

# Useless beauty and the birds: Charles Darwin's peacock

*"The sight of a feather in a peacock's tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick!" – Charles Darwin*

Why beauty?

After a long winter, nothing pleases as much as spring, warmth, and the sounds and sightings of birds. There are no less than 10,000 divergent species on which nature bestows her most extravagant beauty – in visual, auditory and behavioral ways that, frankly, don't make utilitarian sense if every genetic trait has a purpose.

This was the puzzle for Darwin. Upon publishing *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Charles Darwin admitted being confounded by beauty. What on earth was the evolutionary purpose of the stunningly beautiful peacock's tail?



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Likewise, for the last century, most evolutionary biologists have viewed beauty as totally utilitarian. In his book, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World*, Yale ornithologist Richard O. Prum, radically suggests that the opposite is true, that beauty itself,



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