

## **A feather worth more than gold: history of hunting birds for the feather trade**

From [Reality Checks with Staci-lee](#)  
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At the turn of the 20th century bird feathers were worth more than gold. It's hard to believe but true. History classes teach about those who traveled out west seeking fortune and fame panning for gold but little is said about the feather hunters. For many fortune hunters the gold they sought were pink and white and floated in the air. They also belonged to living creatures who would soon be hunted to near extinction. The use of feathers is centuries old and a global problem but by the late 1800s milliners, hat makers, expedited their use causing millions of birds to die.

### **Feathers belong on birds not hats**

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Though the hat industry has slowed considerably, the use of real feathers has waned, but not disappeared. Habitat loss is the next hurdle these birds must overcome to survive into the next century. As with many industries, the wearing of hats may be out of fashion but the feather industry just shifts to other forms of use. Very few people can tell real from fake feathers.



*Puck magazine illustration 1911. "The woman behind the gun." Library of Congress*



*The Roseate Spoonbill is still struggling to survive and has never fully recovered*



*A Snowy Egret shows off his breeding plumage, this is what made him a target for feather hunters.*



*Very few birds have pink feathers so it was the lucky hunter that had these to sell.*

### **Dying for vanity**

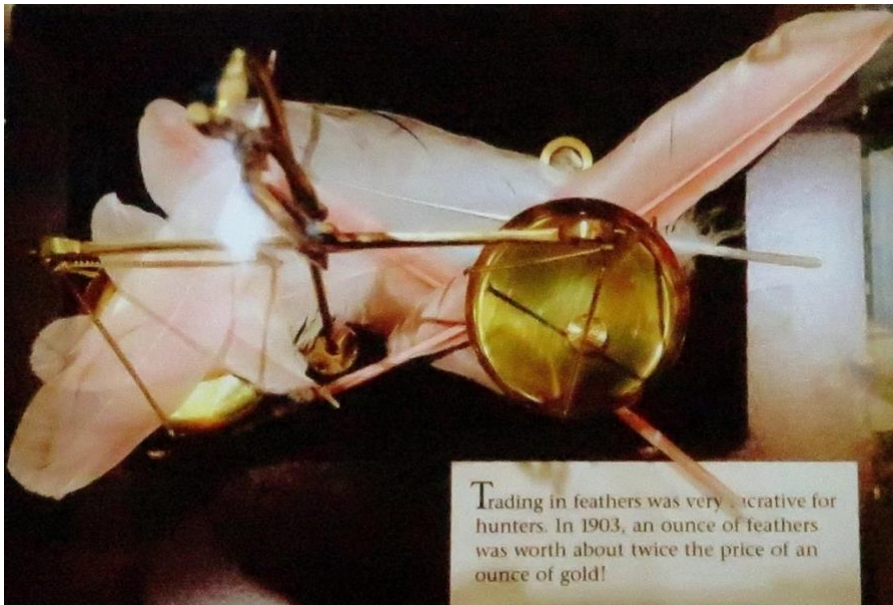
By the 1890s, women were wearing whole bodies of birds on hats. In 1886, noted ornithologist Frank Chapman counted 40 species of native birds, or bird parts, decorating most of the 700 ladies' hats that he had observed in New York City. This should come as no surprise since it was also considered fashionable

to wear a whole dead fox wrapped around the collar of jackets. I can't imagine what went through a woman's mind wearing a hat adorned with dead birds.

Florida had a booming industry of feather hunters that killed over **5 million** birds every year. It's no wonder the herons, egrets and spoonbills have never fully recovered from that massive slaughter. The 'feather rush' may have ended but these birds still struggle with habitat loss and pollution. It's highly unlikely they will ever recover to healthy populations.



*An ad shows a hat with full bird wings. Delineator, March 1910. In 1892 an estimated 800,000 pairs of wings were imported by one London dealer. I can't imagine wearing a dead bird on a hat and thinking it made me look attractive, can you?*



*Herbert K. Job wrote of the scarcity of herons caused by the millinery trade. 'The price for plumes offered to hunters was \$32 per ounce, which makes the plumes worth about TWICE THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD.'*



*Ostrich feathers adorning this hat. You can imagine how many feathers were needed for just 1 hat, now multiply that by the millions of hats sold around the world.*



*Easter Parade, New York City, 1911. Library of Congress.*

Feathers weren't just for hats they were also made into decorative fans.

As dancing became more popular many dresses used feathers as decoration. Many ballroom dance costumes still use them today.



### **Conservation efforts**

As the Roaring 20s quickly approached it was clear something had to be done before we drove many bird species to extinction. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 in the United States, made it illegal to hunt and trade in the feathers of many bird species, which helped protect their populations. If the thinking or hope was that this would end the trade it did not. As with any law several factors need to happen. Enforcement, education and heavy fines all need to be consistent for any law to be effective. The global trade in feathers and bird parts proved to be impossible to stop.

The use of real feathers is discouraged but not banned in the fashion world. Since much of our clothes come from other countries American consumers have no proof that synthetic feathers have replaced real ones so they have to rely on blind faith. That can be a tall order considering how many stores have made claims using fake fur when real fur was actually being sold and mislabeled.

### **How to help save our birds**

- Never buy real feathers
- Never buy fake feathers. Unless you wear a sign that says they are truly man made feathers the visual effect still promotes the use of feathers. This is also true for fake fur.
- Do educate people about the use of feathers today and why to avoid buying products that use them
- Share the history of feather hunting and the cruelty involved
- Do support bird conservation, whether its land acquisition or legislation to save birds they need our help to survive
- Do not go bird hunting or support any bird killing contests
- Go out and enjoy nature. People are most prone to protect something they have a personal connection to



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