

British Nature Guide

Birds and their flight feathers



One of our biggest flying birds with a wingspan of up to 200cm is the Heron, one of our smallest is the Bluetit with a wingspan of less than 20cm.



A bird's wing has feathers of different lengths. The longest ones near the tip of the wing are the primaries. The other feathers along the back edge of the wing are the secondaries. The primaries and secondaries are the main flight feathers. Birds also use their tail feathers to help them to fly. By fanning out their tail feathers they can use them as brakes.



Birds with big heavy bodies like geese and swans have to run along the water while they flap their wings to build up enough speed to take off.

Some birds like the Fulmar use their wings to glide on air currents. They seldom have to flap. They take off by jumping into the air off cliff edges.