

# Ornithology with James Maley

## Ologies Podcast

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Heeeyyy. I just wanted to say really quick, cool merch announcement. If anyone needs totes and mugs and hats and all kinds of cool stuff, my friends Shannon Feltus and her sister Boni Dutch have been awesome at helping me set up a merch site. It's at OlogiesMerch.com, and this week we just put them up, limited-edition, enamel Ologies pins. They come in a pack of five. The first four episodes are each represented in this little, cool pin, and then there's an Ologies logo pin also. They're super awesome. They're limited edition, so if you want 'em, get 'em. Just wanted to tell you up top.

On to the episode. Birds, birds, birds, birds, birds, birds, birds. Birbs. Birbs, boids. Chirpy-chirps. Flappy-flappers. Last week I covered death and dying and it was enlightening and shockingly not a bummer, but I wanted to get into birds to just kinda shake off that October mist. Let's just talk about birds. I don't know how you feel about birds. I've always had kind of a distant wonder about them. But I'm also like, "Birds, you would never let me pet you. Any of you." Which is kind of a really bitchy way to evaluate an animal. It's like "Can I pet it? No? Then I don't care." That's about to change.

Listeners, you send in questions before I record and I was shocked that a lot of questions were "Why is...insert species...such a dick?" and "Why do birds poop on me?" and "What did I ever do to birds?" was essentially the gist of a lot of the questions. So we definitely have a PR problem here, and this episode I think is gonna turn you around because birds are, yes, they're insane. I mean, they fly, first off, which is something that only superheroes and people on angel dust can do. They have weird buttholes, stay tuned, and they can mock your voice, and one of them can mimic the sound of a chainsaw. Also, they're dinosaurs that are alive now and their knees are sometimes backwards. If you were a bird publicist, you'd be like, "I don't even know where to start with your personal brand. What is your deal?"

Let's let an ornithologist speak for them, if you will. Now I've been aware of the Moore Lab of Zoology on the Occidental College campus (P.S. Obama went there) for a few years, and I was really stoked to get a green light for a really last-minute visit last week. I just recorded this a few days ago with the collections manager at the lab who oversees some really, really rare specimens that date back, some of them, as far as the 1790s. He's down to earth, dryly funny. He was sporting a baseball cap and a plaid shirt and a beard. He's like a mellow guy in a beef jerky commercial. And he is so passionate and knowledgeable about birds I could have filled up three episodes just answering your questions. But we chatted for a bit, and I asked all I could, and I feel a kinship with birds that makes me want to wink at them and say, "Hey, man. We're cool."

Please enjoy, James Maley.

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**Alie Ward:** Tell me what you ate for breakfast, I'll check your levels.

**James Maley:** I had some tater tots, eggs, and bacon. [both laugh]

**Alie:** Dude, that sounds like a dope breakfast. You are technically an ornithologist.

**James:** Correct. Yes.

**Alie:** When did James become a card-carrying ornithologist versus a bird-thirsty fanboy?

**James:** Since, I believe the summer of 2001 is when I started getting paid to conduct research on birds, which I technically think is when you become an ornithologist.

**Alie:** When they pay you, or when you get a certain certification?

**James:** When you get paid.

**Alie:** Okay. [*both laughing*] The first dollar exchange, and then you change your business card.

**James:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Have you been a birder for a long time?

**Aside:** I edit from transcripts of interviews done by artificial intelligence and this transcribed to, "Have you been a burger for a long time?"

**James:** Yeah, I've been a [*clip from above...Alie, "burger"*] for a long time. I was super into birds when I was a little kid and then I didn't think birds were cool enough, so I didn't pay attention to birds for a while. Then I got back into birds in high school, and then in college I went full in.

**Alie:** You went full bird nerd? So there was a period in junior high where you were like, "Psh. Birds. No. I like *Miami Vice*."

**James:** Yeah. Exactly.

**Alie:** Pretty much? Birds are like, "Whatever. We'll see you in a couple of years."

**James:** Yup.

**Alie:** Why did you start liking birds when you were a kid?

**James:** My parents had feeders in the backyard and I would just spend hours staring out the window at the birds and I was, like, two. I was just really, really into them. I loved seeing the colors and just what they were doing. I actually memorized all the birds that came into the feeder, and I tricked my parents into thinking I knew how to read because they would point to a bird in the field guide and I would say what it was, but I couldn't read yet.

**Alie:** How old were you?

**James:** I don't know, like two or something.

**Alie:** So you were like a mini bird genius?

**James:** Yeah. [*laughs*]

**Aside:** James's uncle is a big birder and his dad is into birds too.

**James:** I think they just thought it was natural to be into birds.

**Alie:** Do you think it's in your genes?

**James:** I think so. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** What does it mean to be a birder? Because I'm not hip with like bird culture but I understand it is like the 'Cult of Ornithology.' Birders, they're out there with the binoculars, they count how many species they see per year. What is that like? How do you get jumped into that gang?

**James:** There's a whole range of birders. There's casual birders who just like birds and they'll have feeders up in their yard or not, and just look at birds and appreciate them and not even really care that much about what they're seeing and how many they're seeing. And then there's the other extreme which are listers.

