

After prehistoric asteroid destroyed most life on Earth, why were birds able to survive?

With hindsight, birds can be categorized as avian dinosaurs and all the other sorts—from Stegosaurus to Brontosaurus—are non-avian dinosaurs. The entire reason paleontologists make that split is because of a catastrophe that struck 66 million years ago. An asteroid more than 6 miles across struck what's now the Yucatan Peninsula.

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All told, more than 75 percent of species known from the end of the Cretaceous period, 66 million years ago, didn't make it to the following Paleogene period. The geologic break between the two is called the K-Pg boundary, and beaked birds were the only dinosaurs to survive the disaster.

"There has been a lot of discussion about what enabled modern-type birds to survive the K-Pg extinction while other birds groups, non-avian dinosaurs, and even pterosaurs perished," says Royal BC Museum paleontologist Derek Larson.

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By the end of the Cretaceous, beaked birds were already eating a much more varied diet than their toothed relatives. These birds weren't specialized on insects or other animal food, and so they were able to pluck up hard food items like seeds and nuts. And in the aftermath of the extinction, when animal life was severely cut back, those hard, persistent little morsels got beaked birds through the hard times. Beaked birds were able to [feed on the seeds](#) of the destroyed forests and wait out the decades until vegetation began to return.

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