

The Last Feather

Once, not so long ago, people everywhere became very annoyed with birds all over the world.

“These nasty birds are pooping all over our cars,” said some.

Others chimed in, “They are so noisy!”

“And their nests are so messy,” said a woman with a broom.

When a lot more people said a lot more things like this, the birds got pretty fed up that no one seemed to appreciate them. So, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, the birds all thought the same thought at once. *If no one appreciates us, we'll just leave!*

The power of this gigantic thought opened up a crack in the sky, like a jagged window made of light, and all the birds of the world left by the crack that closed itself as soon as they had made it through.

Only a small boy living in a valley saw the birds leave. He was confused, and sad, because he liked to hear the orioles sing and the doves coo. And he liked watching birds take baths in puddles.

Not long after the birds left, insects began to overrun the earth, since there were no birds to eat them.

Snakes and small rodents also ran rampant because they were no longer caught as food by hawks and other large birds.

Birdbaths everywhere became lonely, and wept even more than usual.

Squirrels, whose antics were usually kept in check by birds such as jays and mockingbirds, became bolder and more mischievous than ever. Chasing and chattering, they roamed in packs, harassing dogs, cats, rabbits, and even people.

There were no more feathers for feather collectors or ticklers to pick up.

Many people had trouble sleeping because down-stuffed pillows and comforters could no longer be found. And those who lived in colder climates mourned the loss of warm, down-filled vests and jackets.

Beauty was lost to many areas of the world, and nature lovers and bird watchers became very depressed. Bird photographers, with absolutely nothing to do, twiddled their thumbs.

The numbers of fishes in lakes and seas grew horribly off-balanced because there were no osprey, eagles, and seagulls to help keep the populations in check.

Dead animals lay everywhere, since there were no vultures or turkey buzzards to clean them up.

Since there were no eggs to eat, people could no longer enjoy breakfast, or make birthday cakes! They ate birthday taffy instead, which was not nearly as special, even though it was chewy and tasty.

People were often late to work because there were no roosters to wake them.

Foxes and bobcats grew very tired of eating nothing but rodents. So they stopped eating rats and field mice and went hungry most of the time, which made them very cranky.

Trash piles and dumps became even more messy and nasty without birds to help clean them up.

People couldn't enjoy fried-chicken picnics or fancy quail dinners, so they ate more cows and pigs instead, and that didn't make the cows and pigs very happy.

A certain society on a remote island who had worshiped the purple-crested kraleybird entirely gave up their religion, and their dreams, hopes, and ideals along with it.

All over the world, pictures and symbols of state and national birds were taken down, and many people missed the decorations, and the meaning.

People also missed the wisdom of owls and the happiness of bluebirds.

This went on for nearly a year, and things just continued to get worse and worse.

"This is terrible!" people said. "Where have all of the birds gone? And why don't they come back?"

Only the small boy in the valley knew what had happened. But he didn't know what to do to get the birds to come back. And he had never told anyone about what he had seen the year before.

One day, as the boy was coming home from a birthday party (with no cake), he had to dodge a swarm of wasps, and run from a pack of squirrels. He ran inside a small cave to get away from the buzzing, chattering, and chasing.

When his eyes adjusted to the light in the cave, he looked around. Tucked into a quiet corner, he found a small feather unlike any he had ever seen before. "I haven't seen any feathers at all for nearly a year," the boy said aloud. "This must be the Last Feather." The tiny feather had many colors and looked as though it could have been worn by many birds at once.

The boy also noticed a drawing on the cave wall of a bird with small wings and a very long tail. Though the drawing was faded, the boy could see that the bird had multicolored feathers just like the one he had found. Smiling, he pocketed the treasure as he bravely left the cave to dodge wasps and run from squirrels on his way home.

The next day, the boy went to see the wise man of his town. The wise man lived in the smallest house, but he had the biggest thoughts, so all of the people in town liked to talk to him. The boy told the man about the crack in the sky. Then he showed him the feather he had found in the cave.