**Aside:** Listers love numbers. They really focus on seeing as many species as they can in a given place at a given time. For some reason, during this part, I couldn't stop gasping because this whole subculture just totally delights and baffles me. I used to be a goth in college and every once in a while we'd take someone who was not goth to a club, and they would be like "Whaaat is happening?" I'd be like, "Oh, that guy smoking a cigarette out of a cigarette holder he fashioned from computer parts, oh, he's just a cyber-goth." Like, "Oh, that's a Victorian goth over there." So my introduction to this bird world is like if you took a jock and ducked him into a basement at a gothic-industrial dungeon and were just like, "Oh yeah. There's a lot to learn."

**James:** And so any time a rare bird shows up, they'll chase it. They get in their car or get on a plane and fly there and try to see it. And there's people that have done that for the world. A "big year" for the world. I think the record was just broken. It was like 6000 something species. It was just insane.

**Alie:** So they'll hear like a duck-billed spoonbill...that is probably not a real bird...

**James:** It's not a bird. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** ...was seen in Monterrey and then they'll go try to see if they can catch that one before it flies somewhere else?

**James:** Yep.

**Alie:** That's like the Dave Matthews Band people or like Phish people, you know what I mean? PH fish people, not...I mean, no one follows schools of fish.

**James:** Right.

**Alie:** Have you ever been kind of like embedded with a group of really zealous birders? Or would you say your work is kind of like being a professional lister?

**James:** I am not. I don't keep a list. I keep track of the birds that I see, generally, and I know the ones I've seen and haven't seen. I really enjoy birds and I just like watching them all the time, but I generally don't chase.

**Aside:** Who has seen the most birdseses? Right now, the record seems to be one Jon Hornbuckle, who himself sounds like a type of bird. Like a [*old-fashioned, school marm voice*] Hornbuckle Jonboy. Anyway. Of the approximately 10,000 known species of birds, Jon Hornbuckle has seen 9600, according to a master list at Surfbirds.com. I also find it really curious in looking at this list, that he is like the top birder in the world, but he's very blasé and his name is in all lower case. Everyone else's name, upper and lower case, umlauts, hyphens, he's just got one, lower case, like he entered it while he was on his phone, in line at the post office, so casual. He describes himself as,

*...a victim of an obsession for birding. Like most addictions it has its dangers, some of which I have fallen foul of, but it has given me much pleasure and purpose to life.*

I imagine Jon Hornbuckle standing at a window, cupping a mug of hot, herbal tea with these words running in a voiceover like a pharmaceutical ad.

As I started getting deeper into the cult of birding research, one story donkey kicked me right in the heart. The record for one lister, life-long, top birder, belonged to a middle-aged woman named Phoebe Snetsinger, who was diagnosed with a fatal cancer, so she turned her attention toward birding to lift her spirits. Get this—her cancer went into remission! But she had developed a birding addiction that compelled her to travel around the world, at times in severe peril. She was attacked by five men with machetes and survived. I won't even go into the details, and she continued her treks, she kept going. She missed her mother's funeral; she missed her daughter's wedding in a quest to see more birds. Cancer never took her life, rather Phoebe was killed in a car crash in Madagascar, while birding.

Oh man! Whoo! What's my point? People. Love. Birds. People love birds! Which leads me to realize, birds are very loveable.

**Alie:** This is such a silly question, I'm sure you get asked this a million times, all the time. Do you have a favorite bird?

**James:** No. I don't.

**Aside:** Dang-it.

**James:** I have some birds that I'm particularly fond of and mostly it's the birds that I've studied, that I've gotten to know really, really well. There's these birds in California called Ridgway's rail. They're only found in salt marshes in San Francisco, L.A., and San Diego, and a few places in between, so obviously they're not doing great. They're endangered.

**Aside:** James studied the Ridgway rail for his dissertation and, baller alert:

**James:** And actually I named them that.

**Alie:** You did?

**James:** Yeah. That was pretty cool. Me and my adviser did.

**Alie:** Okay. What was the whiteboard like when you're coming up with brainstorming names to get to name a bird?

**James:** Well the scientific name was already decided because that takes priority, but if there's no standardized common name you can come up with whatever standard English name you want to. The scientific name is *Rallus obsoletus*, so I didn't want to go with 'Obsolete rail,' because [*laughing*] that's a little too dark.

**Alie:** It's a little insulting. It's like, "I'm right here."

**James:** I know, but they're almost gone, so maybe... I went with Ridgway's rail which is a mouthful. People complain about it because it's hard to say but a lot of bird names are hard to say.

**Alie:** Yeah. Get over it.

**James:** It's just because they're not used to it.

**Aside:** Ridgway's rail is... By the way I've said Ridgway's rail... [*Alie from an earlier take, "Widgeway wails"*] Ridgway's rails wrong several times. Ridgway's rail, it's cute as hell. It's like this chicken-sized bird, it looks kind of like a cross between a duck and a pigeon, and it's the color of like, if you were holding a yam and dropped it in potting soil. It's cute. And Robert Ridgway was this really influential and amazing ornithologist, he was responsible for understanding a lot of avian diversity. He was the dude.

**James:** And he has no bird in the U.S. named after him, so I wanted to pay homage to him and he described the first rails out here.

