

The Birds (1963)

TOMATOMETER

All Critics

96

Average Rating: 8/10 Reviews Counted:
46 Fresh: 44 | Rotten: 2

Top Critics

75

Average Rating: 5.6/10 Critic Reviews:
8 Fresh: 6 | Rotten: 2

Proving once again that build-up is the key to suspense, Alfred Hitchcock successfully turned birds into some of the most terrifying villains in horror history.

AUDIENCE

80

liked it Average Rating: 3.5/5 User
Ratings: 150,995

Movie Info

The story begins as an innocuous romantic triangle involving wealthy, spoiled Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), handsome Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), and schoolteacher Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette). The human story begins in a San Francisco pet shop and culminates at the home of

Mitch's mother (Jessica Tandy) at Bodega Bay, where the characters' sense of security is slowly eroded by the curious behavior of the birds in the area. At first, it's no more than a sea gull swooping down and pecking at Melanie's head. Things take a truly ugly turn when hundreds of birds converge on a children's party. There is never an explanation as to why the birds have run amok, but once the onslaught begins, there's virtually no letup. ~ Hal Erickson, Rovi

PG-13, 1 hr. 59 min.

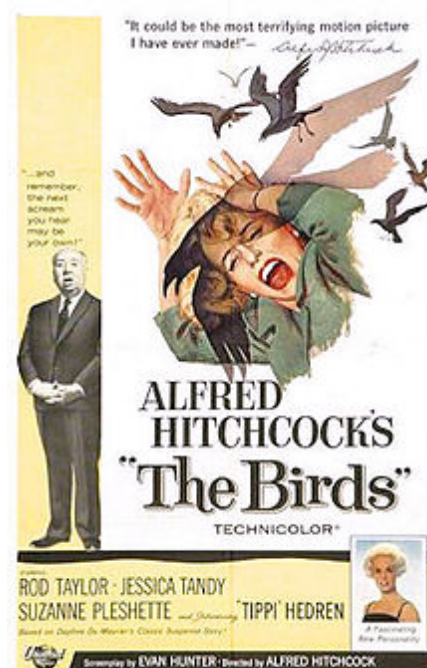
Horror, Mystery & Suspense,
Classics

Directed By: Alfred Hitchcock

In Theaters: Mar 28, 1963 Wide

Universal Pictures

www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1002448-birds/



Theatrical release poster (Wikipedia)

The Birds (1963)

The Birds is a 1963 suspense/horror film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, loosely based on the 1952 story "The Birds" by Daphne du Maurier. It depicts Bodega Bay, California, which is, suddenly and for unexplained reasons, the subject of a series of widespread and violent bird attacks over the course of a few days.

The film was billed as 'introducing' Tippi Hedren. It also starred Rod Taylor, Jessica Tandy, Suzanne Pleshette and a young Veronica Cartwright.

The screenplay was written by Evan Hunter. Hitchcock told him to develop new characters and a more elaborate plot, keeping Du Maurier's title and concept of unexplained bird attacks.

Plot

Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), a young socialite, meets Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) in a San Francisco bird shop. Mitch wants to purchase a pair of lovebirds for his sister's eleventh birthday, but the shop has none. He recognizes Melanie from a previous encounter, but she doesn't remember him, so he plays a prank by pretending to mistake her for a salesperson. She is infuriated when she realises. Nevertheless intrigued, Melanie tracks down his address in Bodega Bay, California, and purchases a pair of lovebirds herself. After driving an hour or two, she sneaks across the bay in a motor boat and secretly deposits the birds inside Mitch's house with a note. He spots her on the water during her escape, and he intercepts her as she is attacked and injured by a seagull. Mitch invites her to stay for dinner, and Melanie reluctantly agrees.

Melanie develops a relationship with Mitch, meets his clinging mother Lydia (Jessica Tandy) and his younger sister Cathy (Veronica Cartwright). She also befriends local school teacher Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette), who later reveals she is Mitch's ex-lover. When Melanie stays for the night at Annie's house, they are startled by a loud thud; they find that a gull has killed itself by flying into the front door. At Cathy's birthday party the next day, the

children are set upon by seagulls. The following evening, sparrows invade the Brenner home through the chimney. Lydia discovers a neighbor who has been killed by birds that invaded his house, and she flees the scene in terror. After being comforted by Melanie and Mitch, Lydia becomes concerned about Cathy's safety at school. Melanie goes to the school and waits for class to end, initially unaware that a huge number of crows are massing nearby. Horrified when she sees the playground engulfed by them, she warns Annie, and they evacuate the children. The birds attack, injuring several children.

