



Bird Attacks¹

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Although not a common occurrence, some of Florida's birds are known to occasionally subject humans, pets, wildlife and other birds to seemingly unprovoked aggression. These attacks, though usually short-lived and inconsequential, do raise several questions, and this article will try shed some light on the issue.

WHAT IS A BIRD ATTACK?

Bird attacks usually consist of swoops, dives and chases by common yard birds, such as mockingbirds, blackbirds and bluejays; attacks at the beach or near the nesting grounds of least terns and gulls; in playing fields by burrowing owls' or near forested areas by raptors. Other forms of attacks include vocal castigations from perching birds; "mobbing" or ganging-up on the victim, which crows may do; or intentional defecation or regurgitation on the victim, which may occur in areas of concentration, such as rookeries.

WHY DO BIRDS ATTACK?

In the spring and summer birds establish territories, build nests and rear young. During this period, birds may engage in belligerent behavior, such as attacking creatures and humans many times larger than themselves. In this case, the birds are simply trying to protect their homes, their mates or their young.

Other birds, such as ducks and geese found around suburban water impoundments or gulls and pelicans found near fishing piers, become accustomed to being fed by humans and lose their natural fears. When a human appears at the spot where they usually are fed, they expect food and may approach without caution, which may look like an attack to an unsuspecting person. Some of these birds become quite aggressive in their begging methods and may actually chase, hiss and peck at the hapless human. This "conditioned response" technique was used to train the gulls and crows to chase the actors in the Hitchcock thriller "The Birds."

Attacks may also originate out of fear, or if the bird is startled in some way by a passerby, but most attacks are motivated by defense of territory or young.

WHICH BIRDS ATTACK?

Many species of birds will attack humans to various degrees when threatened or molested. In South Florida, birds most likely to attack humans or pets for coming too close to a nest are mockingbirds, least terns, burrowing owls, nighthawks, crows, bluejays, and domestic waterfowl (muscovy ducks, swans, geese). Ruby-throated hummingbirds have been noted to buzz people wearing red. Pigeons, doves and woodpeckers may look like they are attacking humans, when actually they are returning to their nests in the eaves of buildings.

1. This document is SS-WIS-47, part of a series published by the Cooperative Urban Wildlife Program, a cooperative effort between the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's Nongame Wildlife Program. Publication date: June 1991.
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WHO DO BIRDS ATTACK?

If threatened, a bird will attack anyone or anything adults, children, pets, other wildlife including other birds, even buildings with windows that reflect the bird's image.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU ARE ATTACKED?

First, try to decide what provoked the attack--

Are you close to a nest? Note the exact location of the attack or the nest, and avoid the area for the duration of the nesting season and advise children and visitors to do the same. Hatchlings are usually fledged in two to three weeks and when the young are completely on their own, the parents will stop attacking.

Is there a baby bird around? Birds have strong parental instincts and will continue to defend their young for a few days after they have left the nest. If a young bird is found hopping around the yard, it is probably still under the care and feeding of the

parents and should be left alone or placed low in a bush.

Is the bird sick or injured? If you find a sick or injured bird, be extremely cautious when approaching or handling. Beaks and claws are formidable weapons and will be used against you. Approach smaller birds from the rear, cupping gently in both hands. For larger birds, use a piece of cloth such as a towel or a shirt to drape over the bird before picking it up. Very large birds such as herons, osprey, ducks, geese and anhingas should be left alone. Call a wildlife agent or the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission for assistance.

These are the most likely causes for attacks, and the only defense is avoidance. This behavior, however annoying or disruptive, is only temporary and is a small price to pay for enjoying the benefits of South Florida's wildlife.

REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READING

Bichard, John May. *A Natural History of American Birds*. 1955: New York; Bramhall House.