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Define "Beast"

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 Uncommon Knowledge
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Right around the time of *Tempest* (1997), the powers that be realized that there were too many creature types in **Magic**. No, scratch that. This story begins a few sets earlier in *Homelands* (1995), the most maligned of **Magic** expansions. Right around the time of *Homelands*, the players realized that there were too many creature types in **Magic**, and the powers that be concurred.

Let me relate this to the fable of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. You see, one day Goldilocks was running through the forests, and came upon this old house. She smashed in the window and what did she find? Three decks of cards, just sitting there on the kitchen table. So she tries, the first one, **Pokémon**. "Too easy," she thought, throwing the cards into the conveniently lit and unattended fireplace. Next came a pile of *Vampire/Jyhad* cards. "Oh my, I don't understand this game at all!" said Goldilocks, stapling the cards backwards against the wall to create a mural depicting the Battle at Wounded Knee. Only one stack remained—**Magic: The Gathering**. But before Goldilocks could play this new game, she was devoured ferociously by a passing *Floral Spuzzem*. As she was being eaten, her thoughts wandered to her high school biology class, where she'd often spent time daydreaming about the newest teen band sensation instead of paying attention to the teacher. "Oh my," mused she. "It's not often that one is eaten by a creature type—Spuzzem."



Goldilocks and the Floral Spuzzem? What is Beast Week coming to?

So this story begs the question: Why are there a clan of sentient super-bears in the middle of the woods playing collectible card games and lighting fires? Should we guard our children against this sloth of bears?

So this guy An-Zerrin, who happened to be a very close friend of Goldilocks, came up with a great idea. "I know! I'll create a ruined city in a world that's been closed off from the rest of the multiverse for generations, and when the bears come to the ruins they will be trapped forever!" Unbeknownst to him, his arch nemesis Soraya the Falconer had gathered her bird hordes to attack. She let loose with her collection of flying fiends, airborne terrors so fearsome that only she could contain them.

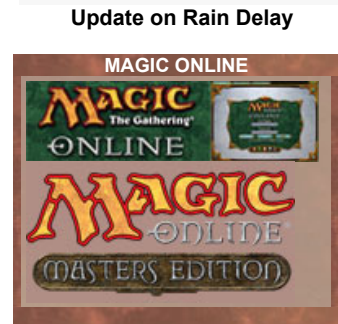
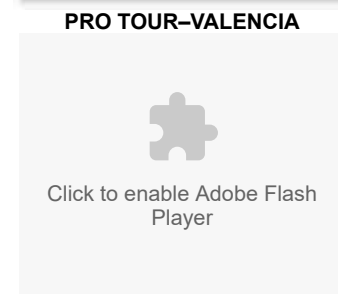


Why does Soraya keep showing up in all these Beast articles? a Marid. Something needed to change.

Of course, these were only *Zephyr Falcon* and *Mesa Falcon*. There weren't any other Falcons for Soraya to command at that point. Vultures, Birds, and even Albatrosses, but no other Falcons. She was easily defeated by the cranky red mage, who then set his trap to stop all the Bears—until he was mauled by a wild *Dwarven Pony*. As he died, he thought "For the love of Pete, couldn't this have at least been a Dwarf or a Horse, not a Pony?"

Now, I know some of you at home might be hopelessly lost now. "What in the heck is he talking about, and what does this have to do with Beast Week?" Well, I ask you in return, did we question why Goldilocks was lost? Ponder that for a while as I continue my column.

There's a problem with having too much or too little of a good thing. With cards like *An-Zerrin Ruins* and *Soraya the Falconer*, you need a narrower base of creature types in order to make this cards as effective as possible. If there aren't enough Falcons, Soraya is useless. Likewise, if every creature your opponent plays is going to have a different creature type, *An-Zerrin Ruins* is next to useless. This created quite the bind for R&D, as they couldn't make good cards that keyed off of creature types, since every creature out there seemed to have no rhyme or reason to their race. *Goblin Rock Sled* was a Rock Sled. *El-Hajjaj* was an El-Hajjaj. *Old Man of the Sea* was



Enter *Tempest*. Many remember the set for its innovative buyback mechanic. Others recall fondly (or not so fondly) the shadow creatures they beat down with (or were beat down with). Me, I remember that this was the first set where Wizards finally put their foot down and made a conscious effort to consolidate the creature types. Gone were the fanciful genus-typings of old, and in were groupings of creatures that could be affected en-masse by cards like *Extinction*. But there was one category of creatures which served as the garbage bin for all those disparate creature types which didn't really fit anywhere else.

