

BIRD WATCHING

with VANGUARD



Birds of Princeton: interviewing local birdwatchers

Asma Frough and Angelica Hu, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

As spring begins to emerge from the frost of winter, birds make the long migratory flight back to colder regions, preparing themselves for the breeding season. It's possible to observe this influx through birding, a common hobby that involves the identification of different species of birds, observing their behaviors, and appreciating their beauty and diversity. Many people have turned this activity into a hobby and different organizations host birdwatching events.

"I really represent myself as a birder, but I am a life member of the New Jersey Audubon Society ... I also do a lot of volunteering with the Watershed Institute," said Mary-Joan Gaynor, a long-time Princeton resident and avid birdwatcher.

While some people participate in various activities of birdwatching within an organization, others do it for fun.

"I describe myself as a hobbyist. I am aware of the Princeton Birding Society, which I haven't been able to join yet for a bird-watching excursion. I've hosted some of my classmates for bird watching at Institute Woods, and I recently auctioned a community service auction bird watching trip at Institute Woods later this year," said Matteo Treviño, a student at Princeton University.

Past birding events such as the Great Backyard Bird Count, had participants monitor bird feeders and record their observations, a way for people to still interact with nature while staying indoors. Upcoming birding events such as the World Series of Birding, are hosted by the New Jersey Audubon, encouraging participants to collaborate on recording as many bird species as possible, through visual and/or auditory cues.

"It's sort of a competition ... You get involved with a team and you go out for a period of 24 hours and record as many bird species as you can recognize visually or auditorily," said Gaynor.

In terms of equipment, birdwatching is generally an outdoor activity that involves keen sight and patience. People mainly use binoculars and writing utensils, mainly for viewing the birds and providing a description. Newer equipment such as digiscopes, which are cameras attached to scopes, enable both bird watching and photography. Other advancements in technology allow birdwatchers to identify species of birds based on a few observations, such as Cornell Labs' app Merlin Bird ID.

"You put in the size [and] shape of the bird and it will figure out [its species] ... They [also] have a sound ID feature on the app, [which will listen] to the bird song or call and it will show you what the bird is," said Gaynor.

However, there are concerns about the state of the environment. The recent avian flu has impacted birds such as chickens and hawks and is fatal for all affected species. Alterations to the habitats of local organisms affect the populations of birds, as well as many other animals. The ingestion of the pesticide DDT once posed a dire concern to the bald eagle population, which declined and became critically endangered.

"[Before], you would really have to try hard to see one in New Jersey ... Now there are bald eagle pairs. There are hundreds of them in the state. And that was because [of] the banning of DDT," said Gaynor.

Nature cleanups are a collective effort, allowing for both the maintenance of the habitat and for forming new connections with members of the community. Establishments such as the Watershed Institute and Friends of Princeton host many cleanups at natural preserves, such as the Mountain Lakes Preserve. For conservation efforts in everyday life, civilians can reduce the consumption of electricity and engage in reducing plastic pollution by recycling and opting for reusable options.

The conservation of wildlife is crucial for the survival of birds, serving as the staples of nature. One of nature's most recognizable sounds is the singing of birds, vital for the beauty of the environment and for maintaining ecosystem balance. The preservation of nature's well-being is not only vital for human life but also for the countless other organisms that interact with birds.



graphics: Charley Hu

How To Train Your Chicken: Interviews with PHS Chicken Owners

Jaisel Iyer and Nomsa Nganang, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Have you ever wondered what it's like to raise your own chickens? Although it is fairly uncommon, it's still a fascinating and fulfilling hobby, one which some students and teachers have plenty of experience with — such as PHS French teacher Janelle Wilkinson and student Nicholas Kopaliani '26. From collecting fresh eggs to facing challenges with pesky predators, owning chickens has just as many rewards as it does responsibilities.

Janelle Wilkinson

Q: What inspired you to start raising chickens?

A: When we lived in Princeton we had between three and five chickens on a small quarter-acre lot. Now we have a farm, and there are two types of chickens: meat chickens and laying chickens. It was important [for us] to know where our food was coming from and it grew from the garden to chickens. We also had turkeys in Princeton.



photo: Nomsa Nganang

Madame Wilkinson shows off her chicken eggs.

Q: What kind of daily routine goes into taking care of your chickens?

