

Reading—Sample Content

Levels 16 through 18



Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

The Extraordinary Feather

Birds differ from all other living animals in one distinctive way—they are the only creatures that have feathers. Their plumes come in different forms and perform many functions.

Some Basic Feather Types

Contour

When people glance at a bird, they see its contour feathers. These outer feathers have a waterproof coating and tiny hooks on their edges that latch together. They overlap each other like roof shingles and shield the bird from stormy weather. The color of the contour feathers is also valuable. Sometimes, it provides camouflage, allowing birds to blend into their environment. For instance, a quail's drab brown feathers effectively conceal the ground-dwelling bird. In some cases, bright contour feather colors shout for attention; male birds commonly use them to attract mates.

Wing

Wing feathers enable birds to soar. They are long and broad. Muscles anchor them to the bird's hand bones so the bird can control and position its feathers. They have a narrow, stiff leading edge that breaks the wind as a bird flies.

Tail

Tail feathers are symmetrical and fan-shaped. By twisting their tail feathers, birds can shift directions in flight. When birds land, tail feathers act as a brake, and as birds perch, tail feathers ensure balance. Certain birds, such as woodpeckers, use their tail feathers as a brace to support themselves when clinging to trees.

Down

Down feathers differ from most other types of feathers because they have soft, fluffy barbs. These barbs efficiently trap pockets of air next to a bird's skin, which insulates the animal from the cold. By fluffing their feathers, birds adjust the amount of trapped air and regulate their body temperature.

Other Uses of Distinctive Feathers

Many birds have other unique feathers suited to their specialized needs. For instance, grouse have feathers on their feet that serve as snowshoes in the winter. Penguins have smooth belly feathers for sliding like a toboggan. Some insect-eating birds have bristle feathers near their beaks to help funnel bugs into their mouths.

Today, scientists continue to study feathers. What unexpected uses might they uncover next?



How do the illustrations support the ideas in the passage?

- ☐ They explain how feathers are used for flight.
- ☒ They show what different types of feathers look like.
- ☐ They explain why some birds have bright feathers.
- ☐ They show how scientists study bird feathers.

This item assesses:

R.5.4 – Demonstrate awareness of techniques that enhance comprehension, such as using existing knowledge, summarizing content, comparing information across texts, using graphics and text structure, and formulating questions that deepen understanding: graphic strategies

Thinking Skill – Synthesize Elements—Integrate: connect and combine elements into a new whole

6.RI.7 – Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

This question has two parts. First, answer part A. Then, answer part B.

Part A

What is the author's main purpose for writing the passage?

- ☐ to persuade readers to do research about bird feathers
- ☐ to inform readers about the colors of bird feathers
- ☐ to entertain readers with stories about bird feathers
- ☒ to inform readers about the functions of bird feathers

Part B

Which sentence from the passage best supports the answer to part A?

- ☐ Birds differ from all other living animals in one distinctive way—they are the only creatures that have feathers.
- ☐ When people glance at a bird, they see its contour feathers.
- ☒ For instance, grouse have feathers on their feet that serve as snowshoes in the winter.
- ☐ Today, scientists continue to study feathers.

This item assesses:

R.4.4 – Demonstrate critical understanding by making predictions; distinguishing between fact and opinion, and reality and fantasy; transferring ideas to other situations; and judging author purpose, point of view, and effectiveness: author's purpose

Thinking Skill – Generate Ideas—Infer: reason beyond available information to fill in gaps

6.RI.6 – Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.

Read the sentences from the passage.

These outer feathers have a waterproof coating and tiny hooks on their edges that latch together. They overlap each other like roof shingles and shield the bird from stormy weather.

Which idea do the sentences develop?

- ☐ Birds cling to tops of houses with their contour feathers.
- ☒ Contour feathers provide protection for birds.
- ☐ Birds use their contour feathers to fly together.
- ☐ Contour feathers give birds bright colors.

This item assesses:

R.3.3 – Demonstrate comprehension by drawing conclusions; inferring relationships such as cause and effect; and identifying theme and story elements such as plot, climax, character, and setting: conclusions

Thinking Skill – Analyze Information—Recognize Relationships and Patterns: identify patterns and the way elements are related

6.RI.3 – Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).

Which sentence from the passage supports the idea that feathers can help a bird blend into its surroundings?

- ☒ For instance, a quail's drab brown feathers effectively conceal the ground-dwelling bird.
- ☐ They have a narrow, stiff leading edge that breaks the wind as a bird flies.
- ☐ Certain birds, such as woodpeckers, use their tail feathers as a brace to support themselves when clinging to trees.
- ☐ Down feathers differ from most other types of feathers because they have soft, fluffy barbs.

This item assesses:

R.4.7 – Demonstrate critical understanding by making predictions; distinguishing between fact and opinion, and reality and fantasy; transferring ideas to other situations; and judging author purpose, point of view, and effectiveness: critical assessment

Thinking Skill – Evaluate Outcomes—Verify: judge accuracy, adequacy, and value of outcomes

6.RI.3 – Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).