**Alie:** Did you hear from his family at all?

**James:** I haven't. No.

**Alie:** Do they know?

**James:** Maybe. I don't know.

**Alie:** Shoot him a tweet.

**James:** Yeah, I should try.

**Aside:** I really, really wanted the Ridgway family to know about this bird so I took a research tangent and I found out that Robert Ridgway had one child named Audubon. And yes, he named his child after a bird painter. Audubon, himself an ornithologist, sadly died young in his 20s. No kids. So he had no grandkids. Then I dove deeper and I found out that Robert Ridgway's brother was also a bird painter who worked at the L.A. County Natural History Museum.

John Ridgway lived in Glendale, so at 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night, I started to gently stalk anyone with the last name Ridgway from Glendale, California and I sent a few Facebook messages and friend requests saying, "Hey. I don't know if you're related to these

ornithologists, but I have some information about a bird that was named after them." I even sent one message via LinkedIn. None of my messages were returned. But I tried. I was starting to watch the people related to the birdwatcher that a birdwatcher had known. Anyway.

**Alie:** Would you say that he's kind of your ornithological hero a little bit?

**James:** Yeah. I mean he was doing ornithology at a time that was really, really different but his eye for subtle differences and different populations and understanding how birds live in this world was just amazing.

**Alie:** I think about studying birds and what you do and I just can't imagine how big of a challenge it is when you see something and it'll just alight on a branch and then be gone. Is that like a fun game to you or do you ever get frustrated by that?

**James:** I definitely get frustrated sometimes, but when you bird as much as I do, you don't encounter that many birds that you can't identify pretty quickly from sight and or sound. So even if a bird lights on a branch for a second, if I get a good look at it there's a pretty good chance I'll know what it is.

**Alie:** You know what's up.

**James:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Have you been through so many different pairs of binoculars to find the best kind?

**James:** I actually don't own a pair of binoculars at the moment.

**Alie:** Whaat?! How is that possible?! You're an ornithologist!

**James:** I know. It's ridiculous.

**Aside:** Okay. Listen up. This is crazy.

**James:** My first pair of binoculars, I really loved those, they lasted for 10 years, and then I was robbed at gunpoint in Honduras and they stole it, stole my pair. So I lost my original pair. And then I was given a pair by somebody else and I left those on a table at the San Diego Zoo. Not as dramatic a story, *[laughing]* but then we have binoculars here at the Moore Lab that I just use.

**Alie:** In Honduras, that was doing field work?

**James:** It was, yeah.

**Alie:** I'm sure that's the most dramatic thing that's happened. Right? The fieldwork must take you all over the globe, right?

**James:** It does. I've spent quite a bit of time in Peru, Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Mexico. Those are the main places I've been, and a lot of time in Alaska, all over the state.

**Alie:** When you're doing field work, what's a typical day like for you when you're not getting robbed at gunpoint, which by the way I'm so sorry that happened. That's horrifying.

**James:** It was a while ago.

**Aside:** Field work for ornithologists can involve danger, clearly, and it sounds otherwise kind of like camping, but also carrying so much equipment while taking notes on everything and data and observations and you don't get much sleep. On a recent expedition in Mexico...

**James:** We were usually just exhausted and would just build a campfire and you know, grab some tequila and just chill out for an hour or two.

**Aside:** What is it about ornithology? Why do people go so crazy for birds? Some social psychology studies point to perhaps a holdover instinct in humans just to hunt stuff. I get it. I get it. I've spent long hours, late nights on Amazon just looking up shit. People go on eBay to buy old VHS tapes, other people twitch for birds. Makes sense.

**Alie:** Do you as an ornithologist have a favorite movie about birds or a least favorite movie about birds?

**James:** I honestly generally don't watch movies about birds because it's usually so wrong. [*both laughing*] Like I've never seen the movie *The Big Year* which is all about birds.

**Alie:** Oh is it? I don't know that movie.

**James:** It's with Jack Black and Steve Martin and Owen Wilson and it's all about these three birders who are trying to break the record for most species seen in the U.S., or the ABA area, in one year.

**Alie:** And you're just like, "No. You got so much wrong."

**James:** I don't know. It's like I don't even want to look [*both laugh*] because I'm one of those people who, when I'm watching a movie and the wrong bird call is in the background, I get super annoyed. [*both laugh*] A lot of movies I have to just pretend that they're getting it right.

**Alie:** Like the bald eagle?

**James:** That's a classic one. [*high-pitched, hoarse, bird scream*] They use a red-tailed hawk's screech instead. Well, bald eagles sound pretty stupid.

**Alie:** What do they sound like?

**James:** They kind of sound [*repetitive, high-pitched, whistling, squeaky bursts*] like high pitched and squealing.

**Alie:** How do you feel about the bald eagle being our national bird rather than the turkey? Was it Ben Franklin that said, "Let's make the turkey our national bird"?

**James:** That's my understanding although I don't really know if that's true, but that's what I've always understood is that he wanted the wild turkey to be the national bird. I would actually rather it be the wild turkey honestly, because turkeys are super smart. They might not seem it, but they are. They are very good at outwitting us and people go to great lengths to shoot them because they're so smart and they have super good vision. I

lived in Alaska for long enough to see what bald eagles really are. Which if you ever go to Homer, Alaska...