Beasts.

Here are the beasts of *Tempest*: *Dauthi Horror*, *Fylamarid*, *Kezzerdrix*, *Krakilin*, *Marsh Lurker*, *Mawcor*, *Pallimud*, *Scragnoth*, and *Screeching Harpy*. And to say that people weren't happy about these creatures being Beasts was an understatement. Why was *Screeching Harpy* a Beast? Wasn't it good enough to be a Harpy (more on this later)? How come *Dauthi Horror* is a Beast but *Dauthi Slayer* is a Soldier, *Dauthi Marauder* is a Minion and *Dauthi Mercenary* is a Knight? And why, oh why, was *Skysnarl* a Giant and not a Troll?

For years now people have tried to come to terms with creature type Beast. Let's say you have a *Coat of Arms* in play, and summon *Aquamoeba*, *Chainflinger*, *Darba*, *Grollub*, *Slipstream Eel*, and *Cavern Harpy*. Each of your creatures would get +5/+5 since all six are Beasts! From a game mechanic standpoint it makes sense, but I know a lot of people who take issue with the flavor standpoint, and rightfully so. It's hard to justify a puddle of water, a rejected Atog, a flightless bird, a Thrull wanna-be, a huge fish and a flying woman sitting together claiming to be of the same family.

Now that *Onslaught* is here, beasts have become a major force in the **Magic** world. Cards like *Contested Cliffs*, *Aether Charge*, and *Wirewood Savage* all take advantage of cards which are type – Beast, which caused some problems in Extended. You see, there's a deck that runs *Aluren* and several 1-3 mana creatures. In the old days, the deck would drop an *Aluren*, then throw *Raven Familiar* into play for free, nabbing a card. Then they'd play *Cavern Harpy* for free, returning the Familiar. For one life they could return the Harpy, and start the cycle of getting free cards all over again.



You see the problem that's brewing here? *Wirewood Savage*, also a three-mana creature, cuts out the middle man. If you play a gating creature, you can have it return itself no questions asked (since it qualified as a creature of its own colors). With *Wirewood Savage* and *Aluren* in play, *Cavern Harpy* becomes a near-instant win. Draw your entire deck (since you can put the Harpy into play for free and return it for free), and find something in there to win with. I'm sure R&D didn't predict that interaction.

I'm not that negative about beasts though, since the creature type contains all sorts of, well, beasts that have the coolest "presence" in **Magic**. These are the guys who just sound, look, and feel cool to play. You can yell out their name when you play them and not feel like a complete nerd. Maybe they are put upon little guys who get no respect. Either way, **Magic** players tend to flock to these cards because they are named well, and have a great flavor to them. *Blastoderm* might be a Beast, but everyone thinks of him as a *Blastoderm*, and that's where the argument of creatures being Beasts really feels comfortable: here are these huge (usually) and dumb creatures which are all Beasts, but all feel distinctly unique even while being Beasts. Some of my favorite Beasts include the following:

- Blastoderm
- Darba
- Erithizon
- Fylamarid
- Grollub
- Gurzigost
- Jackalope Herd
- Mawcor
- Rhox
- Root Greevil
- Scalpelexis
- Scragnoth
- Sea Snidd

I have a soft spot sometimes for the flavor of the game. Without flavor, **Magic** would cease to be Magic and would become just a pile of random numbers and letters interacting with one another. And, believe it or not, Beasts do have flavor. They taste like chicken. So thus ends my contribution to Beast Week, with a warm gooey hug to each and every one of you.

Next week: Thanksgiving in Dominaria



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Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.



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