

If you have trouble "pushing things back an additional 10 million years," don't bother reading the rest of this.

A 135-million-year-old fossil found in China appears to be that of the oldest bird yet known that lived in trees and flew with agility. This is according to researcher Paul Sereno, who came up with his own entry into the "oldest known bird" sweepstakes at the October 12 (1990) meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in Lawrence, KS. The specimen was found in 1987 in northeastern China and the Beijing Natural History Museum asked Sereno for help in studying it.

The most recent fossil find, not yet officially named, evidently followed by about 10 million years the Archaeopteryx – a ground-dwelling, toothed precursor of modern day birds that could climb trees, jump, and flap its wings but probably was unable to engage in long range flight or to live in trees.

A truly tree-dwelling bird fossil was found two years ago in Spain, dating back 125 million years, but this new report "pushes things back an additional 10 million years." The sparrow-sized bird retained some dinosaur characteristics: moveable fingers on the front edge of its wings, a lack of fusion of many of its bones, and a club-shaped end of the pubic bone that may have rested on the ground when the bird sat. But according to John Ostrom, curator of vertebrate paleontology at Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, "it was very definitely an advanced-level bird" and showed that modern-day flying ability came about very early in the history of birds, he said.