**Alie:** I've been there.

**James:** You've been there? Did you look at the dumpster behind the McDonald's because it was probably full of eagles? *[laughs]*

**Alie:** *[laughing]* No, but now I have to go back.

**James:** They're really scavengers. There are some birds that only steal from other birds and other things. They're called kleptoparasites. But bald eagles are not kleptoparasites. They can catch their own food, but more often than not, I've seen them steal food. I saw one steal a flounder from a river otter. It's like, "Come on. The river otter's just finally caught his dinner and you steal it." That's just rude. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** That is a pretty American tradition though. *[laughs]*

**James:** *[laughs]* I suppose so. Yeah.

**Aside:** In terms of that Ben Franklin story... We were both a little bit wrong about this. He didn't push for the turkey to be the national bird, he just said later (he threw a bunch of shade at it in a private letter to his daughter), "For my own part, I wish the bald eagle had not been chosen as representative of our country." He said, "He is a bird of bad moral character," and "he does not get his living honestly." Ben Franklin also said that, ya know, the turkey is "a much more respectable bird." It's "a little vain and silly," but it's "a bird of courage." So then I typed "bald eagle plus dumpster" into Google, and sure enough I found this:

*[clip from YouTube video: "Look at these, all these eagles. I don't know what's going on in this dumpster today."]* Something struck me as kind of eerily familiar about the voice and then I realized it was the honeyed tones of an Alaskan who goes by Pam Aus, and she had a video that went viral a few years ago of a bald eagle and a fox chilling on her porch. I highly recommend just brewing yourself some decaf, cozying up to her channel, because it is like weird, bald eagle diaries. It feels like you accidentally fell into someone else's dream.

**Alie:** Are there any myths or misconceptions about birds that you're like, "I got to go straight in there and bust that?"

**James:** 'Birdbrains' is really aggravating because birds are incredibly smart. I mean they're smart on a level that we don't really appreciate, I feel like. Magpies can recognize themselves in a mirror.

**Aside:** For more on this mirror self-recognition test and its history, and which animals look in it and are like, "Hey. I'm looking good," listen to the episode on primates.

**James:** There's not very many organisms that can do that. I mean cats, dogs, we think of them as kind of smart, but they can't figure that out. But birds can. They're tool users. I mean parrots are just unbelievably smart. The most famous one is a parrot that was studied



by Irene Pepperberg who studied this really beautiful African grey parrot and just incredible research done with that bird.

**Aside:** Looked this up and whoa, oh shit y'all. The Wikipedia for this bird just says 'ALEX (parrot).' He just has one name. He's known, like he's Adele or Madonna. Alex was an African grey parrot and researchers said his name stood for 'Avian Learning Experiment.'

Also, when an acronym is made to spell a word, by the way, that's called a 'backronym' which delights me because I always wondered when you see an acronym that's kinda like, "Okay. I guess that works," that there's actually a word for that. Backronyms are sometimes created to name laws and the official title of the USA PATRIOT Act from 2001 is "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. It spells USA PATRIOT. Okay. That's a stretch.

Alex was said to have a 100-word vocabulary, this parrot, and the intelligence of a 5-year-old human. What they say was exceptional is that he appeared to understand what he said, so he could describe a key as a key no matter what color or size it was. He's like, "I know it's a key, guys. You put a key in front of me. I'm able to say, 'That's a key'."

I also find this adorable: Alex called an apple a 'banerry,' which one linguist thinks is a combination of 'banana' and 'cherry,' which are two fruits he was down with. So he was in that lab making up portmanteaus and I think, frankly, that makes him a poet.

He was also a bitch when he needed to be. If he said, "Want a banana," and someone's like, "Okay. Here's a nut," he "stared in silence, asked for the banana again, or took the nut and threw it at the researcher or otherwise displayed annoyance, before requesting the item again."

He's salty with those nuts, man.

Alex died really young for a parrot. He was only 31 years old. He died suddenly of heart trouble, they think. A lot of well-cared-for African greys live into their 60s. If you get an African grey parrot, you're going to die with that parrot. They live kinda forever. This is precious; just grab onto your heart you guys. Alex's last words were, "You be good, see you tomorrow, I love you." They were the same words that he would say every night when Irene Pepperberg left the lab. [*sighs*] Feelings.

Speaking of birds speaking...

**Alie:** Are there any birds that in the wild have the most beautiful call to you?

**James:** I would say the one that I've most commonly heard is sandhill cranes. If you've ever been where there's big flocks of sandhill cranes, they have this incredible trumpeting sound [*short bursts of resonant, rolling bugling*] that they do in the air and they'll form these huge flocks in the winter. They would come through Fairbanks in the fall and their call, I don't know, it's haunting. It's really beautiful.

**Alie:** How about when, and I'm forgetting the name, is it a murmur of birds?

**James:** Murmuration.

**Alie:** Murmuration. Can you explain, at all, how a murmuration works?

**Aside:** A murmuration is a flock of birds, like starlings, in these liquid-looking formations that are just bogglingly gorgeous to watch. It's so weird. Look it up. It's like a living lava lamp in fast motion. It's like a screen saver someone would stare at in college while being on drugs in the dorms or something, but like, birds.

**Alie:** Because, I look at it and I'm like, "Oh, that's witchcraft. That's so beautiful and crazy." Is it fluid dynamics? Is it like, crowd-think? How do they do that?

