

Feature



The Victorian Plume Trade

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with Paul R. Erlich
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Demand for feathers for Victorian and Edwardian hats nearly drove many species to extinction. Groups like the Audubon Society exposed industry lies, raised social awareness, and eventually turned the tide.

During two walks along the streets of



Manhattan in 1886, the American Museum of Natural History's ornithologist, Frank Chapman, spotted 40 native species of birds including sparrows, warblers, and woodpeckers. But the birds

Photo: [Library of Congress](#).

were not flitting through the trees – they had

Editor's Note

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Frank Chapman's 1886 Feathered Hat Census

BIRD SPECIES	HATS SEEN	BIRD SPECIES	HATS SEEN	BIRD SPECIES	HATS SEEN
Grebes	7	Northern Saw-whet Owl	1	Cedar Waxwing	23
Green-backed Heron	1	Northern Flicker	21	Blackburnian Warbler	1
Virginia Rail	1	Red-headed Woodpecker	2	Blackpoll Warbler	3
Greater Yellowlegs	1	Pileated Woodpecker	1	Wilson's Warbler	3
Sanderling	5	Eastern Kingbird	1	Tree Sparrow	2
Laughing Gull	1	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	1	White-throated Sparrow	1
Common Tern	21	Tree Swallow	1	Snow Bunting	15
Black Tern	1	Blue Jay	5	Bobolink	1
Ruffed Grouse	2	Eastern Bluebird	3	Meadowlarks	2
Greater Prairie Chicken	1	American Robin	4	Common Grackle	5
Northern Bobwhite	16	Northern Shrike	1	Northern Oriole	9
California Quail	2	Brown Thrasher	1	Scarlet Tanager	3
Mourning Dove	1	Bohemian Waxwing	1	Pine Grosbeak	1

been killed, and for the most part, plucked, disassembled, or stuffed, and painstakingly positioned on three-quarters of the 700 women's hats Chapman saw. The North American feather trade was in its heyday.

Throughout the preceding 30 years, general economic prosperity of a growing middle class had provided opportunities to purchase nonessentials. Emulating the fashionable elite, men selected fedoras with feather trim and women adorned their hair, hats, and dresses with "aigrettes" (sprays) of breeding plumage taken from a variety of birds. Accordingly, women's hats became larger, hat ornamentation



(reminiscent of that found on dress military headgear) became more lavish, and the feather trade expanded its enterprise to include marketing the remains of some 64 species from 15 genera of native birds.

Hérons were favored. The [Great Egret](#) and especially the more plentiful, more widely distributed, more approachable, and more delicately plumed [Snowy Egret](#) (right), suffered great losses. These birds had evolved extravagant breeding



Photo by [Alan D. Wilson](#), digitally enhanced by [Balthazar](#). Used with permission.

Media Blitz

Feather trade opponents enlisted the media at all levels in their cause. This 1904 article from the magazine *Primary Education*, volume 12, page 241, gives a first-hand account of the horrors committed by the plume industry.

The White Heron Tragedy

The recent history of the white herons is pathetic in the extreme, as it is a tale of persecution and rapid extermination. It was a sad day when fashion decreed that the nuptial plumes of these birds should be worn as millinery ornaments. It is hardly possible that any women of the present day are unacquainted with all the horrible details of plume-hunting. The following pen-picture of the horrors of the plume trade, drawn by Prof. T. Gilbert Pearson, Secretary of the North Carolina Audubon Society, shows the work in all its bloody reality:



White Heron with plumes (worn only in the breeding season)

"In the tall bushes, growing in a secluded pond in a swamp, a small colony of herons had their nesting-home. I accompanied a squirrel-hunter one day to the spot, and the scene which met our eyes was not a pleasant one. I had expected to see some of the beautiful herons about their nests, or standing on the trees near by, but not a living one could be found, while here and there in the mud lay the lifeless forms of eight of the birds. They had been shot down and the skin bearing the plumes stripped from their backs. Flies were busily at work, and they swarmed up with hideous buzzings as we approached each spot where a victim lay. This was not the worst; in four of the nests young orphan birds could be seen who were clamoring pitifully for food which their dead parents could never again bring to them. A little one was discovered lying with its head and neck hanging out of the nest, happily now past suffering. On higher ground the embers of a fire gave evidence of the plume-hunter's camp.

The next spring I visited this nesting-site, but found only the old nests fast falling to decay. When man comes, slaughters, and exterminates, nature does not restore."

plumage as sexual advertisements to attract their mates. The feathers, apparently, had such a similar effect on 19th-century men that sources of supply began to disappear. So extensive was the decoupling of egrets and their skins that egrets were adopted as the symbol of the bird preservation movement.

Writers such as Herbert Job began to focus their protests on the robbing of heron rookeries:

"Here are some official figures of the trade from one source alone, of auctions at the London Commercial Sales Rooms during 1902. There were sold 1,608 packages of... herons' plumes. A package is said to average in weight 30 ounces. This makes a total of 48,240 ounces. As it requires about four birds to make an ounce of plumes, these sales meant 192,960 herons killed at their nests, and from two to three times that number of young or eggs destroyed. Is it, then, any wonder that these species are on the verge of extinction?"