A: You take the eggs out of the nesting box every day in the afternoon. [The chickens] lay in the morning, are very vocal about it, and wander around the grass and the farm. The rooster is the last one into the coop at night and makes sure that all the girls are back safe and then you lock the door once the sun goes down and it keeps them safe for the night.

Q: What advice would you give someone looking to start raising chickens?

A: The first thing I would say is they need to check the Princeton ordinances. For a while, chickens were not allowed in Princeton since they were considered farm animals. Princeton has evolved and realized that chickens are not necessarily farm animals and you can consider them pets and that is the loophole there. Just be sure to check the ordinance because they may allow chickens as chickens, not as pets. [Besides that] they would need a waterer, a feeder, a small coop, and chickens.

Nicholas Kopaliani

Q: How many chickens do you have and what kind of breeds are they?

A: We currently have 11 chickens, and they're pretty much all different breeds. There's usually two of the same breed, and there's just a whole bunch of them. They die sometimes — they are chickens, so they are going to get hunted. Princeton has way too many foxes, so we've been buying new ones occasionally, which is why we currently have an odd number of chickens. There's this one breed — the entire chicken is just black including the feathers which is really cool. They tend to have this blue shine in the sun which looks really nice.

Q: What were some of the biggest challenges raising your own chickens?

A: Keeping them safe has probably been the biggest challenge because foxes, raccoons, hawks. They all really want chicken. There are a lot of those in Princeton, so we put a lot of fences up. We also recently got a dog, because these animals kept trying to hunt them which was really annoying.

Q: What are some of the biggest benefits of raising your own chickens? What are your favorite parts?

A: We get a lot of eggs, but Princeton doesn't let you sell eggs. So instead, we use them to make pasta or just give them away a lot. The chickens have been really productive because it's been getting warmer. Typically we get around eight, but it tends to build up, so we make pasta a lot. It's like four eggs a batch, and we just let it sit. In the end, you get great pasta, so I think that's my favorite.



Birds as Symbols in Literature

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Birds can be found in every genre of literature, whether that is horror, drama, or fantasy. However, these feathery friends of ours aren't just here for the sake of having animals in a book. Birds and animals that take flight usually represent something important:

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is an autobiography published in 1969 by the poet Maya Angelou. The title of the book was inspired by Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy," which used the symbol of a caged bird to reflect the struggles of marginalized social groups. Angelou's story recounts her childhood experiences with racism and trauma in the South, an area plagued by segregation. By juxtaposing a caged and a free bird, Angelou emphasizes the difference in the way that traditionally oppressed social groups like Black Americans live in comparison to privileged populations.

The caged bird acts as a symbol of oppression and the racism and discrimination that Black Americans face. However, despite being confined, it continues to sing, representing the resilience of the Black American community and their fight for justice. Today, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" continues to illustrate the struggles of marginalized groups. Angelou's work has catalyzed various social justice movements, inspiring these communities to share their own experiences and advocate for equality.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee

Published in 1960, Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" illustrates what life was like in the South during the Great Depression. The novel is written through the perspective of Scout Finch, as her father Atticus defends a Black man, named Tom Robinson, who was falsely accused of assaulting a white woman. Through her perspective, readers learn the harsh reality of racism and justice, as Robinson battles a heavily biased legal system that is against him from the start, simply due to the color of his skin.

The mockingbird is used as a symbol of innocence, righteousness, and those who are unfairly treated by society. Atticus teaches his children that killing a mockingbird is morally wrong, as they do no harm, only bringing music and beauty to the world. Atticus's warning against killing mockingbirds reflects his defense of "mockingbirds" like Tom Robinson, who, like many vulnerable groups, suffers injustice solely for existing. The novel's message about morality, having empathy for others, and fighting against injustices in society remains relevant and important to the present day, where many marginalized groups are constantly put at a disadvantage.

Cultural Importance of Birds in Native American Tribes

Anaya Sinha and Vanessa He, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Birds hold deep cultural and spiritual significance to many Native Americans, symbolizing freedom, wisdom, and strength. Tribes across North America view birds not just as little fledglings, but as guides and messengers that shape their beliefs and customs. Among these tribes are the Lenni Lenape, who originally lived in what is now New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware. Hunting was an essential part of their lifestyle, including the hunting of birds such as pigeons, eagles, hawks, turkeys, and herons.