**James:** I have no idea. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Okay. *[laughs]* And next question.

**James:** Look I could make something up, but... *[laughs]*

**Aside:** A little info on that. Murmurations tend to happen when there's a predator around and the birds are evading it. This is really cool—it doesn't matter the size of the flock; each bird is reacting not to the size of a huge flock, but just to the seven birds around it. They calculated this. They used physics. I don't know. Some Italian researchers came up with it. It's like you're super in-tune with your little posse and then a bunch of little posses make up this one, big, swirling, diving, massive, monster posse.

**James:** It's incredible. I know. I love watching it. It's amazing. I've seen it so many times and I've never seen them crash.

**Alie:** Did you hear about dinosaurs when you were a kid or do you care about the link, that birds are dinosaurs? Or are you like, "Dinosaurs can take a hike? Take a hike, don't care."

**James:** I loved dinosaurs when I was a little kid. I was super into dinosaurs and I didn't make the connection between birds and dinosaurs and I don't think scientists had solidified that until I had gotten super into birds. I like to remind myself every now and again that I'm going dinosaur watching. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** You're going dinosauring! Correct me if I'm wrong, I feel like if Steve Jobs had to design an orifice it would be a cloaca. So simple. It's one thing.

**Aside:** A cloaca is like the home button on an iPhone, it's really all ya need. It's a one-stop shop for liquid waste, solid waste and then as a bonus it's also a sex portal. Birds get it on via what is called – no joke – a cloacal kiss. They just smooch butts, sometimes only for a few seconds.

If you're heard gossip about duck mating, well, a lot of it might be true. Waterfowl gonads, Google it, or you can go straight to an article on Nat Geo called "Duck Penises Grow Bigger Among Rivals" which was written by a friend of mine, Jason Goldman who's a wildlife journalist. Great icebreaker topics. He covers some good ones. Now, back to cloacas.

**Alie:** Why is it reptiles and birds are just like, "I got a single port here. Don't worry about it."?

**James:** They have a whole different physiological mechanism for waste excretion than we do, and reproduction. So they all have internal gonads too, which it would be weird if they didn't.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Yeah that would be.

**James:** But they have a really sort of different kidney system than we do. And so they are able to produce their waste as sort of one product and shoot it out. It's much more efficient. They're not as good at excreting salt from their blood with their kidneys as much as we are. But a lot of birds have a salt gland in their head, well they have two salt glands in their head. So it isn't all out of one.

**Alie:** They excrete salts from a gland in their head?

**James:** They do.

**Alie:** Nothing crazy and weird about that or anything. *[laughs]*

**James:** Nope. They're like little mini kidneys that rest on the top of their skull and they filter salt out of the blood at super high efficiency so that they can drink seawater. Seabirds can drink the ocean water and it's no problem. But if you're ever on the beach and you see a gull with a droplet dripping off the tip of its bill, that's saltwater that's excreted from their salt gland, it comes out the nostrils and drips down off the hook of the bill.

**Alie:** So they have a nasshole I guess. *[laughs]* So they're peeing out of their face.

**James:** Pretty much. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** No big deal. I wonder if they'll ever study that method of excretion in terms of a desalination. Will they ever look at, "Maybe we can attach that as a backpack so human seafarers can..." I don't know.

**Aside:** I'm applying for a patent. Moving on.

**Alie:** I have a question about male and female birds. Why is it that, at least in human species, ladies—we're painting our faces, we're dressing up, men are like, "Whatever. I am wearing beige again." Why is it in birds the men are very decked out and fancy and the ladies are like, "I'm a little bit bigger and I'm beige"?

**James:** That's not always the case in birds. There are some species in which the females are much brighter than the males. They have a different meaning system. In the vast majority of birds, about 90 percent of species, they're monogamous, and in a lot of those, you can't tell males and females apart at all. But in situations where there's really strong sexual selection on males that's put on them by females, and in a lot of those situations, there's a resource involved so there's resource defense. Polygyny is one system where a male with a really bright ornament who's the strongest male defends a resource and all the females that come in can, like, mate with him.

**Alie:** That's polygyny? That's the opposite of monogamy?

**James:** Polygyny is one male, multiple females. Polyandry is one female, multiple males. And in those birds the females are brighter than the males.

**Alie:** Really? So whoever is attracting the most mates is going to be as decked out? Got it.

**James:** The birds that have probably the craziest difference between males and females are these birds that do a thing called 'lekking.' If you don't know what lekking is, it's pretty fantastic. What happens is, these males, they all gather together and display. They're not displaying to each other, they're displaying to any female that will come in.

**Aside:** What!?! You know how sometimes it's secretly awesome to have a cold because you're in quarantine, you're not allowed to breathe on anyone so you could sit alone and watch weird videos for a week? I just sampled a few minutes of lekking videos, and I wanna go lick some doorknobs. I just wanna get up in some NyQuil and some of these videos, ooh they're so good.

**James:** And so they just do all these crazy elaborate displays. And the one who's looking the best and is displaying the best gets the females.

**Alie:** Aww. It's a Miss Universe pageant but with male birds? *[laughing]*

**James:** Pretty much. *[laughs]* It's really incredible.

**Alie:** Do you have a favorite documentary about birds?

**James:** *Life of Birds*. The whole thing.

**Alie:** Is it a series?

**James:** Yeah. It's a six-part series by BBC, narrated by David Attenborough, of course.

**Alie:** I watched *Planet Earth*. The albatross portion where he was waiting for his mate to come back, I was like, "Should I be crying right now? Because I am."

