Was Pteranodon a dinosaur? No, it was a flying reptile

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Was Pteranodon a dinosaur? No: it was a pterosaur, a flying reptile that lived alongside them. Plus Quetzalcoatlus, with a wingspan of 11 to 12 metres.

No, Pteranodon was not a dinosaur. It was a pterosaur, a flying reptile that lived at the same time as the dinosaurs but belonged to a different group. The same is true of Quetzalcoatlus, the giant of the sky. Peabody's dinosaur wing has twenty animals in it: eighteen dinosaurs and these two flyers, and the pages for the two flyers say plainly that they were not dinosaurs.

I put them in the wing because they lived at the same time as the dinosaurs, so anyone looking up one will want the other. Here is what each page says, and what I couldn't find a number for.

What a pterosaur was

Peabody's Pteranodon page says it plainly: pterosaurs lived at the same time as dinosaurs, but they were a separate group of reptiles. Their wings were skin, stretched from one very long finger (the fourth) to the legs. That is a different way of building a wing from a bird's, which uses feathers.

Birds did not come from pterosaurs, either. Peabody's page says so directly: birds came from dinosaurs, not from pterosaurs. I wrote about that separately in are birds dinosaurs.

Pteranodon

The name means "toothless wing" (say it teh-RAN-oh-don). It had a toothless beak and a crest sticking back from its head. Many of its fossils come from Kansas, which was covered by a shallow sea when Pteranodon lived. It soared over the water and caught fish.

Here is the honest part: Peabody has no checked number for Pteranodon yet. Its length, its weight and when it lived all show "no checked number yet", because I found no figure for it on the pages Peabody uses (the Park Service, the Forest Service, the Smithsonian and the rest). That also means Peabody can't draw it to scale beside a child yet. I'd rather show a gap than make one up.

Quetzalcoatlus

For a flyer with numbers, there's Quetzalcoatlus, said KET-sul-koh-AT-lus.

- What: Wingspan · Metric: 11.0 to 11.9 m · Imperial: about 36 to 39 ft · Where it came from: National Park Service, Big Bend

- What: Weight · Metric: just over 230 kg · Imperial: just over 500 lb · Where it came from: National Park Service, Big Bend
- What: When it lived · Metric: about 69 million years ago · Imperial: the same · Where it came from: National Park Service, 2018 National Fossil Day artwork

Both of the first two are scientists' estimates. Its first fossils were found in Big Bend National Park in Texas, and it also lived in Montana.

Two things to put next to it:

- A giraffe. Wikidata gives a standing height of 5.5 metres (18 feet), so Quetzalcoatlus's wingspan is about twice that. See giraffe vs Quetzalcoatlus.
- A bald eagle. The Park Service's Kenai Fjords page gives a weight of 3.18 to 6.35 kilograms (7 to 14 pounds), so Quetzalcoatlus was more than thirty times heavier. See bald eagle vs Quetzalcoatlus. Keep in mind that the eagle is measured head to tail and the pterosaur across its wings.

Peabody's page says Quetzalcoatlus probably took off by vaulting into the air with its strong front limbs, and that on the ground it walked on all four limbs with its huge wings folded up. Scientists think it walked about picking up small animals, like a giant stork.

Why people mix them up

They lived at the same time as the dinosaurs, so it is easy to lump them together. Games do it too, and that is fine for a game. The real story is on the Animals dinosaur pages.

Try tonight

Ask your child to sort the wing into two piles, dinosaur and not a dinosaur. The dino or not quiz is a quick way to practise it, with three big boxes and no typing. For a harder one, the when did it live quiz asks about when animals lived.

Questions grown-ups ask

Is a pterodactyl a dinosaur?

No. "Pterodactyl" is a name people often use for pterosaurs in general, and the answer is the same. Peabody's wing has two pterosaur pages, Pteranodon and Quetzalcoatlus.

Could Pteranodon fly?

Yes. Peabody's page says it flew over the sea, soaring over the water and catching fish.

Was Quetzalcoatlus the biggest flyer ever?

Peabody calls it one of the biggest animals ever to fly. That is as far as I'll go. I only have its own numbers, not a list of every flyer that ever lived.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026 and has no ads. When you've finished with the dinosaurs, the library has stories to read, and the dinosaur facts page has more.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/was-pteranodon-a-dinosaur