

Sacred Feathers

Robert Mesta, director, Liberty Wildlife Non-Eagle Feather Repository

A remarkable repository helps Native American cultures thrive while conserving bird populations.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

In a small room tucked away in the back of Liberty Wildlife, a wildlife rehabilitation center in south Phoenix, Robert Mesta sits surrounded by displays of feathers of all sizes and colors, taxidermied birds, and Native American implements crafted from feathers.

A stack of papers rests on the table in front of him. Sent from across the country, the pages contain seemingly unusual requests: One gentleman asks for the carcass of an adult northern shrike, a pint-size predatory songbird native to the northern reaches of the U.S. and Canada. Another wants a hawk's tail — red-tailed preferred, but Harris's or rough-legged will suffice. And a woman in Alaska seeks puffin beaks that she will use to create a traditional Tlingit dance skirt.

After leafing through the applications, Mesta and his coworker, Mare Van Dyke, turn to a row of cabinets and refrigerators and begin pulling out bags overflowing with feathers, claws, and even entire birds. They carefully choose each individual item, making sure pattern, size, and color match and that it fulfills the requestor's needs. The final selections are then boxed and prepared to be mailed.

Each completed shipment symbolizes both a cultural and conservational victory.

Mesta is the director, and Van Dyke the coordinator, of the Liberty Wildlife Non-Eagle Feather Repository, one of only three organizations in the country that is permitted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to

accept, hold, and distribute feathers. Since 2010, it has worked to provide Native Americans with a legal and no-cost source of non-eagle feathers and birds for ceremonial, religious, and healing purposes.

"Our goal is twofold: to help sustain Native American cultures and also to help sustain our North American bird populations," explains Mesta, who is a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. "The whole idea is that the tribes come to us for their feathers, and if they do that, they're not buying them off the black market. And if they're not buying them, there's not a profit. And if there's not a profit, people quit killing birds."

Across tribes and cultures, Native Americans have always maintained a special relationship with animals, particularly birds. They use feathers for ceremonies, dances and religious practices and to create their regalia and healing implements. And they give them as gifts to commemorate accomplishments and significant life events. For centuries, tribes gathered feathers directly from birds culled from their ancestral lands — taking only what they needed.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, unregulated killing of birds by white settlers and professional hunters and trappers for food, sport, fashion, and profit — alongside loss of habitat — resulted in the annihilation of multiple species. Some, such as the Labrador duck, heath hen, and passenger pigeon — a bird once so numerous that it was believed that no humans could possibly diminish their numbers — were hunted into extinction.



Feathers are an important element of Allen King's northern traditional dance regalia.

As news of the wholesale slaughter of birds spread, many people were horrified and pushed for laws that would stop the decline and protect native bird species.

The first, enacted in 1900, was the Lacey Act, which banned the trafficking of fish, wildlife, and plants that were illegally taken, possessed, transported, or sold. Then, in 1918, the U.S. passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Designed to protect native bird species, it prohibited the possession and sale of feathers, bird parts, and eggs.

"These laws were very effective in arresting the decline of a lot of different species. However, none of them had provisions that allowed Native Americans to continue to harvest wildlife for religious or ceremonial purposes," Mesta explains.

In losing the ability to obtain feathers legally, tribal members lost their ability to maintain important cultural practices. Many traditions, ceremonies, and dances were eventually forgotten.

"With each generation, more is lost, until you're three, four generations down and you don't know half of what was a significant part of the foundation of your particular tribe because you didn't have access to these feathers," Mesta says.

"Feathers are both sacred and revered and probably the most iconic symbol for Native Americans," he continues. "Feathers are there at birth, when individuals make the transition to manhood or womanhood, during marriage, when healing is involved, or to recognize death. They're there for the whole life cycle. That's how significant they are."

Because feathers couldn't be obtained legally, a huge black market developed, and the illicit sale of protected species still exists today. "Every year, thousands of birds are taken illegally and sold on the black market," Mesta points out.

To help reduce poaching and the illegal bird trade, Mesta and leaders at FWS worked to create a proactive solution that would provide Native Americans ages 18 and older from federally recognized tribes with a legal pipeline for feathers. In 2010, Liberty Wildlife, in cooperation with FWS, established the LWNEFR. Bald and golden eagle feathers are handled by the National Eagle Repository in Commerce City, Colorado. And a similar but much smaller non-eagle repository is operated by the Comanche Nation in Oklahoma.

Since its formation, the LWNEFR has processed more than 8,000 requests and sent feathers to Native Americans from 276 tribes across 46 states. From molted feathers to frozen carcasses and everything in between, it deals in more than 1,200 species, ranging from the tiniest of hummingbirds to giant condors, silvery-black anhingas to salmon-pink flamingos, snowy owls to red-tailed hawks. The repository even stocks plumage from such exotic birds as the great argus pheasant from southeast Asia and the scarlet macaw, whose brilliant red feathers have been prized for centuries by the Pueblo peoples of northern New Mexico.

The inventory is supported by donations from rehabilitators, zoos, museums, veterinarians, and falconers. Private individuals also send in feathers and bird carcasses that were found or that belonged to their families, oftentimes for generations.

Most of the requests that the LWNEFR receives come from Native Americans who do not live on tribal lands. There are nearly seven million Native Americans in the U.S. today, and the majority live and work in urban areas.

"Arizona has the third largest Native American population in the U.S. — something like 300,000 and more than 22 federally recognized tribes," Mesta says. According to census data, about 30% of the state's tribal members live in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

"For a lot of different reasons, Native Americans ended up in urban environments that have no connection whatsoever to the tribal lands that provided feathers," Mesta explains. "But feathers are foundational. They've sustained these tribes and their cultures throughout history."

Each year, Mesta and Van Dyke process about 500 orders, representing "literally thousands and thousands of feathers," Mesta notes, and the number of requests continues to grow. And for every feather, every carcass, every set of wings that goes out, one less bird is taken from the wild.

"I can't tell you what level of impact we're having on stopping the black market, but I can say that we're providing a significant alternative to the purchase of illegal feathers. And every year, more and more Native Americans are taking advantage of it," Mesta says. "And that's super healthy and positive for everyone."



Celebrate Wildlife in Native Cultures

Throughout history, Native Americans have maintained a special connection with the animals in their natural world, one that has shaped and sustained their cultures. To commemorate the diverse heritage of Indigenous people across the country, the Liberty Wildlife Non-Eagle Feather Repository welcomes guests to its Fourth Annual LWNEFR Native American and Wildlife Celebration.

"This event celebrates the connection between indigenous people and the wildlife in their environment that plays such an important role in their cultures," says LWNEFR Director Robert Mesta. "We're in a unique position to be able to do that, because we have a large collection of live animals, particularly birds that are culturally significant to Native Americans, and we get to bring everyone together."

The festivities begin with the blessing of the eagles, a rare opportunity to get up close to one of the center's eagle ambassadors. This spiritual encounter includes being smudged — cleansed by the smoke of burning sacred sage bundles by a Native healer — before presenting the eagle with a gift of tobacco, which is rubbed onto the bird's feathers as an offering.

In addition to Liberty Wildlife's always popular raptor flight presentation and the chance to view live eagles, hawks, owls, and other wildlife, the celebration includes performances by Native dancers, singers, and drummers; a Native crafts market; Native foods; and exhibitions of regalia, art, and more. Guests can also explore and learn more about the LWNEFR and meet with Mesta and those who have benefited from its services.

Free. Sunday, Nov. 15, 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Liberty Wildlife, 2600 E. Elwood St., Phoenix.