**James:** Yeah you should be. Yeah.

**Alie:** How did you feel about Portlandia's sketch about 'put a bird on it.'?

**James:** I loved it. I agree. If you put a bird on it, people will buy it. I'm the same way. It doesn't matter. If I see a product with a bird on it, I will buy it.

**Alie:** Do people give you a lot of birdy gifts?

**James:** Yes. All birds. Books. Everything, yeah.

**Alie:** Do you ever get sick of it, or are you like, "Bring it on?"

**James:** No, I'm fine with it. It makes it easier. Yeah, and everybody who would get me anything knows, "Just get him something with a bird and he'll be thrilled." *[laughs]*

**Alie:** I have some questions from listeners. Are you ready? Warning: some of these might be very stupid, and those are the best kind. We're going to start with Patreon listeners. They get first crack.

John Worster wants to know: How fast do hummingbirds beat their wings, and how many calories a day do they need?

**James:** I don't know the answer to either of those questions. I could Google it.

**Alie:** I'll look it up.

**Aside:** Alright, John. I looked it up. Here's the deal. The fastest recorded rate is about 80 beats per second, but the average is around 53 beats per second, and these tiny birds consume between 3.14 and 7.6 calories a day, which, totally non-scientific estimate, I think that's like a sip of soda.

**James:** I know the smallest hummingbird on earth, the bee hummingbird in Cuba, has a heart rate of twelve hundred beats per minute, so super high metabolism, and they have to drink some nectar pretty much as soon as they wake up. I have hummingbird feeders at my house and they're out there well before dawn, the feeders covered. If they don't get some sugar water after a long night, they're dead.

**Alie:** They're chasing that dragon.

**James:** They're also on a constant sugar high.

**Alie:** *[laughing]* No wonder why their heart rate is so high. At least it's not caffeinated, at least not like a Monster Energy drink in your bird feeder. That would be insane.

Jordan S. wants to know: Why do Australian magpies attack people during swooping season?

**James:** I'm not familiar with Australian magpies, but I'm guessing that that's when they're nesting and they want you to get away from their nests or their young. I mean that's usually the answer to why a bird is swooping at you.

**Alie:** That means, "Get away from my babies?"

**James:** Yep.

**Alie:** Okay. So get away from their babies. That's how you stop that.

**James:** Exactly.

**Alie:** Paul Ohainle wants to know: What's the deal with 'Vo' [phonetic] swifts and chimney swifts? Do you know anything about this?

**James:** I do. Well, first of all, it's 'Voxes' [ph.] swift.

**Alie:** Thank you. It was V A U X and I went for the fancy pronunciation.

**James:** I know. Everybody does. But the guy's last name was Vaux, who it's named after.

**Alie:** Gosh. I tried; I overshot that one.

**James:** It's okay. It's common, very, very common. They're super similar but they're basically just eastern and western replacements for one another, so Vauxes are only in the west

and chimneys are only in the east. You can tell them apart, but you almost never find them together, so you can pretty much know which one you're looking at depending on where you are.

**Alie:** Zoe wants to know: Is birdwatching a gateway drug to ornithology?

**James:** It can be.

**Alie:** Okay. So watch yourself unless you want to become an ornithologist and start getting paid for it. Don't get into birding.

**James:** It's not a bad gig. [*both laugh*]

**Alie:** Michael Satumbaga said: How smart are crows? Because they definitely seem like they're watching me, plotting something.

**James:** Crows are incredibly smart and they are watching and plotting something. They can recognize faces of people. They all also have their own dialect, so they have their own voices and they can recognize each other by voice. They all sound the same to us but they're not. There's some really, really cool studies that people have done, especially in Seattle, using masks to see if crows really can recognize individual faces and they can.

**Alie:** Oh my god. So they might be like, "Oh I know that guy. He comes out with some leftover Fritos after lunch," and maybe like, "I hate that guy he's always by my nest."

**James:** Yep. Totally.

**Alie:** So don't fuck with a crow. No. Don't do it. They know you like, "Ech. That guy."

Blake Hawkins wants to know: Is there any hierarchy of intelligence of birds? Is there one species that's extremely intelligent and others that are maybe not so much?

**James:** Yes, that's definitely true. The corvids which are the crows, ravens and jays, magpies, those are among the smartest. They're probably the smartest songbirds, so passerines, and then parrots are incredibly smart. Birds like American coots, uh...

**Alie:** Just the fact that it's called an American coot... [*laughs*]

**James:** It's a coot. I know. If you ever look at a coot, and they're very common and most people just don't pay any attention to them. They have a huge body and a tiny head. They're cute, but they're really stupid.

**Alie:** They sound like your drunk uncle at the holidays who makes sexist remarks that everyone ignores. [*Southern accent*] American coot.

**James:** Pretty much. [*laughs*]

**Aside:** This next question is from the Facebook group.

**Alie:** Can owls really turn their heads 180 degrees?

**James:** Yes.

**Alie:** Okay. Why?

**James:** They have really flexible necks. But they're also really adapted at... So owls have ears at different heights on their head.

**Alie:** One's over here, one's over there?

**James:** Yeah. One's higher than the other, and that way they can better get sound. They can triangulate sound so that if they hear a little mouse that's running behind them they'll turn their head all the way around. Then they can hear exactly where the mouse is and go get it.

