

Birding for Sacred Feathers

Jemez Historic Site



Woodhouse's Scrub Jay sitting on top of a Juniper at Jemez Historic Site. Photo Courtesy New Mexico Historic Sites.

Essential Question

What is “birding” and how is it useful for finding birds important to Pueblo People? What types of bird feathers do Pueblo People use and Why?

This lesson will explain the activity known as “birding” and how it is useful in identifying birds that are important to Pueblo People. This lesson will explain reason why certain feathers are used by Pueblo People.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, student will be able to:

1. Explain the activity of “birding”
2. Describe birds used by Pueblo People
3. Learn basic bird topography

Background

Birding is a recreational activity and hobby where people look for and identify birds. They are able to use several methods to do so: listening to the different types of bird songs and calls, searching in different habitats, knowing flight patterns, and more. Binoculars aid in looking for birds from a distance so the birds are not disturbed. Bird books like *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America* and *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* are excellent guide books to aid in bird identification. There are also cell phone apps that also help to identify birds, like the *Merlin Bird ID* app and the *Audubon Bird Guide* app. There are many places throughout New Mexico that are excellent for birding, but one of the easiest places to look for birds is the backyard.



Many birds show up in the backyards of people's homes looking for food or passing through on their migrations to others areas. Sometimes birds will be building nests to lay their eggs in, or singing their beautiful songs to attract a mate. You do not have to travel long distances to observe birds or the way they behave. One of the best places to see birds is from a window or doorway in your home using your own eyes or with the help of binoculars.

Some of the birds you may see regularly are: Western Bluebirds, Dark-eyed juncos, various types of sparrows and doves, various types of hawks, falcons, and maybe an eagle. These birds and all other birds have significance to Pueblo People of New Mexico for their ability to fly and visit the special places that Pueblo People sing about and mention in their Prayers. They mention places like the sky, the clouds, the mountaintops, the rivers, the hills, the trees, and far distance places that birds are able to travel to. These are some of the reasons why Pueblo People use certain types of feathers in their ceremonies and dances. You can see these feathers being used at Pueblo Feast day dances, the State Fair, or other venues.

There are nineteen Pueblos here in New Mexico, about a dozen in Arizona and one in El Paso, Texas. Each Pueblo has their own way of using feathers. Some will have similar reasons for using certain birds, but some may differ. So this overview is not universal among the Pueblos. Bluebirds for example represent the color of the west, where the Sun sets. Yellow warblers are the color of the North. Not all Pueblos, however, associate each direction with the same colors. Birds like raptors are usually used because of the type of bird they are. Raptor (hawks, falcons and eagles) are hunters and their feathers are used because of their strength and expertise in the hunt.

One of the most common raptors used for ceremonies and dances are Eagles. Eagles are prized for the various types of feathers that they have, from the primary and secondary wing feathers, tail feathers, tail covert feathers, plumes, to the tiny body feathers. The reason they are prized and honored is because of their strength, keen eyesight, hunting abilities and ability to fly to far off places. When Pueblo People use their feathers, they symbolically put their prayers and blessings onto these feathers and those prayers will go to those places that that eagle has been to. For example, if it is a prayer for rain the feathers will take them to the clouds. Pueblo People use other birds for these same reasons. Other reasons include using a bird that is a certain color that corresponds to a particular direction or aspect of nature, or lives or comes from a certain region.

Turkey feathers are also widely used. They represent the mountains where they live and the ground where they spend most of their time as they do not fly for long distances or high into the sky. They live in the trees that are believed to be where the clouds come from. Wild turkeys were hunted along other wild game, and its feathers are used to pray for a successful hunt. Many Pueblo ancestors domesticated turkeys and kept them in pens in their villages, not for food but to gather their feathers to use for making blankets and clothes. So, using turkey feathers today is a way to honor their ancestors and ask for their strength by offering them "clothes" to wear.

