NATURE-INSPIRED INVENTIONS

FLIGHT · VOLUME 015 / 255



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Bird Skeletons

Lightweight Aerospace Lattice Structures

Nature-Inspired Inventions

Volume 015 of 255

WealthSphere Labs

Bird Skeletons: Lightweight Aerospace Lattice Structures

Nature-Inspired Inventions, Volume 015

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Published by WealthSphere Labs · wealthspherelabs.com

About this book. This is an educational guide to biologically inspired engineering. The invention concepts in it are design ideas for study and experimentation, not tested or certified products. Worked numbers illustrate methods unless a source is named. Nothing here is engineering certification, legal advice on patents, or a substitute for qualified professional review of anything that will carry people, loads or risk.

First edition, 2026.

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Introduction: Light Where It Counts

Ask most people why birds can fly and many will mention hollow bones. It is true that many flying birds have hollow, air-filled bones. But the full story is more interesting and more useful to engineers. Research has shown that bird bones are, on average, denser than mammal bones, and that the skeleton as a whole is not dramatically lighter as a fraction of body mass than in mammals of similar size. What birds do exceptionally well is put bone material where it carries load, shape it efficiently, and fuse and reinforce bones so that the skeleton is stiff and strong for its weight.

That is the central problem of aerospace structures: achieve the required stiffness and strength at the lowest possible mass. The tools birds use — thin-walled tubes, internal bracing struts, fused assemblies, material adapted to load paths — have direct counterparts in aircraft spars, geodetic frames, isogrid panels and modern 3D-printed lattices.

This volume explains how bird skeletons achieve light, stiff structures, the mechanics behind them, the history of lattice and lightweight aerospace structures, and how designers can use bird-skeleton principles with today's design and manufacturing tools.

How this book is organized

Chapters 1 and 2 cover bird skeleton structure and adaptation. Chapter 3 explains the mechanics of lightweight structures. Chapter 4 surveys the history of lattice aerospace structures. Chapters 5 to 7 cover translation, design tools and manufacturing. Chapter 8 presents ten design concepts. Chapters 9 to 13 cover testing, failure modes, approval, a workbook and a case study.

> Figures for real animals and structures are rounded and typical. Worked numbers are illustrations unless a source is named.

Chapter 1: The Bird Skeleton

A skeleton built for flight

Compared with mammals, bird skeletons show several features linked to flight:

- **Fused bones.** Many bones that are separate in other animals are fused in birds: the hand bones into the carpometacarpus, the lower back and hip into the synsacrum, the tail vertebrae into the pygostyle. Fusion makes stiff, light assemblies with fewer joints.
- **A keeled breastbone.** The sternum has a large keel, providing area for the flight muscles to attach.
- **Thin-walled long bones.** Wing and leg bones in many species are tubes with thin walls.
- **Pneumatized bones.** In many birds, air sacs of the respiratory system extend into certain bones, such as the humerus, filling them with air.
- **Internal struts.** Some bones, especially in large soaring birds, contain internal bony struts crossing the hollow interior.

Correcting a common belief

Research by Elizabeth Dumont, published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* in 2010, compared the bones of birds, bats and rodents. It found that bird bones tend to have higher density than those of similar-sized mammals, and that skeletal mass relative to body mass was broadly similar. The bird skeleton's advantage is not that it contains less bone overall but that the bone is shaped and arranged efficiently — thin-walled tubes, fused assemblies — and is dense and stiff where needed.

This is an important lesson for engineers: lightweight structures come from geometry and material placement, not just from removing material.

Variation among birds

Diving birds such as penguins and loons have less pneumatized, heavier bones, which help them stay submerged. Large soaring birds have the most extensive pneumatization and internal bracing. Skeletons adapt to lifestyle.

Chapter takeaways

- Fused, thin-walled, braced and pneumatized bones are typical of flying birds.
- Bird bones are relatively dense; lightness comes from shape and arrangement.
- Skeletons vary with lifestyle.

Chapter 2: Bone as an Adaptive Structural Material

Bone composition

Bone is a composite of mineral crystals and collagen fibers. The mineral gives stiffness and strength in compression; the collagen gives toughness. Bone is arranged in hierarchical levels from nanometres to centimetres.

Cortical and trabecular bone

- **Cortical bone** is dense and forms the outer walls of bones.
- **Trabecular bone** is a spongy lattice of struts and plates inside bones, especially near joints.

Trabecular bone is a natural lattice structure. Its struts tend to align with the directions of principal stress.

Adaptation to load

In 1892, the German surgeon Julius Wolff proposed that bone adapts its structure to the loads it carries — a principle now called Wolff's law. Bone is added where stresses are high and removed where they are low. Over time, this produces structures closely matched to their loads.

The vulture's wing bone

D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, in his 1917 book *On Growth and Form*, pointed out that the internal bracing of a vulture's metacarpal bone resembles a Warren truss — a type of bridge truss with diagonal members forming triangles. The comparison has become a classic illustration of convergence between biological and engineered structures.