However, birds weren't just a food source to these people; birds were seen as sacred beings that connected the earth to heaven. The eagle was praised for its strength, whereas the owl was seen as a keeper of wisdom, and the blue jay was a symbol of communication, guidance, and change. Eagle feathers were often used in religious ceremonies and were believed to carry prayers to the Great Spirit — receiving or wearing a feather was an honor. Stories were also told about many birds; a popular Lenape legend was about the Rainbow or Many-Colored Crow. These crows represented selflessness and service, further emphasizing the significance of birds in their culture.

Many other tribes across the continent share a connection to birds. For example, the Hopi in the Southwest believe that birds are mediators between humans and spirits. The Lakota and Cheyenne view the thunderbird as a very powerful and supernatural being that brings beautiful rain and controlled harsh storms. The Cherokee believe that the red-tailed hawk brought messages from ancestors, offering wisdom and protection.

Birds' ability to fly gives them a point beyond human reach, symbolizing insight, vision, and the power to look beyond earthly concerns. This is why many tribes see birds as guiding spirits or totems that help individuals connect with higher truths, and why people look up to them.

Their presence in stories and ceremonies reflects their importance as a guide, spiritual messengers, and protectors. Birds remind people of their connections to nature and the importance of living in harmony alongside the world around them.

The Accidental Birdwatcher

Aritra Ray, MANAGING EDITOR

When my sixth-grade Science Olympiad coach first assigned me this topic, I accepted it with a grumble. I could barely pronounce it — "Orni," I called it.

Little did I know ornithology would soon be an all-encompassing passion that made navigating my daily surroundings feel like a treasure hunt. The hours spent flipping through the Peterson Bird Guide led to me staring out my window, hoping for a glimpse at this new world that had been opened for me. Routine walks became eye-opening moments. Only through birding did I come to appreciate the true biodiversity that surrounded me. I soon set up bird feeders in my backyard, and I was amazed by the variety of birds that lived in the area's trees. From cardinals and blue jays to an endless array of sparrows, every new sighting amazed me like it was my first.

Every excursion soon turned into a birding expedition. The biggest joy I derive from birding is the puzzle of "ID": identifying them within a fleeting second. It's analogous to putting together a puzzle: putting together small clues to find the bigger picture. Whether it's a single streak on a wing or their unique call, birding drives me to challenge myself to look at a challenge from aspects I'd never consider.