The wise man was very interested. “You have found a feather of a hawgino gull,” he said. “They don’t exist anymore. People used to hunt them for their pretty feathers, so they became extinct.”

The boy understood what this meant. He had learned about extinction in school, and he had been sad to discover that the carelessness of human beings throughout the years had caused many animals, plants, fishes, and birds to become lost to the world forever.

“This might be the key to getting the birds to return,” the wise man said thoughtfully. “Even though hawgino gulls are gone, many people believe the spirits of those birds remain. If you go back to the cave, you could ask the spirit of this one to help us.”

The boy wanted the birds to come back, but he didn’t quite understand what to do. So the wise man told him, “After you ask the spirit in the cave for help, go back to the place where you saw the crack open in the sky. While you are holding the feather, make a wish for the birds to return. Hopefully, the spirit from the cave will have followed you, and will help send a message to the other birds.”

The boy left the wise man’s small house with the precious feather. He had to jump over a dead rabbit and walk around a big pile of snakes, but he finally made it to the cave.

Inside, he took a deep breath, and said, “Spirit of the hawgino gull, please help me send a message to the birds of the world, so they will come back and make things right again.”

There was no answer to this request. However, a soft, cool breeze that felt like the gentle tickle of feathers passed through the cave and blew on every part of the boy.

Next, the boy left the cave to make his way to the place where he had seen the crack in the sky. He had to walk very fast because he was being followed by a pack of rats.

When he reached the spot, the boy held the Last Feather tightly in his hand, as he took another deep breath. Then he silently made his wish. *Please let the birds return. We miss them terribly, and we need them to come back and make things right.*

At first, nothing happened. Then the sun smiled brightly, and the boy felt the cool breeze again; and suddenly, the Last Feather loosed itself from his hand and soared up into the air. The breeze carried it very high, and the feather disappeared quickly into the smooth blue sky.

The boy was sad to have lost his treasure, but he couldn't stay sad for long because exactly at the point in the sky where the feather had vanished, a crack of light appeared. As it opened wider, birds began pouring through the crack like someone was dumping an enormous bucket of birds into the valley. The streams of birds swooped down nearly to the valley floor before rising up in different directions, like a splash, to soar high and far away.

The boy no longer thought about the loss of the multicolored feather because feathers of many kinds were now showering down upon him, shed by the flapping flocks.

He ran here and there, and back and forth. Stuffing them deep into his pockets, he gathered bluebird, cardinal, peafowl, dove, and hawk feathers. Then he added owl, sparrow, drake, snowbird, bunting, tern, guinea, and swan feathers.

This went on and on until his pockets were stuffed so full of feathers he could not fit even one more.

But the boy didn't keep the treasure he had just collected. Instead, he ran to the cave. Kneeling in front of the drawing of the hawgino gull, he emptied his pockets into a great pile on the floor. "Thank you for bringing the birds back," he said to the bird.

As he stood up, a cool breeze passed over him, tossing many of the feathers into the air. And the boy told the hawgino gull's spirit, "I am sorry that you were hunted into extinction. I wish you could come back too."

At the moment he finished saying this, the pile of feathers in front of him suddenly sprang to life in the form of a whirlwind. The swirl of feathers soon became so swift and powerful, the boy had to close his eyes and turn away.

But the flurry didn't last long. In less than a minute, an eerie and still silence filled the cave.

When the boy turned back and opened his eyes, he found that the whirlwind and all of the feathers of the pile had completely disappeared. And a single hawgino gull feather was floating down from the ceiling to land by his feet.

Smiling, the boy picked up the multicolored feather. But he didn't keep the treasure. Instead, he tucked it into a quiet corner of the cave, as he said, "I'll leave this here for someone else to find in a time of need."

As he was turning to go, the boy thought he heard a soft, warbling, chirp of agreement from the tiny feather.

About a year later, the world was completely set to right again. And when a few of the birds accidentally pooped on cars, and even on some people, the people didn't complain.