

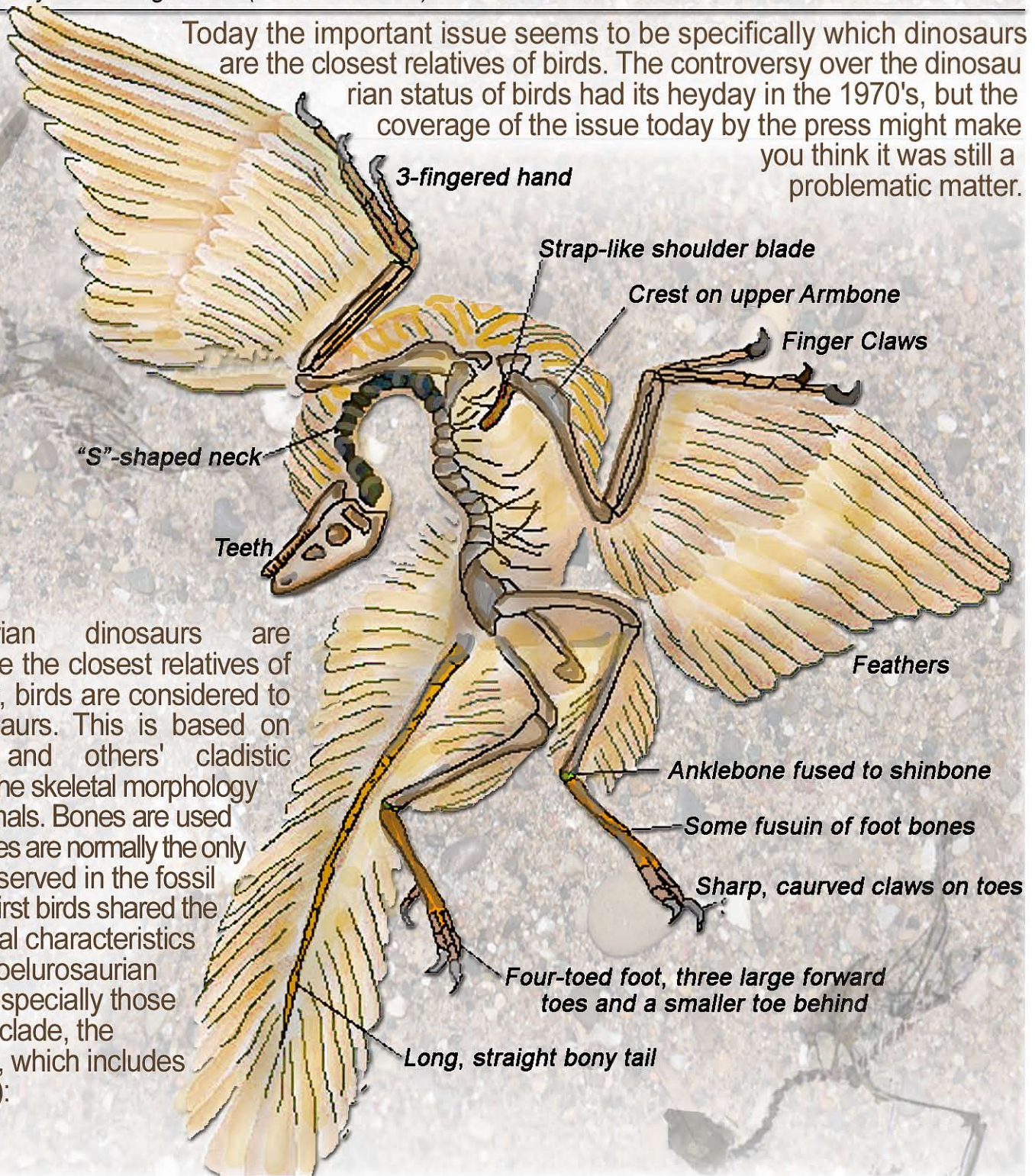
FLYING DINOSAURS

THE FIRST BIRDS



Ask your average paleontologist who is familiar with the phylogeny of vertebrates and they will probably tell you that yes, birds (avians) are dinosaurs. Using proper terminology, birds are avian dinosaurs; other dinosaurs are non-avian dinosaurs, and (strange as it may sound) birds are technically considered reptiles. Overly technical? Just semantics? Perhaps, but still good science. In fact, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of birds being the descendants of a maniraptoran dinosaur, probably something similar (but not identical) to a small dromaeosaur. What is this evidence?

Today the important issue seems to be specifically which dinosaurs are the closest relatives of birds. The controversy over the dinosaurian status of birds had its heyday in the 1970's, but the coverage of the issue today by the press might make you think it was still a problematic matter.



Coelurosaurian dinosaurs are thought to be the closest relatives of birds, in fact, birds are considered to be coelurosaurs. This is based on Gauthier's and others' cladistic analyses of the skeletal morphology of these animals. Bones are used because bones are normally the only features preserved in the fossil record. The first birds shared the major skeletal characteristics with many coelurosaurian dinosaurs (especially those of their own clade, the Maniraptora, which includes Velociraptor):