

Taking Flight

*A History of Birds and People
in the Heart of America*



MICHAEL EDMONDS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Taking Flight opens with two epigraphs: “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we create the world,” by Buddha, and, “It is theory which first determines what can be observed,” by Albert Einstein. How do these quotes pertain to the book?

Why do you think Michael Edmonds chose to start each chapter with a personal anecdote? What do these anecdotes add to the book? Which one resonated most deeply with you?

By trying to empathize with earlier cultures, rather than judge them, Edmonds argues we might learn “not just about the past but about ourselves.” Can you think of any details from the book that caused you to feel less judgmental about, and more empathetic toward, earlier cultures? Did any cause you to learn more about yourself?

Several early chapters in the book focus on Native peoples who saw birds as messengers between humans and the gods. American Indians, and their faith in the spiritual powers of birds, did not disappear when science became orthodox for mainstream Americans. How did differing values influence the behaviors of these two groups?

In chapter eight, Edmonds gives examples of many descriptive (and often entertaining) names for birds that deviate from modern ornithological taxonomies. What names or naming conventions mentioned in this chapter made an impression on you and why?

Chapter 9 discusses folklore and superstitions associated with birds. Why did people believe in this lore? Do you, or does someone you know, believe in any bird-related folklore or superstitions?

During the late 1800s, Midwesterners killed hundreds of millions of birds—so many that the populations of most species were reduced by half and several species went completely extinct. What different factors led to the slaughter of so many birds? Were you surprised to learn about any factors in particular?

In the book's conclusion, Edmonds asks us to examine which of our own beliefs, desires, or values might encourage us to act in ways that threaten our environmental future. Which of your beliefs, desires, or values might do this? What daily habits could you change to reflect new or different values?

