

ORNITHOLOGY

# The Toucan: The Magpie of Brazil

## "A Classic Of Science"

### A Traveller Brought Gesner the Beak of a Strange Bird From a Far Country to Describe in his Story of Animals

C O N R. GESNERI TIGVRINI, *Medicinae et Philosophiae Professoris in Schola Tigurina, HISTORIAE ANIMALIUM Liber III qui est de Avium natura. Francofurti, Ex officina Typographica Egenolphi Emmelij, M. DC.XVII.*

(*History of Animals, Book III which is about the nature of Birds, by Conrad Gesner of Tigurina, Professor of Medicine and Philosophy in the School of Tigurina. Frankfurt, 1617.*)

SHOW here the Brazilian magpie, whose beak John Ferrerius, that most learned of men, has given me; the rest of the body I have added from the description published by Andreas Thevetus Gallicus of Antarctic Gaul. This enormous beak (says Ferrerius) is actually that of a bird brought from the region of Brazil, not any larger (as they report who have returned from that place) than our magpie.

The man who brought me this beak reports that the bird feeds upon peppers, with which it gorges itself most voraciously, but it does not pluck any except for its immediate needs. It will endure a scarcity of peppers in the regions where it dwells, rather than gather them from newer trees.

And I am convinced of the great importance of peppers to them for those

tamed when young are injured by not getting them. And a great many other things are reported about them, but I cannot easily tell whether all are true.

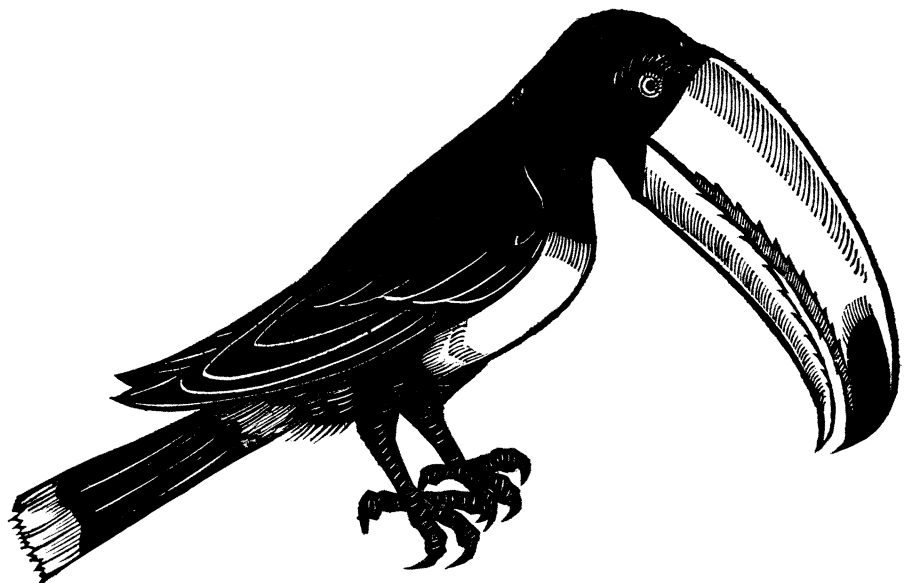
#### Almost Transparent Beak

He who sent this to me says that the skin of the breast is distinguished by feathers of the most splendid and beautiful gold or saffron color (the rest of the body is black, except that the base and tip of the tail are red). Andreas Thevetus states that the beak is wider and longer than the rest of the body: which I can believe the more readily since it is very thin like a membrane and almost transparent, very light and hollow, and able to hold air inside it: for which reason it has this peculiarity, that there is no passage for smelling; for its thinness allows odors to penetrate it, as easily as though it were open. The beak might very easily be broken, but it appears to be jagged by nature so that it can cut things with less exertion. But

can air pass around these as though they were teeth, although that inside is held back by the closed beak, and slip into the throat and windpipe?

This bird, which might be named *Burhychus* or *Ramphestes* from the size of its beak, is called *Toucan* by the inhabitants of America. See Thevetus, chapter 47 of the book just cited, in which he says that this bird is the size of a pipit or a young pigeon. It must be another species to which he refers. Both have black feathers except for the yellow tail, in which the other has feathers of red mixed with black, the feathers under the breast becoming yellow, nor am I able to find the flame color so characteristic of this one appearing in the red feathers at the tip of the tail. Ambrose Paraeus describes this bird as similar in body and color to the raven, although its beak is somewhat yellow, transparent, very light, dented like teeth, and of the length and width which I have described. I have drawn two pictures of this bird, one agreeing with the description which John Ferrerius sent me with the beak, the other similar to the one described by Thevetus and Ambrose Paraeus in their books.

*Science News Letter, June 13, 1931*



GESNER'S DRAWING OF THE TOUCAN

He says of it: "This picture agrees with the beak and the description sent me by John Ferrerius." But the careful old pioneer naturalist played safe by adding another illustration with a more conservative beak.

### THE GREAT NEBULA IN ORION

is shown to be a vast whirl-  
pool of glowing gas

by

Sir William Huggins

in

NEXT WEEK'S CLASSIC OF SCIENCE