Lesson 2

The Last Dodo

If someone called you a “dodo,” you would probably be insulted. It is a derogatory term that describes someone who is not very astute. The English word comes from the Portuguese doudo, which means “a foolish person.” Dodo was the name Portuguese settlers gave to a large bird that inhabited the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Some people think of the dodo as a mythical creature. It was a real bird, however, and its story is a sad one.

For thousands of years, until the island of Mauritius was discovered by Portuguese sailors in 1507, this odd-looking bird lived in peaceful solitude. Because there were no predatory animals on the island, the dodo had long since lost the ability to fly. And since it had no natural enemies, it was very trusting and made no attempt to flee when approached by humans. Because of this, the Portuguese considered the bird stupid. They gave it the name by which we know it today—the dodo.

Even if it had been less trusting of humans, the dodo would still have been vulnerable. It was too fat and ungainly to run very fast. The settlers on the island found that dodos, although a little tough, were good to eat. They slaughtered them in large numbers. Domesticated animals brought to the island by the settlers added to the dodos’ problems. The female dodo laid a single large white egg, which it deposited on the ground, usually in a tuft of grass. Prior to the arrival of the first settlers, the eggs had lain undisturbed until they hatched. To the dogs that now roamed the island, these eggs were a delicacy; the dogs scavenged the island and devoured any dodo eggs they found. The dodo was last seen alive in 1681. None is believed to have survived after that date.

As time passed, people began to wonder if the dodo had ever existed. Drawings done by artists who had visited Mauritius showed a bird somewhat larger than a swan, with a long neck, a large head, an enormous black bill, and a short, tufty tail. Its plumage was grayish in color over most of its body and white on its breast. Most people who saw these pictures thought that such an odd-looking creature must be a figment of the artist’s imagination; at that time, there was no way of knowing whether they provided an authentic record of an actual creature.
Then, in 1889, a large number of dodo bones were discovered in a swamp on Mauritius. Several skeletons were reconstructed from them and later displayed in museums in London and Paris. They are all that remain of this odd-looking but rather lovable bird.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What drastic change occurred in the dodos’ living conditions in 1507?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

2. What is the meaning of prior as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

3. What was it about the dodo’s nature that made it easy to catch?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

4. What was it about the dodo’s physical condition that made it easy to catch?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

5. What other names of birds are derogatory when applied to humans?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

6. How was the existence of the dodo authenticated?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

7. What did the Portuguese think of the dodo’s intelligence?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

8. What is the meaning of delicacy as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
9. What color were the feathers of a dodo?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

10. What is the meaning of **devoured** as it is used in the passage?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

11. Why did many people believe the dodo to be a **figment** of an artist’s imagination?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

12. What did many people come to think about the dodo before the discovery of the bones?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

13. What is the meaning of **slaughtered** as it is used in the passage?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

14. What is the meaning of **predatory** as it is used in the passage?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

15. How would you describe the dogs that lived on the island?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
• The Latin for feather is *pluma*. In addition to the word *plumage*, this Latin root gives us the English word *plume*, which is a noun, meaning “a large feather or group of feathers,” and a verb, meaning “to smooth its feathers.” (Birds *plume* themselves with their beaks.) The French word for *pen* is *plume* and comes from the same Latin root. Pens were once made from large feathers with the ends split to hold ink.

• The Latin *solus* means “alone” or “without company” and forms the root of a number of English words in addition to *solitude*. *Solitaire* is a card game for just one person. *Solitary* means “alone” or “without company.” *Solo* means “performed by one person.”