peregrine is so swift, it can snatch its prey mid-air!

Only the male woodpecker has a red patch on its head



Peregrine Falcon

Whoosh! The peregrine falcon is the planet's fastest bird, reaching speeds of up to 400kmph when it dives to catch prey – which includes other birds! Nesting mainly in coastal cliffs, it has also started to make its home on top of tall city buildings, too.

This bird of prey was seriously endangered because of hunters and the widespread use of pesticides. But, luckily, its numbers are on the up, thanks to legal protection and safer pesticides, and there are now about 1,500 breeding pairs in the British Isles. Yay!

Crossbill

The crossbill's beak may look bent, but it's actually evolved like that over time to help it force open pine cones and tease the seeds out with its tongue. Clever!

This large finch breeds in the Scottish Highlands, the north Norfolk coast and the New Forest in south-west England, as well as parts of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Incredibly, the rare Scottish crossbill (see the small picture, below right) is the only species of bird in the British Isles that is found nowhere else in the world!

The bendy-beaked bird and its rare Scottish cousin (right)



Great spotted woodpecker

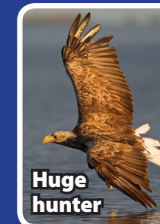
Ever heard a rapid 'drum roll' while in the woods? Well, it was probably a great spotted woodpecker, hammering away at a tree trunk! It does this for a number of reasons – from attracting mates, to digging for grubs, using its long sticky tongue to lick them out. Yum! Making its home in trees across England, southern Scotland and Wales, the noisy woodpecker is easy to spot, thanks to its black and white stripes and red tail.

Fly to the rescue

All kinds of birds can be found flying around the British Isles' skies. Many are here all year round, while others just pay us a summer visit. But, sadly, there are fewer and fewer of some of our favourite feathered friends...

White tailed eagle

Our biggest bird of prey lives in the north-west of Scotland. But we're seeing less and less of the white tailed eagle, as its nest is a target for egg collectors who keep its eggs as trophies. So now, when the RSPB finds a new nest, they make sure to keep it a secret. *Shhh!*



Huge hunter



Barley bird

Corn bunting

This 'fat bird of the barley' has dived in numbers by more than 90% since 1990. The corn bunting is suffering as its hedgerow

home is given over to crops. But some farmers are helping them by planting more seeds in autumn, when it's harder for this barley-loving bird to find food!

Turtle dove

Hunting and intensive farming have meant the number of breeding pairs of turtle doves here has plummeted by 94% in the last 20 years. Today, charities are fighting to rescue these migratory birds from the brink of extinction. Let's hope they make a comeback!



Dove in danger

EXTINCT...

Great auk

The last of the great auks in the British Isles was caught over 150 years ago in Scotland, after being mistaken for a witch! The poor penguin was very slow, making it easy prey for hunters – which is why we can see so many of the tiny-winged birds in museums today.



Amazing auk