

Feathers, Nature's Miracle

NATURE NOW

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Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

All animals with feathers are birds. Each of us as one time or another has picked up a fallen feather to marvel at its color and its structure. Every species has a number of different kinds of feathers each designed to fill some functional or decorative need.

A fledgling's first feathers are called down. These are attached to the tips of the contour feathers which are already formed under the skin where they are closely wrapped in sheath. If you have ever plucked a fowl you know all about these.

As it grows the feather gradually splits its protective sheath which then drops off. A dense undercoat of down is also present in many adult aquatic birds. The female duck grows a special coat of it in spring with which to line her nest.

THE LARGER stiff feathers which make up the tail and the outer half of the wings are called flight feathers.

The latter are attached directly to the bones of the wing. In addition, skin, tiny muscles and tendons connect each feather giving the bird minute control in flight. On the first joint of the wing corresponding to our thumb) are three feathers that aid in balancing the bird.

The bulk of feathers which cover the body are called contour feathers.

These grow in tracts, filling up a hollow here and smoothing out another area there thus giving the whole a better shape for air travel.

MOST FEATHERS are arranged in overlapping rows like shingles on a roof. The wing feathers grow in this pattern with special precision to make an efficient air foil. However they are pressed closely together on the downbeat and somewhat separated on the upbeats to allow for the passage of air.

Feathers are very complex in structure, those of a single pigeon wing consisting of more than a million parts.

A very simplified description is that each has a central flexible shaft from which spring thousands of interlocking bars each equipped with barbs.

THESE OVERLAP and interlock in a manner which provides some flexibility, while at the same time a fitting so closely joined that they are air and water proof.

If you ruffle a feather with your hand you dislodge this connection. If you carefully stroke it the barbs go back into place. When a bird "preens" itself, it accomplishes this same end.

Nature solves the problem of wear and tear by seasonal molts. This is a gradual process beginning at the bird's head. Wing and tail feathers are shed in pairs so that the flight balance is not disturbed. Nearly all birds undergo

due to the feather structure. Within our own range no red can vie with that of the scarlet tanager, no orange with that on the head-stripe of the golden-crowned kinglet, no blue with that of the indigo bunting.

SCIENTISTS believe that color aids birds in sex and species recognition as well as in attraction. Unusual feather displays such as fancy tails and crests are used in courtship rituals.

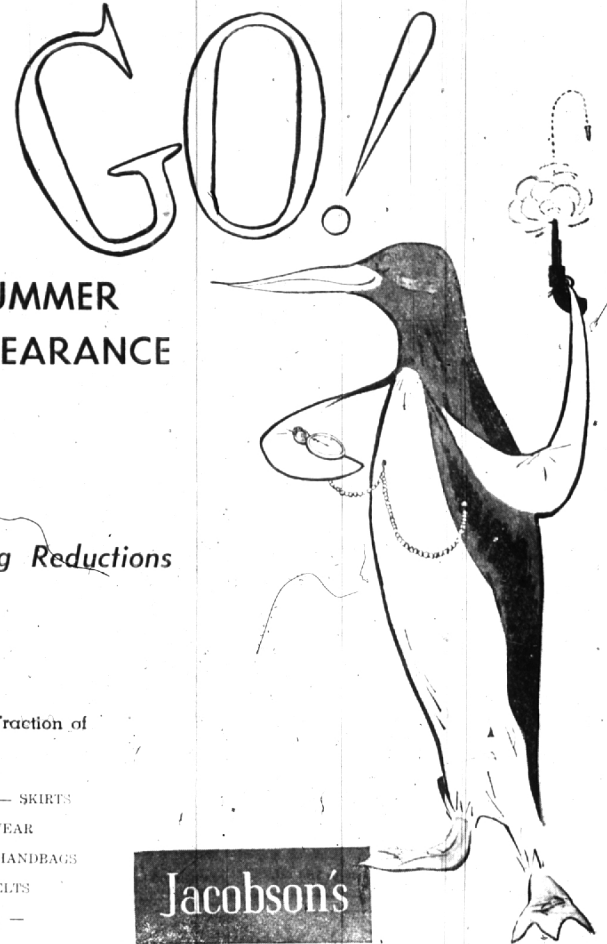
Patterns and colors are also arranged to hide the bird from his enemies. Some have markings which blend with their surroundings as evinced by ground nesting species which tone in with grasses and dead leaves.

Others, particularly shore birds, operate on the principle of counter shading; the body is dark above and light underneath. Still others exhibit defective coloration, which is believed to deflect, startle or confuse predators.

Most scientists agree that feathers evolved from the scales of reptiles. We have a few scattered prints of these in the rocks of a hundred million years ago. When discovered, these furnished a key to the reconstruction of the story of bird evolution.

This is especially true in the tropics where birds outshine flowers in brilliance. These extraordinary colors are produced not only by the pigments present but by the reflection and refraction of light

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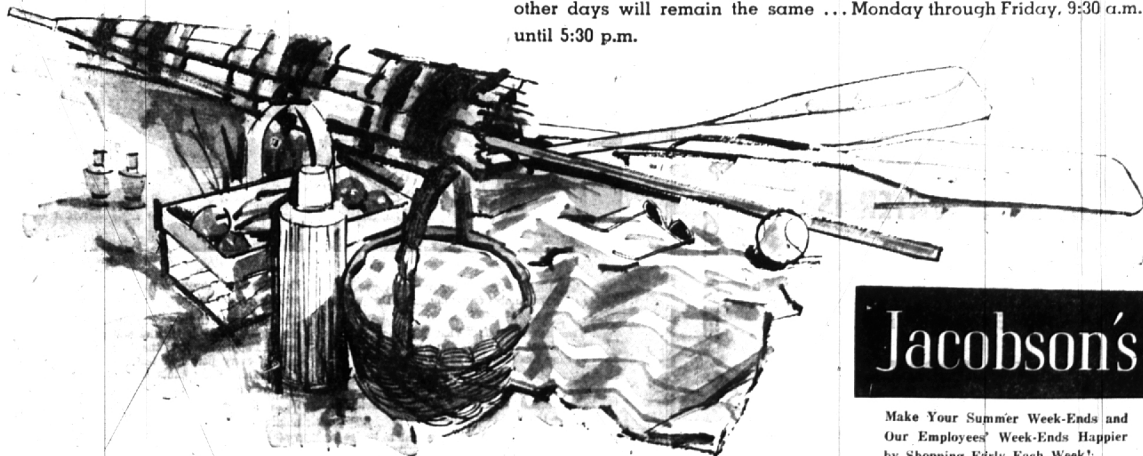
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