Is a penguin a bird? Seven animals kids ask about, answered

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Is a penguin a bird? Yes. Plus the whale, shark, bat, octopus, axolotl and sea turtle: what kind each one is, with sizes from named sources and a simple way to sort.

Yes, a penguin is a bird: it has feathers, wings and a beak, and it hatches from an egg. It just uses its wings to swim. Peabody sorts its animals into six kinds by what their bodies are like inside, not by where they live. That's why seven animals trip people up, and why the answer to "is it a fish?" is so often "no". Here they are, one by one.

The seven answers

- Question: Is a penguin a bird? · Answer: Yes, a bird · The giveaway: feathers, wings, a beak, and it hatches from an egg
- Question: Is a whale a fish? · Answer: No, a mammal · The giveaway: it breathes air and feeds its babies milk
- Question: Is a shark a fish? · Answer: Yes, a fish · The giveaway: gills and fins, in water all its life
- Question: Is a bat a bird? · Answer: No, a mammal · The giveaway: hair and milk; its wing is a stretched-out hand
- Question: Is an octopus a fish? · Answer: No, an animal with no backbone · The giveaway: no backbone at all
- Question: Is an axolotl a fish? · Answer: No, an amphibian · The giveaway: soft, damp skin, and it starts life in water
- Question: Is a sea turtle a fish? · Answer: No, a reptile · The giveaway: dry, scaly skin

The penguin

The emperor penguin stands up to 1.14 m (3.7 ft) tall and weighs up to 39.9 kg (88 lb). Both are maximums, from a US Fish and Wildlife Service press release of 25 October 2022. Not every bird can fly: penguins swim with their wings and ostriches run. Emperor penguins dive deeper than any other bird, and the dad keeps the egg warm on his feet all winter.

The whale

The blue whale is a mammal, like a dog, an elephant or you. Mammals breathe air, have hair or fur (a whale has a few whiskers) and feed their babies milk. It can reach 33.5 m (110 ft), the maximum NOAA Fisheries gives for Antarctic blue whales. Dolphins are mammals too. Stand it next to a penguin in Compare Two (this pair is ready-made) to see how far apart two sea animals can be.

The shark

A shark is a fish. The great white shark is up to 6.1 m (20 ft) long and 1,810 kg (about 4,000 lb), says NOAA Fisheries. The biggest fish alive is the whale shark, up to 12.2 m (40 ft) by some estimates from NOAA's National Ocean Service. It's a gentle shark that eats tiny food, and despite the name it is a fish, not a whale.

The bat

A bat is the only mammal that really flies. The little brown bat has a wingspan of 23 to 28 cm (9 to 11 in) and weighs about 14 g (half an ounce), according to the National Park Service. Mother bats gather in big nurseries to raise their pups together, and like every mammal they feed their pups milk.

The octopus

The giant Pacific octopus is 1.8 to 2.4 m (5.9 to 7.9 ft) long on average with its arms counted, says NOAA Fisheries. It has no backbone, so on Peabody it shares a shelf with bees, jellyfish and lobsters. It's certainly not a bug, and it has three hearts.

The axolotl

The axolotl keeps its feathery gills its whole life and never leaves the water. Amphibians usually start in water with gills and then grow legs and lungs, but the axolotl stays in water. It grows up to 30 cm (about 12 in), says the US Geological Survey, and wild axolotls live in only one place on Earth, near Mexico City. Wikidata, reading the IUCN Red List, puts it in the critically endangered group, which Peabody says as "in great danger".

The sea turtle

A sea turtle is a reptile. The leatherback is the only sea turtle without a hard shell, and the biggest of them: 1.5 to 1.8 m (4.9 to 5.9 ft) and 340 to 454 kg (about 750 to 1,000 lb) for an adult, according to NOAA Fisheries.

A quick way to sort any animal

Ask in this order:

1. Does it have feathers? It's a bird.
2. Does it have hair or fur, and feed its babies milk? It's a mammal.
3. Does it breathe water through gills and swim with fins? It's a fish.
4. Is its skin dry and scaly? It's a reptile.
5. Is its skin soft and damp, and does it start life in water? It's an amphibian.
6. Does it have no backbone at all? It belongs with the octopus.

The is a shark a fish guide goes deeper, and the quiz fish, bird or mammal lets a child try it

out. Browse the kinds: birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians.

Questions grown-ups ask

Why is the octopus on the "no backbone" shelf?

Most animals on Earth have no backbone, including insects, jellyfish, lobsters and octopuses. Peabody calls the shelf "bugs and other animals without backbones", even though an octopus is nothing like a bug.

Which birds can't fly?

Penguins swim with their wings, and ostriches run. Peabody's ostrich page gives a top speed of 69 km/h (43 mph) from the Smithsonian's National Zoo.

Is an animal's kind the same as where it lives?

No. "Ocean animals" is a list of animals that share a place: it has mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and animals with no backbone. The ocean animals page shows them together.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads. The library has stories for when the sorting is done.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/is-a-penguin-a-bird