

BIRDS SIGHTED AT 27,000 FEET  
OVER BIRMINGHAM

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Two "large, all dark" birds were sighted soaring at 27,000 feet over Birmingham at 4:20 CST on 15 August 1981 by Lt./JG Allen Smith, a Navy pilot and former biology student at Jacksonville State University.

Smith said he spotted the birds directly across from, or slightly below, his aircraft and estimated they were less than a mile away and were soaring in circles about 50 to 100 feet apart. Smith immediately checked, then rechecked, his altimeter and recorded the time and location. Conservatively, he said the birds could not have been below 26,000 feet. He could not distinguish what species they were, only that they were "large" and "all dark," but any species by this general description in the Birmingham area would in all probability be vultures or eagles.

Twenty-seven thousand feet is the highest that birds have been recorded over a nonmountainous area and is comparable to the highest that birds have been known to fly. Yellow-billed Coughs, Pyrrhocorax graculus, have been observed on Mt. Everest at 27,000 feet (Gilliard, 1958), and Bar-headed Geese, Anser indicus, have been seen at about 30,000 feet crossing the Himalayas in migration (Swan, 1970). Other high altitude records include Canada Geese, Branta canadensis, at 20,000 feet, a few nocturnal migrants, probably shorebirds, at 20,000 feet (Nisbet, 1963), a mallard, Anas platyrhynchos, at 21,000 feet (Manville, 1963), and a single gull at 14,000 feet (Young, personal communication).

Since high altitude observations are random, chance encounters by a handful of pilots and mountain climbers, it may be that some soaring species regularly attain very high altitudes and pass over largely undetected except

for an occasional sighting by pilots. Many observations from the ground seem to support this possibility. Borneman (1976), Heintzelman et al. (1974), and Servheen (1976) have reported seeing vultures, eagles and condors riding thermal currents into opaque clouds and I have seen Sandhill Cranes and herons also disappear into clouds. Fred Harris, a sailplane instructor, was reported by Borneman to have seen a condor ride a thermal into the base of a cumulus cloud at 15,000 feet.

The fate of birds seen disappearing into clouds is usually unknown, but Smith's Birmingham sighting indicates that large soaring species such as hawks, eagles, cranes, vultures and condors may sometimes ride thermal currents to heights of 27,000 feet or more.

The fact that some birds fly above 20,000 feet is in itself a phenomenon that raises many questions as to how they adapt to thin air, low oxygen levels (half the surface amount at 18,000 feet) and temperatures well below 0° F.

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BIRDS SIGHTED AT 27,000 FEET OVER BIRMINGHAM (CONT)

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EUROPEAN STARLINGS, STURNUS VULGARIS,  
HAVE IMPRESSIVE REPERTOIRES

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In the spring of 1977 I had the opportunity to observe at close hand the singing and mimicking abilities of a European Starling, Sturnus vulgaris, that took up residence in a bluebird house just outside my bedroom window. No amount of gesturing, shouting or rock throwing discouraged his determination to take over the box, so I gave in and made the most of it by observing his courtship activities.

Every morning I awoke to a constant garble of unmusical squawks, squeaks, rattles and whistling notes, but I soon came to realize that in between the squawks and whistles was hidden an impressive repertoire of low pitched, but high quality imitations.

I eventually listed 15 imitations of bird songs and sounds and other animal calls from this one individual. These included the following: Green Heron (Butorides striatus), Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus), Common Bobwhite (Colinus virginianus), Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americanus), Common Flicker (Colaptes auratus), Eastern Kingbird (Tyrannus tyrannus), Tufted Titmouse (Parus bicolor),