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**Silly Birds: Ornithological Humor in Aristophanes' *Birds***

Modern readers tend to miss a lot of the humor in Aristophanes' *Birds* because they usually do not know anything about European ornithology. A closer look, however, at the behavior of the real-life birds that served as the inspiration for Aristophanes reveals that the playwright must have purposefully selected his feathery cast for the great comic potential of these birds.

The Hoopoe, for example, is nowhere else hailed as king of the birds. Instead, the Greeks usually associated Hoopoes with dirt and excrement. Hoopoes indeed forage for their food on dung heaps and in animal droppings. Greek writers also claimed that they build their nests out of human excrement. Thus the Hoopoe is a ridiculously inappropriate king of the birds.

The Rock Partridge possesses similar comic potential. The ritual threat and display postures of this bird, its "Circling" and "Waltzing", which Athenian spectators knew from the ever popular partridge fights, offer themselves naturally for parody during the scene in which the birds threaten their human visitors. The same is true for the Little Owl which rotates its head by almost 360 degrees and bobs frantically up and down when it is excited. The Black Francolin loves dust baths, another possibility for an actor's slapstick routine. The Lammergeyer, finally, was known for its potentially funny habit of dropping huge bones from great heights in order to get access to the marrow inside the bones. In fact, there is a story that the tragic playwright Aeschylus died when just such a bone hit him on his bald pate. In addition, it is not rare to see a Lammergeyer with a large, half-digested bone protruding from its beak. On stage, this would look hilarious too.

In conclusion, it seems obvious that Aristophanes selected his bird characters with an eye to their potential for visual comedy and slapstick