Melanie meets Mitch at a local restaurant. Several patrons describe their own encounters with strange bird behaviour. A drunk believes the attacks are a sign of the Apocalypse, and a traveling salesman suggests exterminating them all. An amateur ornithologist dismisses the reports of attacks as fanciful and argues about it with Melanie. A young mother becomes increasingly distressed by the conversation and chides them all for frightening her children. Outside the restaurant, a motorist is attacked while filling his car with gasoline; he is knocked unconscious and the gasoline continues to pour out onto the street. The salesman from the restaurant, unaware that he is standing in a puddle of the gasoline, lights a cigar and drops the lit match. The gasoline ignites, killing him. The birds attack in greater numbers as people pour from the diner to survey the damage; Melanie is forced to take refuge in a phone booth. Mitch rescues her and they return to the restaurant, where the hysterical mother accuses Melanie of causing the attacks. Melanie and Mitch return to Annie's house and find that Annie has been killed by birds while pushing Cathy indoors to safety.

Melanie and the Brennens barricade themselves inside the Brenner home. The house is attacked in waves by the birds, and several times they nearly break in through the sealed doors and windows. During a nighttime lull between attacks, Melanie hears noises from the upper floor. Not wanting to disturb the others' sleep, Melanie enters Cathy's abandoned bedroom and finds that the birds have broken through the roof. They violently attack her, trapping her in the room until Mitch comes to her rescue. She is badly injured and nearly catatonic, and Mitch insists they must get her to a hospital. A sea of

birds ripple menacingly around the Brenner farm as Mitch prepares Melanie's car for their escape. The radio reports the spread of bird attacks to nearby communities, and suggests that the National Guard may be required because civil authorities are unable to combat the inexplicable attacks. The film concludes ambiguously, as the car carrying Melanie, the Brennens and the lovebirds slowly makes its way through a landscape inundated by thousands of different bird species perched together quietly. For the moment, they are not attacking.

- Diner
- Elizabeth Wilson as Helen Carter
- frightened boy in coffee shop
- Roxanne Tunis as Extra
- Alfred Hitchcock makes his signature cameo as a man walking dogs out of the pet store at the beginning of the film. They were two of Hitchcock's own Sealyham terriers, Geoffrey and Stanley.

Cast

- Tippi Hedren as Melanie Daniels
- Rod Taylor as Mitch Brenner
- Jessica Tandy as Lydia Brenner
- Veronica Cartwright as Cathy Brenner
- Suzanne Pleshette as Annie Hayworth
- Ethel Griffies as Mrs. Bundy
- Charles McGraw as Sebastian Sholes
- Doreen Lang as Hysterical Mother in Diner
- Ruth McDevitt as Mrs. MacGruder
- Joe Mantell as Travelling Salesman in Diner
- Malcolm Atterbury as Deputy Al Malone
- Karl Swenson as Drunken Doomsayer in
- Lonny Chapman as Deke Carter
- Doodles Weaver as Fisherman Helping With Rental Boat
- John McGovern as Postal Clerk
- Richard Deacon as Mitch's City Neighbor
- Bill Quinn as Sam as Man in Diner
- Morgan Brittany as Girl in Birthday Party
- Darlene Conley as Waitress
- Dal McKennon as Sam the Cook
- Mike Monteleone as Gas Station Attendant
- Jeannie Russell as School Child
- Rory Shevin as Small/young blond

Production

Development

On August 18, 1961, residents in the town of Capitola, California, awoke to find sooty shearwaters slamming into their rooftops, and their streets covered with dead birds. News reports suggested domoic acid poisoning (amnesic shellfish poisoning) as the cause. According to a local newspaper, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Alfred Hitchcock requested news copy in 1961 to use as "research material for his latest thriller". At the end of the same month, Hitchcock hired Evan Hunter to adapt Daphne du Maurier's novella, "The Birds", first published in her 1952 collection *The Apple Tree*. Hunter had previously written "Vicious Circle" for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, which he adapted for the television anthology series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. He also adapted Robert Turner's story "Appointment at Eleven" for the same television series. Hunter later suspected that he was hired because he had demonstrated he could write suspense (with the 87th Precinct novels, as Ed McBain) and because his novel *The Blackboard Jungle* had received critical acclaim. The relationship between Hunter and Hitchcock during the creation of *The Birds* was documented by the writer in his 1997 autobiography *Me and Hitch*, which contains a variety of correspondence between the writer, director and Hitchcock's assistant, Peggy Robertson.

Hunter began working on the screenplay in September 1961. Hunter and Hitchcock developed the story, suggesting foundations such as the townspeople having a guilty secret to hide, and the birds an instrument of

punishment. Hunter suggested that the film begin using some elements borrowed from the screwball comedy genre then have it evolve into "stark terror". This appealed to Hitchcock, according to the writer, because it conformed to his love of suspense: the title and the publicity would have already informed the audience that birds attack, but they do not know when. The initial humor followed by horror would turn the suspense into shock.

Hitchcock solicited comments from several people regarding the first draft of Hunter's screenplay. Consolidating their criticisms, Hitchcock wrote to Hunter, suggesting that the script (particularly the first part) was too long, contained insufficient characterization in the two leads, and that some scenes lacked drama and audience interest. Hitchcock at later stages consulted with his friends Hume Cronyn (whose wife Jessica Tandy was playing Lydia) and V.S. Pritchett, who both offered lengthy reflections on the work.

