

THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

# LEWIS THOMAS PRIZE

*Honoring the Scientist as Poet*

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Tuesday, April 20, 2021

2021 RECIPIENT

**Richard O. Prum**

AUTHOR OF

*The Evolution of Beauty:*

*How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World—and Us*

WELCOME

**Richard P. Lifton, M.D., Ph.D.**

President and Carson Family Professor  
The Rockefeller University

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION OF THE

**2021 Lewis Thomas Prize for Writing about Science**

**Richard O. Prum, Ph.D.**

William Robertson Coe Professor of Ornithology  
Yale University

FOLLOWED BY A CONVERSATION WITH

**Erich D. Jarvis, Ph.D.**

Professor, The Rockefeller University  
Investigator, Howard Hughes Medical Institute

CLOSING REMARKS

**Dr. Lifton**

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The **Lewis Thomas Prize** is an international award for writing about science that honors the rare individuals who bridge the worlds of science and the humanities—whose voices and vision tell us about science's aesthetic and philosophical dimensions, providing not merely new information but cause for reflection, even revelation.

## **Richard O. Prum, Ph.D.**

William Robertson Coe Professor of Ornithology

Yale University

Intellectual fearlessness and a flair for independent thinking have fueled Richard Prum's discoveries, which have exposed new frontiers in diverse scientific realms. His creative, interdisciplinary approach has established him as a leading evolutionary biologist and ornithologist, and his familiarity with birds has led him to novel investigational opportunities that have revealed unanticipated aspects of bird behavior, evolution, and anatomy. Dr. Prum's first book for a general audience pops with vivid descriptions and a compelling challenge to dogma about the purpose of beauty.

A birder since 4th grade, he pursued his fascination as a Harvard University undergraduate and then as a Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan. After a postdoctoral fellowship, Dr. Prum joined the faculty at the University of Kansas. He is now a professor of ornithology at Yale University and head curator of vertebrate zoology at its Peabody Museum of Natural History. He also has served as director of the Franke Program in Science and the Humanities.

Dr. Prum has explored a vast range of subjects. He posited a hypothesis for the origin of feathers that countered the conventional wisdom that they arose from scales, and he and colleagues deduced the coloration of a feathered dinosaur. He teamed up with mathematicians to overturn a widely accepted explanation for the physics of blue bird coloration, and he developed a new theory of mimicry. Dr. Prum collaborates with experts far afield to deploy the power of physics, game theory, paleontology, soft condensed matter, and other specialties to liberate an array of truths about nature. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur "genius" grant.

In *The Evolution of Beauty*, Dr. Prum challenges the "honest signaling" idea, in which attractive features reflect fitness. Instead, females' aesthetic preferences drive the evolution of many elaborate and beautiful traits. Charles Darwin proposed this notion 150 years ago, but it fell from favor. Dr. Prum is reviving it for the public in a form that delights as vigorously as it informs. *The New York Times Book Review* chose *The Evolution of Beauty* as one of the 10 best books of 2017, and it was one of three finalists for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.