**Alie:** They don't look wonky.

**James:** No they don't.

**Alie:** You know they don't look like Sloth from *Goonies* or anything.

**James:** Right. If you open... If you have a dead one... We had one that just got hit by a car not too long ago, well, a couple of years ago. If you opened it up, you could see the flaps on either side are on completely different heights. That's neat.

**Alie:** Oh, I had no idea. What's the most absurd bird ever?

**James:** I think the most absurd bird and also a little bit scary is called a horned screamer. [*both laugh*] It's a great name. And I would recommend everybody to look it up. There's some great YouTube videos of horned screamers screaming.

**Alie:** Horned Screamer sounds like the worst guy at a frat party.

**James:** Seriously. You would not want to go dressed up as a horned screamer to a Halloween party. They have a giant, bony feather coming out of their head, so they're sort of like a unicorn in that respect. They're related to geese, sort of, but they have a bill like a vulture and their feet aren't webbed. And they scream. You can hear them for over a mile, and they're super territorial. They have these huge wing spurs on their wings that they like to try to kill each other with.

**Aside:** Hell yes, I looked this up. Are you kidding me?! The visual of this is like two angry, hairy toddlers [*repetitive but varied, high-pitched barking honks*] screaming at each other, honking like ping pong back and forth but each with a single bouncing, like needle-like spike emerging from the top of their heads. Whatever you're picturing in your mind, trust me the reality is weirder. You must get up in this.

**Alie:** I'm going to get a big horned screamer tattooed right across my back and shoulders. [*both laugh*]

Lily Masa wants to know: Why do we call people 'chickens' when chickens are actually mean and cocky as fuck?

**James:** That's a good question. I don't know. Chickens are kind of scared generally. I mean, they're a little flighty.

**Alie:** Maybe that's why they're so mean is because they're scared.

**James:** Well I would say roosters are mean, but hens not so much.

**Aside:** All right. I looked into 'chicken' etymology and I didn't come up with much, but I did find so many entries on English as a Second Language forums asking, if I may quote one directly:

*I would like to know that what is meaning, "Don't be chicken"? and how can use it?*

It's a good question. Now, to be fair, I'm not a French-as-a-first-language speaker, and I have always wondered why if someone is mad at you in France, they call you a 'duck.' Because, *canard* in French is 'duck,' and my mom always told me, "If someone calls you a duck in French, you're in some hot water." Now I just found out, looking at this, that non-French speakers often mishear that, and what they're being called is a *connard* which in English does not mean 'duck.' It's more akin to... 'Cloaca' is what that means. I think we should start calling people 'cloacas.'

**Alie:** This is so sad. Ryan [ph.] wants to know: There are some birds that partner for life. Say one of them dies. Does the surviving bird re-partner? And is there like a Tinder for birds?

**James:** The surviving partner does find a new mate. It's all driven by the desire to reproduce, so you're not going to have a bird that suddenly turns that off even though its mate died. And a lot of birds seem like they mate for life but they don't. They actually will switch partners every year.

**Alie:** So we've been led wrong? Like I've heard that penguins are maybe not as monogamous.

**James:** Most monogamous birds are not fully monogamous. Most of them are promiscuous. They're socially monogamous, but they're promiscuous. There's some birds that do this to an absolute extreme. There's some fairy-wrens in Australia. I think they're called Superb Fairy-wrens.

**Aside:** The bird names are killing me.

**James:** It's so out of control that sometimes not a single egg in a female's nest was sired by her partner. So that every single egg that's in her nest, she copulated with another male.

**Aside:** Get it giiiir!

**Alie:** But it looks as though she is partnering with and rearing them with one male? Does the male know about this?

**James:** I mean, he must because he's doing it too to every other female in the area.

**Alie:** So it's kind of like a New-Age, "We're together, but we're not shackled to one another"?

**James:** Exactly.

**Alie:** Do you think that people use birds and their monogamy or lack of monogamy to justify their own behaviors?



**James:** Definitely. Yeah.

**Alie:** Heather Ennis wants to know: Why do I always see pigeons with one clubbed, stumpy foot? I think maybe that isn't an accurate sample population.

**James:** It's for a couple of reasons.

**Aside:** I love that he has an answer for this.

**James:** Often, they'll get something stuck on their foot...

**Aside:** Spoiler alert: it was a tangly haaaair ball.

We caught it and pulled the hairball off it. But I think that's it. Their feet, they're always walking around on the ground getting into things and so I think they just get into something that tangles on their foot and then they lose it.

**Alie:** Street birds, man.

Sam Ara wants to know: Are bird cages cruel, and should we give them big aviaries or just not have them as pets?

**James:** I think we should just not have them as pets. Bird cages are cruel. A bird's meant to live and fly around the world. It's like we saw something that has evolved to fly and decided they shouldn't anymore, and keep them in our house. It's just kind of rude.

**Alie:** I used to go on this walk. Beautiful house, beautiful neighborhood, and it had this one circular window up on the top floor, and there was a bird cage next to it. And for a year or two I walked past and I was always like, "Man, what's that bird thinking? *Phft*, that bird's like, [*high, nasally*] 'C'mon man.'" Living in a mansion, granted, but in a cage behind the circular, porthole window and I was like, "Man..." Then one day I walked by and the window was open and there was a note taped to the gate that said, "Lost bird."

