

Parrot Feather Lure

Take a look at how bird feathers have played a part in history

By Beth Clark

[Click image to enlarge](#)

A fan of red and blue macaw feathers used in the Young Women's Freestyle Dance.

Photo by Bill Clark

[Click image to enlarge](#)

Macaw feathers are used in this Jingle Skirt Dance for young girls .

Photo by Bill Clark

The pulsing drum beat and stunning regalia mesmerized the spectators as dancers circled the arena at the Taos Pueblo Powwow. Intricate beadwork, a dazzling array of colors and a variety of spectacular bird feathers decorated the costumes at the annual gathering of Indian nations in New Mexico. Because birds figure prominently in Pueblo mythology and symbolize several aspects of their social structure, the feathers of indigenous eagles, hawks and turkeys are an integral part of the dancers' attire.

Surprisingly, brilliant macaw and smaller parrot feathers also graced the garments, despite the fact that macaws have never lived in this country. The only parrots indigenous to the United States are the thick-billed parrot and the Carolina parakeet. Wild thick-billed parrots haven't been documented in Arizona for at least 50 years, and the Carolina parakeet, restricted to the eastern U.S., has been extinct since the early 1900s. This tropical feather riddle is solved by indisputable archaeological evidence that prehistoric peoples imported both living parrots and feathers from Mexico.

The early movement of birds and feathers took place through ancient trade networks that antedated the Aztec empire by hundreds of years. Long-distance feather merchants amassed personal wealth by dealing in this parrot plume trade. Nearly weightless and low in bulk, feathers were easy to transport, while being extremely high in value compared to much heavier trade merchandise. Transactions took place in marketplaces, where both raw feathers and worked objects were sold.

Caution: Feathers can transmit disease. Infectious pathogens that can be transmitted by feather dust can cause serious illnesses such as psittacine beak and feather disease and Polyomavirus. External parasites or ectoparasites such as lice, mites, and ticks can also spread disease. Keep other birds' feathers – both wild and pet bird – out of your bird's area.

Non-native parrot feathers were particularly venerated by the prehistoric pueblo dwellers of New Mexico and Arizona despite the fact that they were difficult to obtain. They traded prized items such as turquoise ceremonial arrow points for them. Ancient Aztec trade patterns oriented toward the northwest to Paquimé in Chihuahua, Mexico, and the American Southwest made this possible. There is proof, however, that they were used at least 400 years prior to the advent of the Aztec Empire. Ceremonial objects incorporating these feathers, bones and bird images are present at numerous prehistoric Pueblo sites. The birds are still pervasive in present day dance regalia, pottery and jewelry, and reverently reflect their ancestors' influence. Today, the feathers used in ceremonies are usually procured from pet owners and zoos, and are molted feathers.

Because birds were present when mankind evolved, feathers are an inherent component of the human heritage. It is simply impossible to imagine a world without birds and feathers. Present-day parrot owners readily understand and appreciate the compelling avian attraction that prompted the illustrious parrot plume trade so long ago. We share this fascination with our predecessors from centuries before, the Indian nations that are striving to perpetuate their culture today and, no doubt, with generations to come. The lure of feathers is timeless.