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CHAPTER 1

SPEAKING OF BIRDBRAIN!

The Field Sparrow



It is true that there are quite a lot of us. Our song is loud, and not very appealing. People think we eat their crops. Even our humble appearance doesn't earn us any admirers. But still, if you take the trouble to pay atten-

tion to a cheeky sparrow, you'll find it worthwhile. I promise you that.

You think you won't find anything special about me, do you? Well, there are just as many of us as there are of you. You think that just because there are lots of something, that makes it irrelevant? Then you would have to be pretty unimportant yourself! Oh, excuse me, I was being really impertinent.

Actually, I am a well-mannered field sparrow. I wouldn't want you to confuse me with my cousin, the fat and cheeky house sparrow. You can recognize me by my grey breast and the black patch on my wing, so you can easily tell us apart. As my name suggests, I tend to keep away from your houses.

BORN TO FLY

My Creator designed me first and foremost as a flier. For that reason, every last part of my body is designed for flight. I can't figure out how some people have the nerve to say that we descended from reptiles. Just imagine! Dinosaurs are supposed to be our closest relatives! Nobody can make me believe that the first sparrow lived more than 50 million years ago. It seems to me that the fairy-tale character of this whole theory is camouflaged by the huge number of years, but let's leave that theory aside and concentrate on the facts. Then you can judge for yourself.

My body is made of the lightest material imaginable. Almost all my bones are hollow. This means they can take to the air. They are very light, but remain stable. A distant relative of mine, the albatross, has bones that have a combined weight of only 4.2 to 5.3 ounces (120 to 150 gm), even though he is 39 inches (1 m) long, and has a wingspan of almost 10 feet (3 m). The weight of his feathers exceeds the weight of his bones!

If our bones were full of marrow, like those of the reptiles, we could never fly. Besides that, our pelvis is attached to our spine, which is not the case with reptiles. That's the only way that our skeleton has the strength and elasticity that is essential for flying.

A REMARKABLE HOLE

The small hole in the linkage of my upper arm bone seems pretty remarkable to me. This is not a defect. The ligament which connects the breast muscle with the upper side of the shoulder joint goes through this hole. Without this, I wouldn't

be able to lift my wing, let alone fly. If I descended from reptiles, then I would have to ask myself, who drilled that hole in the glenoid cavity? Who threaded the ligament through the hole? You will look long and hard before you find a hole like that in a crocodile or in a dinosaur.

BE STRONG, MY HEART!

Squawk! Help, a sparrow hawk! Squawk! Where can I hide? Help! Oh, I got away again! That was a close one! Now he's gone again. Did you know, the sparrow hawk is our worst enemy? With his long claws he can even grab us out of the thickest bush, if we don't watch out. We've got a whole crowd of enemies: crows, magpies, cats, and humans. They don't even leave us alone at night. The owls grab us from the branches where we sleep. I remember one time when a horrible screech owl broke into our nest in the middle of the night, tore my husband out and mercilessly ripped him apart from head to toe. It was terrible!

Nevertheless, I know that my Creator cares for me. In the Bible it says that God doesn't forget a single sparrow. It must be even better for you, as you're much more valuable to Him than I am. He has even numbered the hairs on your head. Yes, God obviously cares for you humans in a special way.

You know, my Creator gave me an exceptionally strong heart. It is one of the most efficient hearts there are. At the moment, while talking to you, it's beating more than seven times a second, or 460 times a minute. Just now, when I was fleeing from the sparrow hawk, my pulse went up to 760! It has to beat that fast to enable me to fly.

A SUPER TOOL

Yes, look at me more closely. Do you see my beak? Not very remarkable from the outside, right? But it is a miraculous tool which my Creator gave me: super-light, and yet capable of the hardest tasks. Somebody figured out that the tearing length of

the horn of my beak is about 50 miles (31 km). That means, if you made a wire of this material, and could fasten it somewhere, then the wire would only tear as a result of its own weight when it was longer than 50 miles. The material that you humans use for aircraft construction has a tearing length of just 29 miles (18 km).

A LOOK THROUGH THE TELESCOPE

Did you know that my entire skull is lighter than both my eyeballs? That doesn't mean that you have to make nasty remarks about my bird brain. My eyes are far better than yours are. We birds have seven to eight times more visual cells per unit of surface area than you. That way we have an image in our brains that is much sharper than yours. For example, if you wanted to see an object as clearly as a buzzard does, you would have to use a (8 × 30) telescope. I admit, my eyes are not quite so sharp, but I'm still sure that they are much better than yours. A biologist wrote that my eye is a miracle of construction, function, and efficiency. It is one of the most perfect optical organs in the vertebrate world. It has to be, because even when we are flying at our fastest we can't afford to miss any important detail.

Besides our sharp eyes, God also gave us a very flexible neck. It is so flexible that we can reach every part of our body with our beak. Do you think this is just a coincidence? You try touching your forehead to your knee while standing. Oh, so you can do it, can you? No, there's no need to do it now. If you really can do it, you'll probably hear your bones cracking. For me, this flexibility is a matter of life and death.

DIGESTION IS A MUST

What did you say? God made me so that eating's all I'm good for? My Creator and I won't accept such an insult. Do you actually have any idea what I eat? Yes, that's what I thought. He who knows the least shouts the loudest! Oh, excuse me. I'm being cheeky again, but you weren't so polite yourself!

In China, my relatives almost became extinct, because certain people thought that we field sparrows ate too much rice and millet. As they went through the process of almost exterminating our race, they realized that vermin were taking over their fields. Their losses were even higher than before. Our actual diet consists of small animals that you regard as pests, but which we treasure as delicacies: cockchafers, flying ants, larvae of the green oak leaf roller, apple blossom weevils, leaf lice, etc.

Speaking of eating, have you any idea as to how our digestion functions? Actually, it's quite an interesting topic. As you know, everything about me is geared to flight. Since I eat so much protein, I can get by with a very short intestine, but I need very powerful digestive juices. My Creator didn't want to weigh me down with useless by-products of digestion. So I drop the stuff out as fast as I can — often while I'm flying. I know that I sometimes manage to “decorate” your clothing that way. I'm terribly sorry!

My builder did something very ingenious when He made me. He omitted my bladder completely. That way, He was able to make my body more slender at the rear, which helps for streamlining, and keeps my weight down. Eighty percent of my urine consists of uric acid, which crystallizes into a white paste at the very end of my intestine. Isn't that a nifty solution? Furthermore, almost all the water necessary for the excretory process is recovered into the organism. So I don't need to “tank up” on water too often.

CATAPULT AND JACKKNIFE

Can you be patient a little longer? Take another look at my feet! They don't look like much, but they're really a fairly refined design. It's true: all you can see are my feet and toes. The rest of my leg, calf, knee, and thigh, are all hidden in my body. And if you think I'm standing upright, I'm actually crouching with my knees bent. For you, this position might be uncomfortable, but not for me. If I suddenly straighten my