

## BIRDS AND FEATHERS

Feathers from any bird are important. Birds are from The Upper World and any part of them does not belong to the person who holds it. Feathers are very important to our people and are used in ceremonies, dancing, and medicine. If you happen to find a feather or a dead bird or any part of one, you must decide if you are going to walk on by or collect it. Before collecting it, you should leave a gift of tobacco thanking Grandfather, as well as the bird, assuring Grandfather that the item will be honored while in your possession. Once the item is collected then the care of it becomes important.

The feathers we have may be with a person for their entire life or they can be passed on when the time is right. While any part of a bird is in our possession we must be careful to act honorably. (Which each person should do anyway) It is said if you act in a way which is not honorable, the bird takes this information to Grandfather and there could be negative consequences. With gifts, to give something away which was given to you by someone is an act which is not honorable. The exception to this would be that with feathers there may come a time that you "feel the need to pass it on." When this occurs and the feather is 'passed on' the action is not one of dishonor. This is because the feather never really was ours to begin with but, belongs to the bird and Grandfather.

NOTE: The three worlds are 1-The Lower World- where animals live underground or in the water. 2- This World- Where the four footed animals, insects and man lives. 3- The Upper World- Where the birds live.

There are special ways that a person stores a feather, gives a feather, or disposes of worn out feathers. It is said that a warrior will die when a feather of a war bird drops on the ground (dirt). Remember, a war bird is a bird of prey, i.e. falcon, hawk, eagle, etc., so special care is taken that this does not happen while it is in your care. The storing of feathers is as diverse as there are birds. The way we were taught was that each one is placed in red cloth with some sage, cedar and tobacco. The bundles of red cloth are then placed in a cedar box, if you have one. You can store them in a shoe box and place then in a closet. We add moth balls to the container that the feathers go into. This kills the mites that would destroy them.

Owl feathers should not be stored in the house you live in unless you have no other option. They should be in another building such as a shed or 'outhouse'. If you must store them in a house put them in a shoe box in a closet, away from the day birds' feathers. An owl is a 'night bird' i.e., a warrior bird that hunts and flies primarily at night. There is nothing negative about the bird or its feathers. There are many Native Americans who believe that an owl is a 'ghost' but this could not be more untrue. This belief came from the Priest who arrived here with the Europeans and were witch hunters. They believed that anything that moved at night was either a ghost or had something to do with the practice of witchcraft. This is why our people were referred to as 'heathens' for we sang and danced at night around a fire. It made it look even worse for we did this at every full moon. This idea has permeated our culture to the point that one could never convince someone of the opposite.

In today's world birds of prey are given to either female or males and are worn on their dance regalia. In the old days only a male was allowed to wear one of these feathers. There were no big pow-wows for the purpose of entertainment of people. The dances were done as 'praise to Grandfather. I am not going to say that a female cannot wear an eagle feather on her dance regalia. This is up to each individual to decide, with Grandfather, if they feel they are honoring the bird with this type of action. We do not feel that women should wear the birds of prey feathers, this is our personal belief. The decision is left up to each nation one belongs to. If you need any further information about feathers as gifts to women look at the gifts lesson.

Disposing of feathers was done by someone in the tribe appointed to do this. One should never bury feathers. This mixes The Lower World and The Upper World and is never done.

Another aspect of feathers is their meaning. Some birds were primarily used by warriors and the meaning was for them. Each war bird represents a warrior's level he has obtained through deeds, age, and medicine. There are a few women warriors and women medicine people who can wear the feathers from the birds of prey. Usually though, women do not wear feathers in their hair, as this

denotes some level of warrior which most women have not attained. When given a bird of prey feather she can use it for saging. This is done now-a-days, but it was not done by our ancestors. If the woman is instructed as to how to wear the feather on the ear then that would be an honorable way she could use it.

The following explains some of the meanings of feathers from different birds:

CARDINAL (red) - Stands for the East and is referred to as "The Daughter of the Sun."

MACAW (blue/yellow) - Stands for the North and is called "The Sun Bird." It was traded from far to the south where the Sun shines most of the time.

MACAW (blue/red) - This was also considered to be one of the "birds of the sun." It is referred to as the "bird of fire" because of the red on the feather. It is considered a very sacred bird and only a high medicine or warrior person would use it.

RAVEN (black) - Stands for the West and stands for the second level warrior. Just because it is the 'bird of the west' and is black does not mean it represents death. The west is black "for it is where Grandmother Sun goes down." The feathers are only used by the raven warriors or to be placed under a new fire by the medicine person. The Tlingit/Hadja (NW Coast of USA and Alaska) say this bird created man so it is always put at the top of a 'totem pole.'