Casting

As Hunter and Hitchcock developed the script they imagined Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in the two lead roles. Hitchcock, however, was unable to cast them and instead used Rod Taylor and Tippi Hedren, both of whom he signed to personal contracts (only Hedren made subsequent films with Hitchcock).

Soundtrack



Many of the sound effects were created on the Mixtur-Trautonium, an electronic musical instrument developed by Oskar Sala.

Hitchcock decided to do without any conventional incidental score. Instead, he made use of sound effects and sparse source music in counterpoint to calculated silences. Hitchcock wanted to use the electroacoustic Trautonium to create the birdcalls and noises. Hitchcock had first encountered this predecessor to the synthesizer on Berlin radio in the late 1920s. It was invented by Friedrich Trautwein and further developed by Oskar Sala into the Mixtur-Trautonium, which would create some of the bird sounds for this film.

The director commissioned Sala and Remi Gassmann to design an electronic soundtrack. They are credited with "electronic sound production and composition", and Hitchcock's previous musical collaborator Bernard Herrmann is credited as "sound consultant".

Source music includes the first of Claude Debussy's *Deux arabesques*, which Tippi Hedren's character plays on piano, and "Risseldy Rosseldy", an Americanized version of the Scottish folk song "Wee Cooper O'Fife", which is sung by the schoolchildren.

Special effects

The special effects shots of the attacking birds were done at Walt Disney Studios by animator/technician Ub Iwerks, who used the sodium vapor process ("yellow screen") which he had helped to develop. The SV process films the subject against a screen lit with narrow-spectrum sodium vapor lights. Unlike most compositing processes, SVP actually shoots two separate elements of the footage simultaneously using a beam-splitter. One reel is regular film stock and the other a film stock with emulsion sensitive only to the sodium vapor wavelength. This results in very precise matte shots compared to blue screen special effects, necessary due to "fringing" of the image from the birds' rapid wing flapping.

Premiere and awards

The film premiered March 28, 1963 in New York City. The Museum of Modern Art hosted an invitation-only screening of *The Birds* as part of a 50-film retrospective of Hitchcock's film work. The MOMA series had a booklet with a monograph on Hitchcock written by Peter Bogdanovich. The film was screened out of competition in May at a prestigious invitational showing at the 1963 Cannes Film Festival with Hitchcock and Hedren in attendance.

Ub Iwerks was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Special Effects. The winner that year was *Cleopatra*. Tippi Hedren received the Golden Globe Award for New Star of the Year – Actress in 1964, sharing it with Ursula Andress and Elke Sommer. She also received the Photoplay Award as Most Promising Newcomer. The film ranked #1 of the top 10 foreign films selected by the Bengal Film Journalists' Association Awards. Hitchcock also received the Association's Director Award for the film.

Reception and interpretation

The film earned an estimated \$5 million in North American rentals.

The Birds received a Rotten Tomatoes approval rating of 95%. The eminent film critic David Thomson refers to *The Birds* as Hitchcock's "last unflawed film".

Humanities scholar Camille Paglia wrote a monograph about *The Birds* for the BFI Film Classics series. She interprets the film as an ode to the many facets of female sexuality and, by extension, nature itself. She notes that women play pivotal roles in *The Birds*. Mitch is defined by his relationships with his mother, sister and ex-lover – a careful balance which is disrupted by his attraction to the beautiful Melanie.

The film was honored by the American Film Institute as the seventh greatest thriller and *Bravo* awarded it the 96th spot on their "The 100 Scariest Movie Moments" for the scene when the birds attack the city.

American Film Institute Nominations

- AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies
- AFI's 100 Years...100 Heroes & Villains
 - Birds (Villains) Nominated
- AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies (10th Anniversary Edition)

Sequel and remake

An unrelated sequel, *The Birds II: Land's End*, was released in 1994, with different actors. The film was a direct-to-television film and received negative reviews. The film's director, Rick Rosenthal, removed his name from it, opting to use the Hollywood pseudonym Alan Smithee. Hedren appeared in the film in a supporting role, but not as her original character.

In 2007, *Variety* reported that Naomi Watts and George Clooney would star in Universal's remake of the film, which would be directed by *Casino Royale* director Martin Campbell. The production would be a joint venture by Platinum Dunes and Mandalay Pictures. Hedren stated her opposition to the remake, saying, "Why would you do that? Why? I mean, can't we find new stories, new things to do?" Development has been stalled since the 2007 announcement. On 16 June 2009, Brad Fuller of Dimension Films stated that no further developments had taken place, commenting, "We keep trying, but I don't know." Martin Campbell was eventually replaced as director by Dennis Iliadis in December 2009.

Several shooting scenes from *The Birds* are reenacted in *The Girl*, a 2012 HBO/BBC film that gives a version of the relationship between Hitchcock and Hedren.