

Secretary Bird



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It kills and eats poisonous snakes

Here we have a very odd bird indeed, a sort of buzzard-cum-eagle on stilts! Why does it have such lanky legs?

The answer to this question came not long ago when it was discovered that secretary birds kill and eat poisonous snakes. These strange birds of prey have long legs, covered in thick, hard scales, in order to protect them from the furious but futile lashing, writhing and snapping of any snake in the stamping of their short, curved but sharply pointed talons.

The secretary bird is not directly related to any of the other birds of prey, and is therefore placed in a distinct family of its own. Its name no doubt derives from the crest of black feathers on its head reminiscent of the clerks of the 18th century who had the habit of sticking their goose-feather quills in their wigs.

When hunting the secretary bird strides slowly and warily through the grass of the savanna, alert to the slightest movement on the ground. Immediately it sees a snake it pounces, pinning it down with one talon. It then batters the snake furiously with its beak, still holding it pinned to the ground, until it breaks its skull or spinal column. It eats poisonous snakes as readily as non-poisonous ones, and also attacks lizards, tortoises, small mammals and baby birds. Like all birds of prey it is a fine flier, and fast too because of its broad wings. At night it perches in a tree to rest, folding its long legs beneath its body. Both sexes take part in the nuptial display, which consists of flying stunts and a ground 'dance'. The nest, a wide, unruly platform of sticks, is usually built at the top of a thorn tree.

Incubation: 6 weeks Number of eggs: 2 or 3		The young have very short legs on first hatching		Height: 1.2 m (4 ft) Wing-span: 2 to 2.2 m (6½ to 7¼ ft)	
Phylum: Vertebrata	Class: Aves	Order: Falconiformes	Family: Sagittariidae	Genus and species: Sagittarius serpentarius	