

Secretarybird

- The Secretarybird, “a crowned beauty” lives 10-15 years. (*Up to 20 years in captivity.*)
- The Secretarybird is a bird of prey.
- The tallest of all raptors, they stand **4.1 – 4.9 feet tall** mainly due to their long legs.
- An adult’s wingspan is 6.9 feet and they weigh from 5 to 9.4 pounds.
- The single species of its family, the bird gets its name from its **crest of long feathers** that look like the quill pens office workers once tucked behind their ears. Also, male secretaries from the 1800’s wore gray tail coats and dark knee-length pants.
- The bird is basically white with areas of dove-grey, black on the wings, thighs and 2 elongated central tail feathers. The short, down-curved beak is backed by an area colored in a variety of red/orange and yellow/orange skin.
- The face is bare – as with most raptors - and the tail feathers are long and shaggy.
- Their most distinctive feature is the **20 or so black crest feathers** that can be grouped and tucked behind their heads.
- The head of the Secretarybird (*with its orange/yellowish bare patch*) and shape of the beak are very similar to those of the caracara.
- They have a **very, very long eyelashes**.
- Like all raptors, Secretarybirds not only have two eyelids, they have a third eyelid. The **nictitating membranes**, or third eyelid, is primarily used to blink. This thin, semi-transparent eyelid moves horizontally or from the inside to the outside of a bird’s eye. It protects the eyes from their prey, dust, twigs, etc. while enabling them to still see.
- Secretarybirds have territories that span up to 19 square miles.
- Since they begin hunting early at dawn, rest in shade during hot periods of the day, and return to their roost prior to sunset, they are considered diurnal.
- Each day, they stomp through short grasslands to consume **snakes**, reptiles, amphibians, tortoises, rats and other small mammals as well as young game birds.
- They can kick with a force that is 5 to 6 times their body weight.
- Secretarybirds have tough scales on their legs which protect them from snake bites.
- Unlike other birds of prey, Secretarybirds do not have grasping toes. Their toes are thick and blunt with short curved talons on the end.
- Secretarybirds **pair for life** and are remarkably faithful to their nest site. However, members of a pair are usually not together, but instead stay a small distance apart.
- The nest is generally placed low in the fork of a tree, usually an acacia. The huge bundle of sticks grows year by year in the manner of an eagle's eyrie.
- The two, occasionally three, rough textured, pale green eggs take about 50 days to hatch, and the downy young are fed on a diet of small mammals. They fly after about eight weeks.
- Both sexes work together to build a nest. Eggs are laid in May or June and incubated mainly by the female. The young are fed regurgitated insects and small prey by both parents.
- These birds **take to flight only when hard-pressed**. Yet, they can still fly high with their legs dangling behind.

- The Secretarybird walks well on extremely long legs plodding up to twenty miles in a day.
- When pursued, the Secretarybird escapes by relying on the speed of its legs but may spread its wings to aid the running.
- When hunting, this bird spreads its crest feathers like a fan and seeks food with its short-hooked beak.
- A Secretarybird finds most of its food on the ground and has a partiality for snakes. It grabs the snake with its strong toes and beats it to death on the ground, while protecting itself from bites with its large wings. Finally, it seizes its prey and hurls it into the air several times to stun it.
- In addition to finding food with its beak, the Secretarybird will also stamp on grass tussocks with its feet to scare up lizards, grasshoppers, and small mammals or birds.
- They are opportunistic birds and gather at recently burnt-out areas where prey are often injured and without plant cover.



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