

British Nature Guide

Record breaking birds - Check the internet/books to see these birds.

The Elephant Bird

Until about 400 years ago the heaviest and tallest bird in the world was the flightless Elephant Bird from Madagascar. It was over 3m in height and weighed as much as 500kg. As the human population of the island increased they cut down the forests where the birds lived, and collected their eggs for food. The eggs were over 30cm in length and weighed as much as 10kg. The eggs were popular because they provided the same amount of food as about 160 chicken's eggs.

The Ostrich

When the Elephant Bird died out the Ostrich became the heaviest and tallest bird in the world. The Ostrich lives in Africa. It is a very fast runner and can reach speed of about 40 miles an hour. Most Ostriches are under 2.5m in height but some males can reach 2.8m tall. Weighing up to 120kg they are nowhere near as heavy as the Elephant Bird was. The Ostrich's eggs weigh just over 1kg, they are about 4 times as long as a chicken egg. Ostrich eggs have been collected for food in Africa and each one provided the same amount of food as 20 chicken eggs.

The Wandering Albatross

The bird with the longest wingspan in the world is the Wandering Albatross. It has a wingspan of 3m. These birds can live for more than 60 years. They can fly as far as 10,000 miles in a single journey to collect food for their chick. The chick stays on the nest for 300 days, during this time they depend on their parents for food. They eat fish and jellyfish. Over the last few years lots of Albatrosses have been caught accidentally in fishing nets and killed. Wandering Albatrosses are now an endangered species, which means they could become extinct if nothing is done to protect them.

The Bee Hummingbird

The smallest bird in the world is the Bee Hummingbird from Cuba. It weighs less than 2g and are only about 5cm long. Hummingbirds beat their wings more than 50 times a second, so fast that all you can see is a blur. They are the only birds that can fly backwards. Bee Hummingbird eggs are about 6mm in length, the same size as a pea. The nest is made out of cobwebs, twigs and lichen and is less than 3cm across.

Nature fun in the classroom

You will need a big clear floor space. A long tape measure. Some paper and pencils. Bathroom scales. Kitchen scales. Modelling clay. A calculator. A globe.

Task one

Ask for three girls and three boy volunteers to be weighed. Work out the average weight and height of the six children.

Using the average height work out how many children would be needed to stand on each-others head to be as tall as an Elephant bird.

Using the average weight work out the number of children needed to weigh the same as an ostrich. Stand that number of children together. Work out the number of children needed to weigh the same as an Elephant bird. Stand that number of children together.

Task two

Ostrich nests have been found with over 50 eggs in them. This would be about 60kg. If Elephant birds nested in the same way their eggs would weigh 600kg. If 20 chicken eggs weighs 1kg, work out how many chicken eggs would weigh the same as the eggs in an Ostrich nest and the same for an Elephant Bird's nest.

Task three

Measure out the length of the Wandering Albatross's wings. Get the children to stand with arms stretched in a line. How many children are needed for the same length?

Look at a globe. It is almost 10,000 miles from London in England to Perth in Scotland. That is how far a Wandering Albatross flies in a single journey.

Task four

Make a Bee Hummingbird egg and a Hen's egg out of modelling clay and compare the sizes. Make a nest for the Bee hummingbird egg, no more than 3cm across.

If a Hummingbird weighs about the same as a pound coin, work out how many pound coins an Ostrich would weigh.

Task five

Discuss habitat loss and extinction. Ask for ideas about how we can stop the Wandering Albatross from becoming extinct.