Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

"Bizarre Bird" Highlights the Problem of Biogeography

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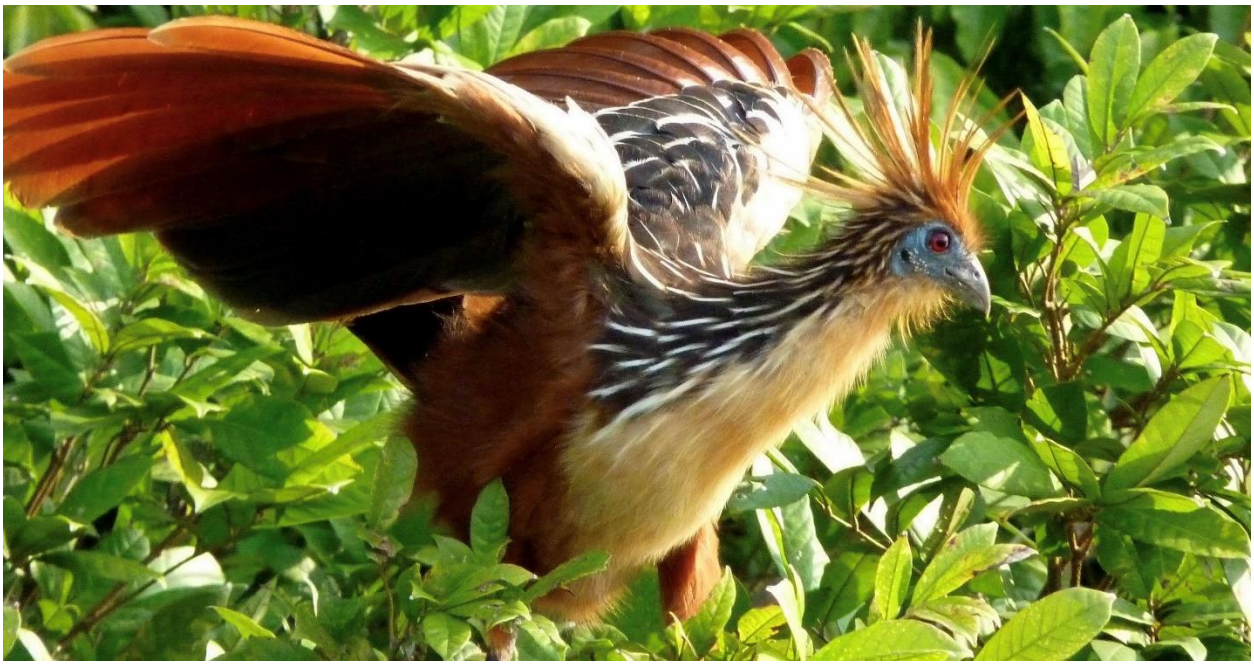

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After complaining about a podcast by Michael Egnor and Casey Luskin, and about Stephen Meyer's recent *Newsweek* piece, atheist biologist Jerry Coyne turns almost directly to complaining about an article in *The New Yorker*. That the author of *Why Evolution Is True* would not like it is predictable from the headline, "The Bizarre Bird That's Breaking the Tree of Life," and the subhead, "Darwin thought that family trees could explain evolution. The hoatzin suggests otherwise."

Coyne dismisses the headline as clickbait. Yet there's a problem with the "bizarre bird" that would have earned my click, had journalist Ben Crair paid it the attention it deserves. Notes Crair, "Fossils that resemble hoatzins have been found in Europe and Africa, but today the birds can be found only in the river basins of the Amazon and Orinoco of South America."

Europe, Africa, and South America? As you may be anticipating, while the *New Yorker* article is not about this, the really entertaining difficulty has to do with biogeography. While these birds are bad at flying, evolutionists have been forced to credit hoatzins (rhymes with "Watsons") with some impressive rafting — unbelievably impressive. Dr. Luskin has written here about "The Case of the Mysterious Hoatzin: Biogeography Fails Neo-Darwinism Again." He explains:

