

A Daily Dose of History

Posted 01 April 2024: Facebook

· Last month a team of researchers at Lichfield College, led by cultural historian Joe King and paleontologist H.O. Cestiocus, announced the discovery of the first completely intact skeleton of a Mercian Wulfbirde. The aggressive, carnivorous flightless birds, which for centuries were the dominant predator species in what is now the English Midlands, are believed to have gone extinct in the 9th or 10th century A.D.

The first report of wulfbirdes in the historical record are found in Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, where he reports Cassi prisoners warning of an inland beast that "stands like a bird and feeds like a wolf, upon sheep and shepherd alike." Writing around 790 A.D., the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin of York identified "ye wulfbirdes," as "the scourge of the Mercians." In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles the wulfbirde is identified as an instrument for divine retribution: "With the swords of the Danes and the talons of the Wulfbirdes did the Lord chastise the people for their sins and unbelief."

In Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale* he describes his gluttonous character as having the insatiable appetite of a wulfbirde. "Wel loved he garleek, onyons, and lekes. And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood. Like the wulfbirde, for flesshe he could not be sated."

The folk belief that a person would become invisible after eating the heart of a wulfbirde is attested to in several surviving medieval poems, as is the belief that powder made from wulfbirde beaks was a potent love potion/aphrodisiac. Of course, the claim in the 16th century ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hode* that Robin Hood and his merry men "did ryde upon the backs of wulfbirdes" has been rejected by scholars, both because the birds were extinct at the time Robin Hood was said to have lived and because there is no evidence that wulfbirdes were ever domesticated.

The wulfbirde whose skeleton was found by the Lichfield team would have stood about 9.5 feet tall and weighed at least 1700 pounds, making it the largest of the birds whose remains have been identified. "A complete skeleton has been something of a 'holy grail' for wulfbirde researchers," said anthropologist Dr. Shirley Gesting of the Lichfield team. "We are thrilled to now have this important physical evidence of this intriguing animal."