There was no question that plume trading had become a very lucrative business. "In 1903," Job continued, "the price for plumes offered to hunters was \$32 per ounce, which makes the plumes worth about twice their weight in gold." (Later they were to bring \$80!)



THE FIGHT IN ENGLAND AGAINST THE USE OF WILD BIRD'S PLUMAGE IN THE MILLINERY TRADE

Sandwich-men Employed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, that Patrolled London Streets in July, 1911.



Audubon Society founder George Bird Grinnell opposed elaborate plumes worn by ladies like Ms. Charles Bruce in 1902. Photo by George C. Beresford

It should not be surprising that the millinery trade, an industry employing 83,000 people (1 of every 1,000 Americans) in 1900, stood fast against claims of cruelty and exploitation and offered the public false assurances. It was carefully explained, for instance, that the bulk of feather collection was limited to shed plumes -- those found scattered on the ground within rookeries. In truth, those "dead plumes" brought only one-fifth the price of the live, unblemished, little-worn ones.

To counteract the charges of cruelty, claims were circulated that most feather trim was either artificial or produced on foreign farms that exported molted feathers. The

demand for egret feathers, nonetheless, began to slip.

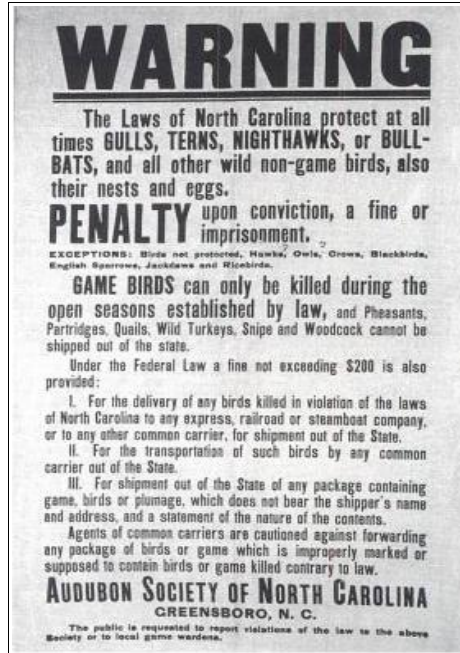
No sooner was the public weaned off egrets than it fixed its attention on seabirds of the Atlantic coast. And harvesting did not stop there. Hunting of West Coast terns, grebes, White Pelicans, and albatrosses for ornamental feathers also expanded.

By the turn of the century, plume hunters were killing many millions of birds each year. Preservationists struggled to enact laws to prevent the killing, possession, sale, and importation of plume birds and ornamental feathers (right). They disseminated their information through numerous periodicals (including [Bird Lore](#) and [Audubon Magazine](#)), many books, and the campaigns of the American Ornithologists' Union (founded in 1883), the Audubon Society, and other conservation organizations.

The Audubon Society offered public lectures on such topics as "Woman as a bird enemy" and erected Audubon-approved millinery displays. It also selected regulatory committees to audit the millinery sold in key areas. These actions helped more women to

recognize their role in the issue and more men in the millinery trade (whose livelihoods had come from encouraging those women into that role) to change their orientation as interest in feathered fashions subsided.

Thus ended the "Age of Extermination," and by World War I, embellishing attire with breeding plumes had become a thing of the past. How much this change was due to the effects of hunting and trade regulations and how much was the result of rising prices for dwindling supplies is still not clear. Nor is it evident whether changes in the everyday lives of women simply eliminated opportunities to wear oversized, constraining hats, or whether a growing inclination toward promoting humanitarian ideals reduced the allure of feathered garb. Regardless, displaying feathers became, once again, an avian trait.



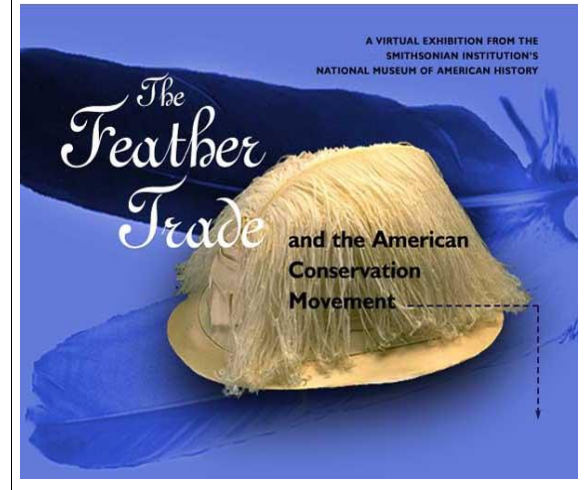
Linen Audubon Society poster, 1903. From *Our Vanishing Wild Life: Its Extermination and Preservation* by William T. Hornaday.

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Smithsonian Exhibit

Visit the National Museum of American History's [on-line exhibit](#) about the turn of the century fad that turned ladies into activists.



[Screens](#) (2008), co-authored with Donald Kennedy, is the Winner in the Nature Category of ForeWord Magazine's [2008 Book of the Year Award](#). She is an affiliate of the Stanford Biology Department.

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