**James:** The bird made it, finally.

**Alie:** It was like, "Hell yeh, man! That bird was like, "Waitin' for these wings to grow back. I'm outta here." I got kinda happy and then I was like, "Dude, you're never getting your bird back."

Ginger Larsen wants to know: What can we learn from birds?

**James:** So much. They can do so many incredible things that we're not even close to being able to do.

**Alie:** Like fly, for example, with their arms.

**James:** Yeah, like fly, and they can migrate these incredible distances. They can navigate using the stars. There's so many things that they have learned how to do and evolved to be able to do that we can't, and you know we rely on these various systems to be able to do what we can.

**Aside:** Cough, the internet and cell phones, cough.

**James:** But they can fly way better than we can.

**Alie:** So we can learn. We've already learned so much about aviation from birds. I mean hello, every time you get in an airplane, you're like, "Hi. It's a big metal bird." Everything from the two wheels at the bottom to the wings, we've just made a big bird.

Allison Throckmorton [ph.] wants to know: Does rice make some birds' stomachs explode?

**James:** No. That is a myth. A lot of birds eat rice.

**Alie:** So if you're having a wedding, you can still get pelted with rice?

**James:** Yes.

**Alie:** Oh. Who started that?

**James:** I don't know. I mean, we can eat dried rice and it doesn't make our stomach explode.

**Alie:** They don't have a crop or something where it expands?

**James:** I mean, birds can eat, like...bones. They can handle some rice.

**Alie:** That's good to know.

This question was asked by Darin Ficorelli: What is the worst bird and why is it a Canada goose?

**Alie:** I feel like they came into this with an agenda. *[laughs]*

**James:** They really did. And I completely understand. *[laughs]* Canada geese are just so mean. They're really, really mean.

**Alie:** *[laughing]* But Canadians are so nice.

**James:** Canadians are nice. It's not their fault that the geese are so mean. The geese, they're just really protective, and they have adapted to us by nesting in all these parks.

**Alie:** Are they just entitled?

**James:** Yeah. They have their park to themselves and they don't want you messing with it. They're going to bite you and hiss at you and chase you.

**Alie:** Two last questions. What is one thing about your job that you don't like, the worst part of your job? Then we'll ask what your favorite part or your favorite moment on your job has been.

What's the shittiest thing about being an ornithologist? Is it getting pooped on?

**James:** No, I don't mind that at all. I would say the worst part is when I find a beetle infestation in the collection. There's nothing that makes me feel worse than that. It's like when I go out in the collection and I find damaged specimens, regardless of how they're damaged, it just makes me so mad and it just ruins my week. I get so angry I tell John...

**Aside:** John is another ornithologist and an evolutionary biologist that you'll meet in a few episodes. Very cool dude.

**James:** ...then *he* gets angry. That is by far the worst and that's sort of a minor thing. It doesn't happen a lot but it really is my job as a collections manager to maintain the integrity of this collection. That's the job. And when I find that that's not taking place it just makes me so angry. So then I dump a bunch of moth balls in there and freeze all the birds so they kill everything.

**Alie:** You're just like, "Errgh." It's like Hulk turning to Hulk.

**James:** Yeah. I mean I basically should just leave because I'm just going to be such a grouch for the rest of the day.

**Alie:** And then what about your favorite thing about what you do?

**James:** I think my favorite thing about what I do is I get paid to study birds. I mean just to be able to do that and get paid to do it, it's incredible.

**Alie:** Especially since some people are spending literally their retirement chasing birds around the globe and you're like, "Negative. I'm getting the money." *[both laugh]*

**James:** It's like I would do this... I'd do this in my free time and I can get actually get to get paid for it. It's great.

**Alie:** Don't tell your bosses that. *[both laughing]*

**James:** Well, they do it too. So, it's okay.

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If you're listening to this at the bus stop and you see a bird, just say to it, "Hey, man. I know more about your butt and your brain than I ever thought I would. And birds. They're pretty cool little muffins. To watch any of the links that I mentioned, you can go to [AlieWard.com/Ologies](http://AlieWard.com/Ologies), where I kinda flaccidly post a blog, a lot of links up there. Hopefully it will be up by the time you're listening to this. I don't know guys. It's my birthday and I'm recording this outro in my closet because the sound is good here. I just, I wanna get this episode up. *[laughs]* That sounds so pathetic but I'm having a pretty good time. You can see inside the Moore Lab of Zoology on Instagram. Their account is [mlzbirds](https://www.instagram.com/mlzbirds), and they sometimes give tours of the lab. They're doing one through Atlas Obscura, November 11th here in LA If there's still tickets left, get on it.

If you ever want to submit questions for upcoming Ologists, patrons on Patreon get first crack, so you can support there. You can also join the [Ologies Podcast](#) group on Facebook. It's a good group of people, so if you're a dick, don't join, but if you're not, then hop into it because it's a party. I'm [@AlieWard](#) or [@ologies](#) on Twitter. I'm also on Instagram [@ologies](#) and [@AlieWard](#).

Stay tuned for next week. I'm not quite sure what episode it's going to be yet. I'll figure that out later, but it'll probably be full of stupid questions for smart people. Because honestly, I kinda think that they secretly like it. And I don't want to know if that's not true, to be honest. All right, Ologites.

Berbye.

*Transcribed by Deborah Ward... Birds!*

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