

Conservation Corner

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We trust everyone had a wonderful Thanksgiving opening and passing around our many gifts of gratitude. We thank everyone who stopped by our Make & Take Workshop during the Pocahontas Art Walk. Now it's time to look forward to the upcoming Christmas season. In light of recent natural disasters and tragic killings that have darkened our skies, I thought perhaps it would be timely to take a closer look at the four timeless themes of Advent – Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

I'll introduce this week's theme, Hope, with Emily Dickinson's Poem 314.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.



Have you ever thought of hope as the thing with feathers? After all, feathers are unique to birds, an evolutionary adaptation that gives birds the ability to fly. Feathers are also the warmest, lightest-weight body covering of all the animals. Feathers are similar to our own hair in structure and composition, emerging from follicles and composed of keratin. Small songbirds have somewhere between 3,500 and 5,000 feathers while waterbirds may have up to 25,000!

Each of those feathers is composed of three parts: the shaft or central hollow tube that makes the feather rigid; the barbs or parallel strands that create its flat surface; and the barbules, which run along the barbs and connect them with tiny hooks on one side and bumps on the other. When birds preen, they are in essence zipping up their feathers, getting ready for flight.

There are also three main types of feathers: flight feathers of the wings and tail, insulating down feathers, and contour feathers that cover and streamline the body. It is the contour and flight feathers that carry the colors and patterns distinctive of each species.

And so it is with hope. Hope is unique to humans, a characteristic that gives us the ability to fly. Hope may be soft, yet strong in flight. Hope gives us warmth and protection from the elements. Hope, too, displays many colors and patterns that help define and identify us. Here at Conservation, hope comes in many small ways, including the feathers of the trumpeter swans, wild turkeys, and American Bald Eagles who once again call Pocahontas County home.

In closing I'd like to invite everyone to take time this holiday season to attend our Come & Go Wreath Workshop. Stop by anytime between 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, December 7, at the Nature Center to create a grapevine and/or evergreen swag or wreath. Snacks and supplies will be provided. There is no charge for the class, but registrations are appreciated! Call 712-335-4395 or email conservation@pocahontas-county.com today.