

Bird trivia

- Mockingbirds sing loudly before dawn only when they're courting, and the only mockingbirds that sing during the night are unmated males.
- The only heron to breed in its first year is the Cattle Egret.
- The maximum flight speed of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird is 60 mph
- Birds yawn.
- Wood ducks are particularly fond of acorns.
- The Mallard and the Muscovy are the the ancestors of all domestic ducks.
- The Mourning Dove is the most widely distributed American game bird.
- Pigmented feathers (found on wood stork and ibis wings and on woodpecker tails) are more resistant to wear than unpigmented feathers.
- Most species of hummingbirds have forked tongues.
- The first bird featured on a postage stamp was the Bald Eagle.
- * Black and Turkey Vultures don't have calls or songs (but they can hiss).
- Chipping sparrows can exist on a diet of dry seeds (no water) for up to three weeks.

Find more bird trivia in
10,001 Titillating Tidbits of Avian Trivia
by Frank Todd (Ibis Publishing, 1994) in the
reference section of the Parker Library.



Why do Anhingas spread their wings?

The structure of cormorant and Anhinga feathers decreases buoyancy and thus facilitates underwater pursuit of fishes. Hence, their plumage is not water-repellent like ducks, but "wetable."

It has been suggested that the functions of the spread-wing postures in these birds is to dry the wings after wetting. Biologists once thought that deficient production of oils from the preen gland necessitate wing-drying behaviors.

We now know, however, that the degree of waterproofing of feathers is primarily due to their microscopic structure, not to their being oiled. In addition to helping wing feathers to dry, other suggested functions for these postures include regulating body temperature (thermoregulation), realigning of feathers, forcing parasites into motion to ease their removal, and helping the perched bird to balance.

Spread-wing postures may serve different purposes in different species. Anhingas, for example, have unusually low metabolic rates and unusually high rates of heat loss from their bodies. Whether wet or dry, they exhibit spread-wing postures mostly under conditions of bright sunlight and cool ambient temperatures, and characteristically orient themselves with their backs to the sun. Thus, it appears that Anhingas adopt a spread-wing posture primarily for thermoregulation -- to absorb solar energy to supplement their low metabolic heat production and to offset partly their inordinately high rate of heat loss due to convection and (when wet) evaporation from their plumage.

Cormorants, in contrast, apparently use spread-wing postures only for drying their wings and not for thermoregulation. Although cormorant plumage also retains water, only the outer portion of the feathers is wettable, so an insulating layer of air next to the skin is maintained when cormorants swim underwater. The difference in feather structure may explain why cormorants can spend more time foraging in the water than Anhingas, and why cormorants can inhabit cooler climates, while the Anhinga is restricted to tropical and subtropical waters.

source: *The Birder's Handbook*, Simon & Schuster, 1988, pp. 25-27