SNOW EGRET (white) - Stands for the South and Peace. The mating plumes are worn by the Great Sun. They stand up in the front of the turban wrapped around his head. Its wing and tail feathers are used by the men at Green Corn for the Pole Dance. Each woman at Green Corn is given egret feathers which are "under plume" for the Feather Dance and for their participation in the Green Corn medicine.

DOVE (grey morning dove) - Stands for Peace and the Dove Clan

SANDHILL CRANE (sand) - A war bird which stands for a warrior of high rank; the feathers are treated the same as a hawk.

BUZZARD (black/grey) - The Medicine Bird of all the birds, for "he can eat dead things and live."

OWL (any type) - This is the messenger/ warrior bird of the night. Its counter part is the Hawk the "day messenger bird." The Horned Owl and Barred Owl are very large owls. The screech owl, with its reddish eyes, is a small owl.

TURKEY (wild/brown) - considered an important and wise bird. The tail feathers are used to make a fan for honor. They are depicted on shell engravings from the Mississippian Mound Period. The body feathers are sewn on a mesh net to make a cape for the high-ranking men of the culture including the Great Sun. The white stripped wing feathers are used on arrows for the fletching. (The fletching **balances the weight of the arrowhead to prevent the arrow from tumbling end-over-end in flight.** When fletched properly, an arrow may spin in flight producing an ideal trajectory. A similar effectiveness is gained by placing grooves in the barrel of a rifle to cause the bullet to spin).

BLUE JAY - The feathers are not kept from this bird, for it is considered a trickster. The Blue Jay 'calls' a warning when snakes are around, but he does this calling so much you really can't tell if he is just hollering or warning you. So you do not know if his "screams" are truthful or not.

BLUE HERON (blue/grey) - A war bird which stands for a warrior of high rank. The feathers are treated the same as a hawk.

CROW- Crow tail feathers are given to boys that have just gone through manhood. The feather indicates the he "wants to be a warrior."

RED SHOULDER HAWK - The wing feathers of the Red Shoulder Hawk are worn by a warrior who has reached level three of being a warrior. The Tail feathers are worn by a warrior who has obtained a position above that of the third level.

PILEATED WOODPECKER (black/white) -This bird was highly respected by our ancestors. It was engraved in shell stone and other mediums. It is considered a warrior bird for "his head is red".

BALD EAGLE - The feathers from this bird are used by warriors who can no longer fight, are disabled or are elders (over 50).

PEREGRINE FALCON - The tail feathers are worn only by medicine warriors. This bird's design is one of the most used designs of our ancestors and has been drawn on shells, stone, copper and wooden items. If you look closely at the bird's head you will see it is the only bird with a "forked eye". This symbol is used quite often in pre-Columbian art. Some of the warriors paint a forked eye on themselves before dancing. This signifies a very high ranking warrior. The design was also used on the sacred mythical animal "Uktena." What has been mistakenly said to be 'eagle dancers' by archaeologist is now corrected to be 'falcon dancers.' This bird is probably where the "Thunder Bird" got its origin. It is the only bird which dives over 100 miles per hour and kills its prey with such a deadly force it does this in one 'strike.'

GOLDEN EAGLE - The feathers from this bird are used by medicine warriors who have obtained top level of medicine or is a medicine elder (over 50 years).

OSPREY (black/white) - This is a bird of prey and is considered to be a high ranked warrior.

HUMMINGBIRD - This is a very sacred bird. "She brought the tobacco back to man." The 'hummer' is one of the birds 'drawn out' on the Nazca plain so the complete bird can only be seen in its entirety from up in the air.

HOUSE WREN - This bird is welcomed into any home of the SE Indians. It is supposed to be 'good luck' to have one living in the house.

ANHINGA (Snake bird) - The feathers of this bird are used by medicine people and are very sacred. It is said: "He hunts in the Lower World." -underwater

QUAIL - One of the stomps of the Cherokee is named after this bird.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN - This bird is 'mimic' by the plains Indian dancers with their bustles and their dance movements.

PARROT - This is the extinct South Carolina Parrot. It was held in high esteem and hunted to extinction by the English for its feathers. There is an effigy pipe made to depict this bird.

KINGFISHER - In an old story it was said he should have been a warrior but was not. He obtained a long bill and gills for fish.

PARTRIDGE - In an old story this bird stole his 'whistle' from the turtle.

ROBIN - This bird is a good indicator of a change in the climate. It let our ancestors know of the coming of spring and winter. Its migrations are based on very precise measures of the climate. There are many other birds whose migration marked the passing of the seasons for our ancestors.

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