Birds like Scarlet Macaws have a special history. They are tropical birds, but Pueblo People have used these birds for centuries. The feathers and sometimes live macaws were brought from their jungle homes in southern Mexico. Their ability to talk may have been a major draw for keeping them alive, but their feathers were their main purpose. The scarlet macaw is primarily a red bird, and for some Pueblos, red is the color of the south and the color of Mother Earth. Scarlet macaws also have blue and yellow feathers. So, with three colors of the rainbow represented on one bird made them extra special. They also symbolize the place where they came from, the rainforest. Any symbol that represents moisture in some form is very important to Pueblo way of life.

Birds feather hold a very strong cultural and spiritual connection to all Modern Pueblo for some of the reasons I have explained, plus many more that I cannot explain. Pueblo People are very secretive about certain religious aspects of their way of life and birds hold a special place in those beliefs.



Activities

K-4 Coloring Different types of Birds

5-8 Questions About Birds

9-12 Written Assignment

New Mexico Content Standards

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/instructional-materials/new-mexico-content-standards/>

K-4th Grade Standards

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

K-4 Benchmark I-A: New Mexico: Describe how contemporary and historical people and events have influenced New Mexico communities and regions.

(K) 1. Identify the customs, celebrations, and holidays of various cultures in New Mexico.

(1st Grade) 1. Identify common attributes of people living in New Mexico today.

(2nd Grade) 1. Describe how historical people, groups, and events have influenced the local community.

(3rd Grade) 1. Describe how the lives and contributions of people of New Mexico influenced local communities and regions.

(4th Grade) 1. Identify important issues, events, and individuals from New Mexico pre-history to the present.

K-4 Benchmark II-B: Distinguish between natural and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define regions, their relationships with other regions, and patterns of change.

(K) 1. Identify natural characteristics of places (e.g., climate, topography).

(1st Grade) 2. Identify how traditional tribal and local folklore attempt to explain weather, characteristics of places, and human origins and relationships.

(2nd Grade) 1. Explain how people depend on the environment and its resources to satisfy their basic needs.

(3rd Grade) 1. Explore examples of environmental and social changes in various regions.

(4th Grade) 3. Identify ways in which different individuals and groups of people view and relate to places and regions.

K-4 Benchmark II-C: Be familiar with aspects of human behavior and man-made and natural environments in order to recognize their impact on the past and present.

(K) 1. Identify family customs and traditions and explain their importance.

(1st Grade) 1. Identify examples of and uses for natural resources in the community, state, and nation.

(2nd Grade) 1. Identify ways in which people depend on natural and man-made environments including natural resources to meet basic needs.



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(3rd Grade) 2. Identify ways in which people have modified their environments (e.g., building roads, clearing land for development, mining, and constructing towns and cities).

(4th Grade) 1. Explain how geographic factors have influenced people, including settlement patterns and population distribution in New Mexico, past and present.

5th – 8th Grade Standards

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience. Students will:

5-8 Benchmark 1-A. New Mexico: explore and explain how people and events have influenced the development of New Mexico up to the present day:

(7th Grade) 2. describe the characteristics of other indigenous peoples that had an effect upon New Mexico's development (e.g., pueblo farmers, great plains horse culture, nomadic bands, etc. - noting their development of tools, trading routes, adaptation to environments, social structure, domestication of plants and animals); 3. explain the significance of trails and trade routes within the region (e.g., Spanish trail, Camino Real, Santa Fe trail)

9th – 12th Grade Standards

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience. Students will:

9-12 benchmark 1-D. Skills: use critical thinking skills to understand and communicate perspectives of individuals, groups and societies from multiple contexts:

3. Describe primary and secondary sources and their uses in research; 4. Explain how to use a variety of historical research methods and documents to interpret and understand social issues (e.g., the friction among societies, the diffusion of ideas)

Additional Resources

1. Macaw Article <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/macaw-breeding-center-supplied-plumage-180969982/>
2. Bird info. <https://www.audubon.org/>
3. Bird info. <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/>
4. Bird info. <http://sciencenetlinks.com/lessons/look-bird-watching-your-own-backyard/>
5. <https://www.indianpueblo.org/19-pueblos/>
6. <https://www.indianpueblo.org/19-pueblos/history-culture/>
7. Videos of Pueblo Dances on You Tube
 - a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmfUiHSOB7U>
 - b. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNaw8Vq_AUU