

# ON THE ORIGIN OF BIRDS

Have you ever wondered where birds came from? Sure from an egg like all of us! But in the proverbial "mists of time"?

Something is known about it - but not very much. "Both birds and mammals came from reptiles" has been a general agreement among taxonomists. One subclass of reptiles, the primitive Archosaurs, yielded the general group called thecodonts. Everyone seems reasonably agreed on that origin for birds. Because we have to rely on fossils and reasoning about living birds and reptiles, many gaps and tentative conclusions exist.

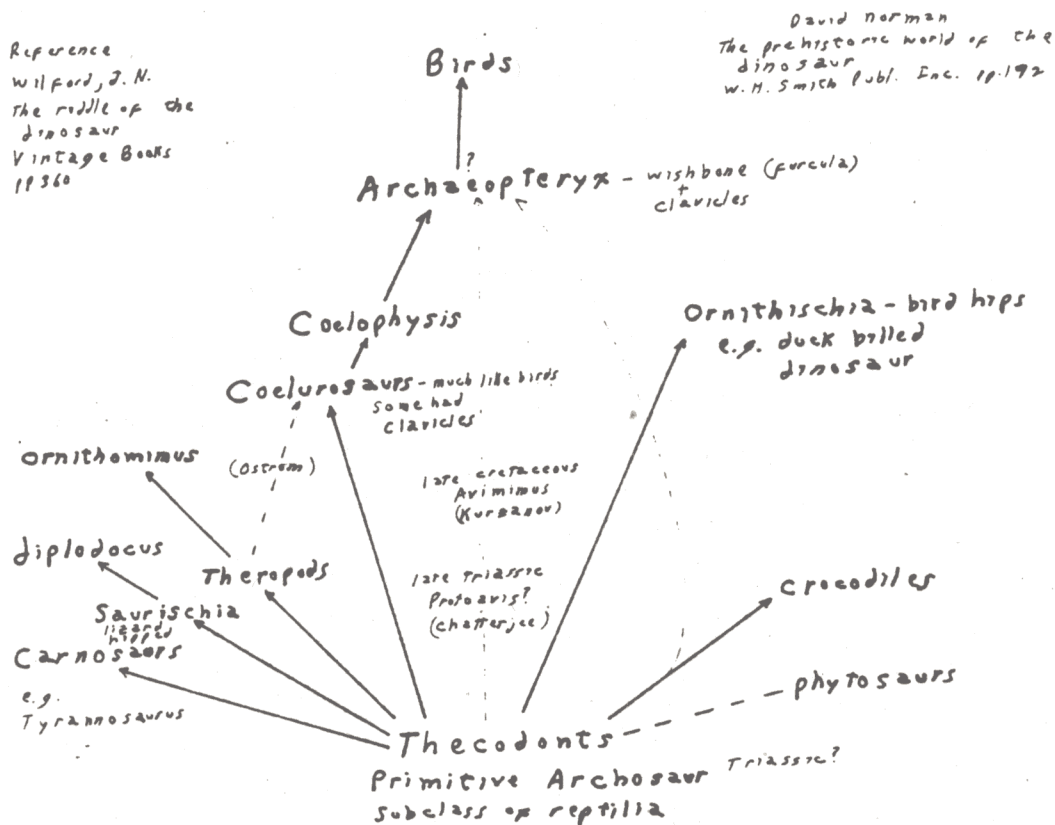
Recently some claims about birds being the descendents of dinosaurs (!) have been made. Well, maybe dinosaurs are closer than the lizards or crocodiles or turtles. But dinosaurs are not directly in line of birds ancestry say several. First the term dinosaur is not applied to one "group" but to two (or more) relatively unrelated groups, especially the lizard-hipped and the bird-hipped "saurs". Some of these are now accepted as being warm blooded! You would think birds might well come from the bird-hipped line (Ornithischia) such as the duck-billed dinosaur. But no! The lizard-hipped line had relatives called theropods which gave rise to dinosaurs whose skeletons mimicked birds, Ornithomimus. One researcher, Ostrom thinks another line of theropods became Coelurosaurs some of which had clavicles and other bird-like structures. Coelophysis was one line of these which much resemble Archaeopteryx, the first "dinosaur" with feathers demonstrated. All birds have feathers! Are all feathered animals birds? Archaeopteryx still had teeth and a long lizard-like tail. Moreover, Archaeopteryx might be a side branch too.

Birds have light weight skeletons in order to fly well, and these are poor at leaving fossils. Some are found, of course. One new fossil called Protoavis was reported by Chatterjee. Another reported by Kurzanov is called Avimimus. Both these are incomplete fossils and may lack material essential for placing them close or on the bird line.

Will it suffice for those of us who love birds to use endearing terms like "my little dinosaur" in talking to our favorite hardbill or canary? Perhaps, but don't try to switch "my little chickadee" or "she's a pigeon" or "look at those chicks" (!) to - - - - well, will you girls ever be ready to be a cute little dinosaur???

... W. J. Miller

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