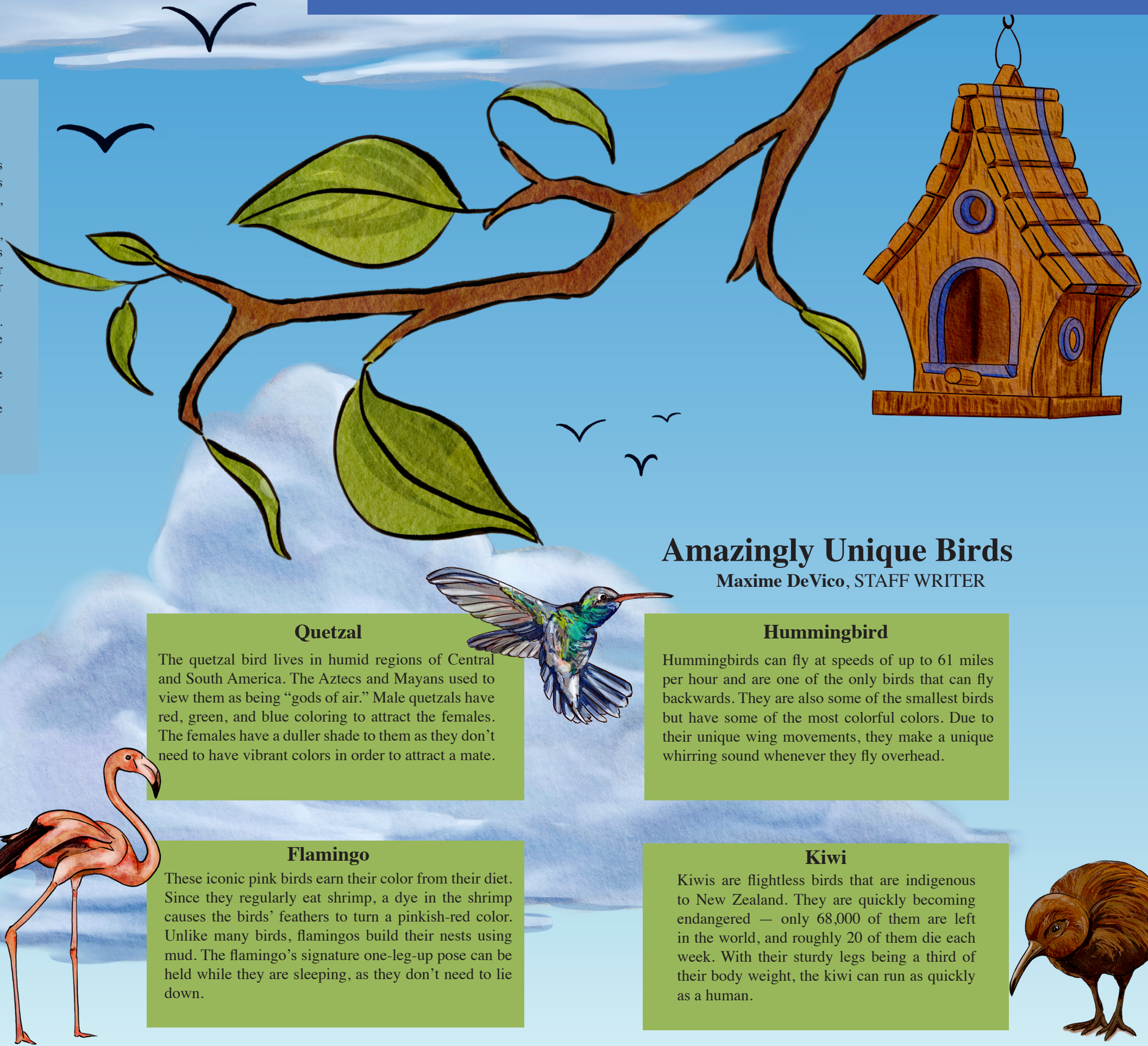
Of all the experiences that I've acquired from birdwatching, observance is perhaps one that I've come to appreciate the most. Birdwatching has taught me to see beyond the surface level. It is an exercise for all the senses; bird calls are the background music of every neighborhood, and their variety leaves me in awe.

Birdwatching is also a humbling experience, and it speaks to how much more there is to learn. More often than not, birds present a living mystery. They aren't what they initially seem to be. But effective birding is about creating a mindset to think beyond the obvious, and consider every possibility. My birding experience has taught me that no possibility is too outlandish. What might look like a finch could actually be a female cardinal, but how can you tell? Well sometimes, you just can't. And that's the beauty of nature. There are no absolutes, only ambiguity and possibility.

For some, exotic birds are the draw — macaws, flamingos, and the like. But my true passion is about backyard birds. Backyard birding shows us that the greenery we take for granted is in reality a privilege, and we ought to enjoy what is in our backyard instead of reaching for increasingly exotic species brought to market by unethical bird breeders. Backyard bird feeders offer me a glimpse of birds in their natural habitats — one nectar feeder was even frequented by a ruby-throated hummingbird last spring!

At the time when the world seems to spin faster than ever, birdwatching connects me with nature and pulls me away from the world of screens and deadlines. Because there is no deadline with a birdwatch. Nature sets the clock, and nature's humbling power reigns supreme.

graphics: Charley Hu



Quetzal

The quetzal bird lives in humid regions of Central and South America. The Aztecs and Mayans used to view them as being "gods of air." Male quetzals have red, green, and blue coloring to attract the females. The females have a duller shade to them as they don't need to have vibrant colors in order to attract a mate.



Hummingbird

Hummingbirds can fly at speeds of up to 61 miles per hour and are one of the only birds that can fly backwards. They are also some of the smallest birds but have some of the most colorful colors. Due to their unique wing movements, they make a unique whirring sound whenever they fly overhead.

Flamingo

These iconic pink birds earn their color from their diet. Since they regularly eat shrimp, a dye in the shrimp causes the birds' feathers to turn a pinkish-red color. Unlike many birds, flamingos build their nests using mud. The flamingo's signature one-leg-up pose can be held while they are sleeping, as they don't need to lie down.



Kiwi

Kiwis are flightless birds that are indigenous to New Zealand. They are quickly becoming endangered — only 68,000 of them are left in the world, and roughly 20 of them die each week. With their sturdy legs being a third of their body weight, the kiwi can run as quickly as a human.

