



THE OSPREY

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No Feathers in Your Cap

Ruth Heil

Style. Fashion. Expression. Even Ceremony. These are a few reasons why humans love to decorate themselves. Whether attractive or silly looking, no fashion trend should ever exist to the detriment of a living creature. This is the cornerstone of the founding of the National Audubon Society.

Called millinery, 19th century hat makers—particularly those in New York and London that supplied the upper class socialites—fueled the slaughter of live egrets and other showy birds for fashionable decoration to the tune millions of birds a year. In addition to elaborate feather displays, some hats featured wings and even entire bodies. According to researcher Darryl Wheye, in 1886 the father of the Christmas Bird Count, Frank Chapman, counted the dead that walked the streets of Manhattan on two occasions in 1886. While herons were favored, he found 40 species on three-quarters of the 700 women’s hats he saw, including 21 common terns, 23 Cedar Waxings, 16 Northern Bobwhites, and 21 Northern Flickers. (See the list at web.stanford.edu/group/)

stanfordbirds/text/essays/Plume_Trade.html.)

Feather sprays could also be found on dress collars, hairpieces, and men's fedoras.

Birdwatchers told of discovering horrific scenes in the aftermaths of feather hunts. Skinned adults lain to waste while their hatchlings starved in unprotected nests. In the late 1800s, Boston cousins Harriet Lawrence Hemenway and Minna Hall decided they had had enough of watching women parade around wearing dead birds on their heads, so they began a campaign to change the mindset and gain awareness about the awful business of the plum trade. They called for a boycott, and soon upwards of 900 Boston socialites had joined. This led to the forming of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. The federation spread to more than a dozen states and by 1905 the National Association of Audubon Societies was incorporated.



The good old days. Photo in the public domain, National library of Ireland.

Ironically, the famous painter and society namesake, John James Audubon, also killed birds to create beauty. The detail for which his paintings became legacy was possible because many of his models never moved. Audubon developed techniques for stuffing, preserving, and posing his kill that were so lifelike he set a new standard for the art of taxidermy.

Congress finally banned the extermination of wild birds for profit in 1913 with the Weeks-McLean law (a.k.a. the Migratory Bird Treaty Act). Because lawmakers recognized that it would be impossible to trace the origins of any feather to its method of collection—ripped from a live bird or picked up from the forest floor—possession of feathers or any part of a native North American bird became as prohibited as the act of killing. It was no longer simply unsavory to wear plumage

to the annual ball; it was illegal.

Molted feathers or those taken from road- or window-killed birds are not exempt. The only exceptions are legally-hunted waterfowl or other migratory game birds as well as those collected by individuals or organizations who obtained permits for educational or ceremonial purposes (such as nature centers or Native American traditions.)

I once used a stray Blue Jay feather to mark a page in my Roger Tory Peterson field guide. However innocent, this was unlawful. Once the decorated gentlemen and ladies of 19th-century society realized the consequence of their actions, they too changed their habits. The next time you see a feather, pick it up, admire it, and contemplate the species from which it came. Then remember the founding of the National Audubon Society and drop it. Resist the temptation to tuck it into your hat. As it flutters to the ground, consider it a small sacrifice for leaving the beauty of feathers to the birds.

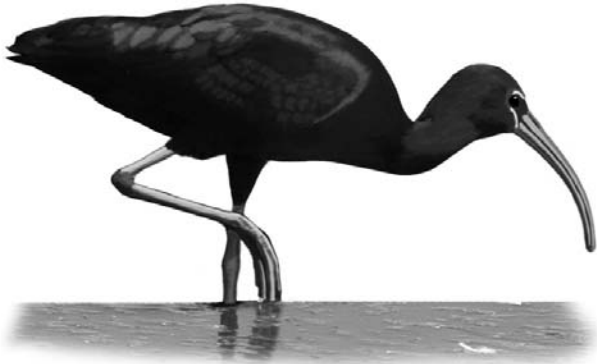
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Glossy Ibis, by Dr. George C. West

**Lehigh Valley Audubon Society Local Chapter
Application For New Membership Or Renewal
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You can apply for a new membership or renew your membership on www.lvaudubon.org or by mailing this form and your check *payable to L.V.A.S.* to:

LVAS Memberships
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Please check one:

- New membership application \$20
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