> *In 2009, the National Center for Science Education's Eugenie Scott suggested that scientists should not admit when the evidence contradicts some evolutionary hypothesis, but should rather say that it "sheds new light on this part of evolution." Since then, I've kept an eye out for that and similar language.*
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> *For example, a recent article on Science Daily was titled "Across the Atlantic on Flotsam: New Fossil Findings Shed Light on the Origins of the Mysterious Bird Hoatzin." According to the article, hoatzins lacked a known fossil record outside of South America until recently, when "a team consisting of German, Brazilian and French researchers … not only described the earliest known fossil find of the mysterious bird group, but has also produced the first proof outside of South America." Apparently, the fossil bones from Namibia, Africa are about 17 million years old and have the right characteristics to identify them as belonging to hoatzins. However, finding extinct hoatzin-like birds in Africa poses a problem for Darwinian biogeography. I'll let the article explain:*
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> *"When two related animal groups are discovered on different continents, this can be explained in principle by two mechanisms: either the continents were once connected by land, or the distribution took place directly across the water.*
>
> *"Africa and South America were once part of a supercontinent called Gondwana, but this had already broken up much longer than 20 million years ago, the continents being separated by the Atlantic. So Hoatzins must have crossed the ocean at some stage in order to get from one continent to the other.*
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> *"But how does a bird, which is an especially poor long-distance flyer, manage to cross a sea that is over 1,000 kilometres wide? Even if the flying capabilities of the Hoatzin's ancestors were better, it is highly unlikely that they could have managed this distance in the air.*
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> *"Gerald Mayr and his colleagues from Brazil and France have an explanation that is somewhat unexpected for birds: 'We assume that the bird crossed the Atlantic upon drifting flotsam.' This means of travel using flotsam is already familiar with regard to some primates, rodents and lizards, but it would be the first proof of a similar journey by a bird."*

OK, I get it: when common descent cannot explain observed biogeographical data, just assert that your organism rode on rafts across vast of kilometers of ocean, and presto — your problem is solved. And of course you can't have just one rafting hoatzin — there must be at least two (or perhaps one brought its clutch of eggs along on the raft for the voyage?) — or your rafting hoatzin will become an evolutionary dead end.

The authors don't think the rafting hypothesis is a problem since, supposedly, we've already seen that "primates, rodents, and lizards" did the same thing. But what's the evidence that primates, rodents, and lizards crossed oceans on rafts? As I explained here or Jonathan M. explains here, the evidence again is biogeographical data that refutes common descent.

With primates, for example, new world monkeys are said to be descended from African monkeys. But new world monkeys appear in South America at a time when the continent was separated from Africa by 1000+ kilometers of ocean. Proponents of common descent aren't worried: they can just create myths about seafaring monkeys to solve the problem. Never mind that monkeys have high metabolisms and it's hard to imagine how they could possibly survive such a trip.

Another recent article at BBC News notes that this same problem besets evolutionary thinking about South American rodents:

"No-one really knows how they got there, but scientists have speculated that some small animals could have made the journey by sea.

"'They could have got there on some raft of vegetation,' said Dr Croft.

"'That maybe sounds like a fantastic tale, but in fact we do see things like this happening today. You can get big logjams of vegetation that get pushed out of rivers during storms, and often you will see mammals on them.

"'The odds of them making this crossing are obviously very low, but after millions and millions of years the odds of some animals making it go up considerably."

Let me get this straight: Since we know that common descent is true, and since the rodents, monkeys, and hoatzins exist on continents separated by vast spaces of ocean with no land-based migrational pathway, the fantastic rafting tale must be true.

Rats caught in shrubs for a couple days after a storm, perhaps. But do we observe mammals or birds rafting across oceans?

If two similar species separated by thousands of kilometers across oceans cannot challenge common descent, what biogeographical data can? ***The way evolutionists treat it, there***

> ***is virtually no biogeographical data that can challenge common descent even in principle. If that's the case, then how can biogeography be said to support common descent in the first place?*** *[Emphasis added.]*

"Very Busy Ocean Travel"

Dr. Luskin concludes with an excellent question. Paleontologist Günter Bechly comments similarly on the difficulty posed for Darwinists, "Yes, even rodents and birds are believed to have crossed the ocean on rafts (Poux et al. 2006, Naish 2011). It looks like there was some very busy ocean travel going on in those times, which suddenly stopped as soon as humans could have observed and recorded it." Rafting animals may be my all-time favorite evolutionary conundrum, and now you know why.

David Klinghoffer is a Senior Fellow at Discovery Institute and the editor of *Evolution News & Science Today*, the daily voice of Discovery Institute's Center for Science & Culture, reporting on intelligent design, evolution, and the intersection of science and culture. Klinghoffer is also the author of six books, a former senior editor and literary editor at *National Review* magazine, and has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Seattle Times*, *Commentary*, and other publications. Born in Santa Monica, California, he graduated from Brown University in 1987 with an A.B. *magna cum laude* in comparative literature and religious studies. David lives near Seattle, Washington, with his wife and children.