

Dinosaurs

The term *dinosaur* does not refer to a single group, but a generic term that represents most reptiles that lived in the Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous periods. Dinosaurs are reptiles that may have had four-chambered hearts and could have been warm-blooded. In the dinosaur group are two orders. They are: Ornithischia (bird-pelvis dinosaurs), and Saurischia (reptile-pelvis dinosaurs).

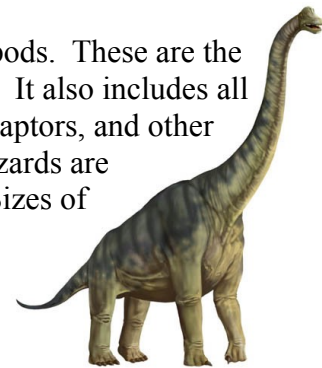
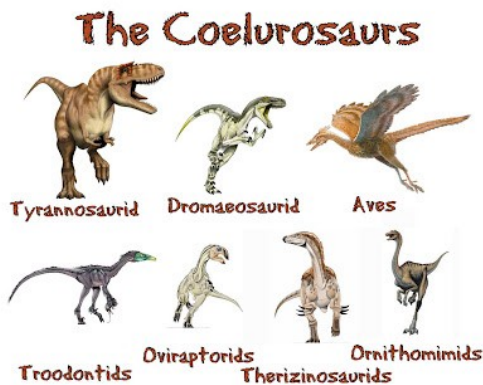
Ornithischia

All ornithischians are plant-eaters. They include the stegosaurus, ankylosaurus, ornithomimids (bird-footed), and ceratopsians.



Saurischia

Saurischia includes some plant-eating dinosaurs, such as the sauropods. These are the long-necked dinosaurs such as brachiosaurus, apatosaurus, and diplodocus. It also includes all of the meat-eating dinosaurs, or carnosauria. The *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the raptors, and other dinosaurs belong to this group. Also, the coelurosaurs, or hollow-tailed lizards are saurischians. These are feathered, bird-like reptiles, like *Archaeopteryx*. Sizes of dinosaurs range from the size of chickens to the giant ultrasaurus.



One more order of reptiles associated with the dinosaurs are the pterosaurs. These are not really considered a part of the “dinosaur” group, but lived at the same time. These had leathery wings and could probably glide better than fly.

Mesozoic, Extinction and Birds

The dinosaurs started about 300 million years ago, and went extinct probably around 65 mya. This is the mesozoic era. Earliest dinosaurs were similar to the late giant amphibians. The giant dinosaurs were present in the Jurassic, and the most sophisticated, intelligent at the end. Current thought is that an object from space struck the earth, sending dust and vapor into the air and blocking some sunlight. Many plants died, and the large animals also died. Evidence includes the large crater under part of the Gulf of Mexico, the sudden end to dinosaur fossils after this point, and rare elements found around the earth corresponding to this extinction.

Modern birds are currently thought to be a sub-set of the saurischian dinosaurs, who later developed the bird-like pelvis. They are still placed in their own class, but this is being challenged. Because scientists have found so many winged reptiles from the time of the dinosaurs, and so many reptile-like early birds, the distinction between bird and dinosaur is being blurred.