



pinfeathers

A play & learn page for future Payne County Audubon Chapter members

The Roles of Bird Colors

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?

FEATHER COLOR PLAYS A VARIETY OF ROLES IN THE LIVES OF BIRDS, AND IS CRITICAL TO THEIR SPECIFIC LIFE STYLES.

MATING

IN SOME SPECIES THE COLORS AND MARKINGS OF THE MALE HAVE A DIRECT IMPACT ON HOW ATTRACTIVE HE IS TO A FEMALE, AND HIS MATING SUCCESS. IN A FEW ISOLATED CASES THE ROLES MAY REVERSE, WITH THE MALE DUCK LOOKING FOR CLUES TO A FEMALE'S VALUE AS A MATE BY EVALUATING THE COLORATION OF HER FEATHERS.

CAMOUFLAGE

- THE COLORS OF A BIRD'S FEATHERS ARE OFTEN USED TO PROVIDE CAMOUFLAGE FROM PREDATORS.
- FEMALES ARE GENERALLY DRABBER OR PALER, BROWN AND GREEN SO THAT THEY CAN SIT ON THE NEST AND NOT BE SEEN.
- THE WINTER PLUMAGE OF THE WILLOW PTARMIGAN IS PURE WHITE TO MATCH ITS SNOW-COVERED WINTER HOME. THE SPRING MOLT PRODUCES MOTTLED BROWN FEATHERS, MAKING THE FEMALE ALMOST INVISIBLE AS SHE SITS ON HER NEST.
- EVER WONDER WHY CARDINALS ARE THE LAST ONES AT YOUR FEEDER IN THE EVENING? RED BECOMES BLACK IN DIM LIGHT, MAKING THEM HARDER FOR A PREDATOR TO SEE.

MANY SPECIES (INCLUDING KILLDEER, NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD, EASTERN KINGBIRD, MANY SPECIES OF SHOREBIRDS, AND MOST GULL SPECIES) EXHIBIT A COLOR PATTERN KNOWN AS **COUNTERSHADING**—A DARK BACK OVER LIGHT UNDERPARTS. WHEN VIEWED FROM ABOVE (PERHAPS BY A HUNGRY FALCON) THE DARK BACK APPEARS LIGHTER IN THE SUNLIGHT, WHILE THE LIGHTER LOWER HALF OF THE BIRD IS DARKER AS THE RESULT OF BEING IN ITS OWN SHADOW. THE EFFECT IS ONE OF A SINGLE COLOR, MAKING THE BIRD HARD TO SEE AT A DISTANCE. WHEN VIEWED FROM BELOW THE BIRD BLENDS WITH THE SKY.

TERRITORIAL DOMINANCE

BIRDS IN GOOD HEALTH ARE ABLE TO PRODUCE FEATHERS WITH BRIGHTER COLORS. IN ESTABLISHING A NESTING TERRITORY, STRONGLY COLORED MALE BIRDS MAY BE SENDING A SIGNAL THAT THEY ARE ESPECIALLY FIT.

PLUMAGE CHANGES

FEATHERS COME IN AN AMAZING ARRAY OF COLORS, INCLUDING JUST ABOUT EVERY HUE IMAGINABLE. ALL OF A BIRD'S FEATHERS ARE REFERRED TO AS ITS PLUMAGE. A BIRD'S PLUMAGE CAN CHANGE OVER TIME FOR SEVERAL REASONS:

- PASSING THROUGH ONE OR MORE MOLTS UNTIL ADULT PLUMAGE IS REACHED
- MOLTING INTO AND OUT OF BREEDING PLUMAGE
- STAINING BY FOOD SOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT
- WEAR AND TEAR
- BLEACHING BY THE SUN

Adapted from Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [All about Birds](#)



NAME A BIRD FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING COLORS.



WHITE

1. _____



RED, BLUE, GREEN

10. _____



BLACK

2. _____



YELLOW & BLACK

11. _____



RED

3. _____



ORANGE & BLACK

12. _____



BLUE

4. _____



BROWN

13. _____



SLATE BLUE

5. _____



RUST

14. _____



GREEN

6. _____



GRAY

15. _____



YELLOW

7. _____



BLACK & WHITE

16. _____



SCARLET

8. _____



PINK

17. _____



YELLOW, RED &
BLACK

9. _____



VIOLET

18. _____