

HOW THE BIRDS GOT THEIR FEATHERS

by Joseph Bruchac

1 **L**ong ago, back when the world was new, the birds had no feathers. It was difficult for them in those days. When the sun shone down brightly, they were too hot. When the wind blew and the seasons turned to the long white time, they were cold and they shivered in the forest. And so it was that the Creator took pity on them and sent down a message to them in a dream.

2 All the birds gathered together in council to discuss the dream they had all had, the dream they knew was a message from the Creator. The message was this: If they would appoint one bird to be their messenger, that bird could go to the Skyland and bring back clothing for all the birds. The Eagle, who was the chief, sat on the council rock and began the discussion: Who could fly that long distance, high into the Skyland, to bring back clothing for the birds?

3 Everyone wanted to go, but some of the birds were too small; their wings were too weak. The great Eagle could fly the highest of all, but as the chief of the birds he had to stay with his people. Finally it was decided that Buzzard, with his long, strong wings, would be the one to fly to the Skyland with the message that they were ready to accept the Creator's gift of clothing.

4 Buzzard began to fly. He flew and he flew through the sky. He flew for so long that he became hungry; he had forgotten to eat before he left on his journey. He looked down, and there by the side of the lake he saw some rotten fish. He was so hungry that he flew down and he ate those rotten fish. Then, feeling better, he began to fly again.

5 Buzzard flew higher and higher, up toward the Skyland. Higher and higher he went, so high that the heat of the sun shone down and burned the top of his bald head. But he was determined to carry the message of all the birds up to the Creator, and so he continued.

6 Up and up he flew, until at last he came to the Skyland, where the Creator waited. "Buzzard," the Creator said, "you have done well. You have been brave and determined. You have carried the message of your people to me. I see that you wish to receive this gift of clothing from me. All the birds will have clothes, which you will take back to them. Buzzard, since you were the messenger, and you were so determined and brave, I will give you the first choice of clothing to wear."

7 The Creator took Buzzard to a place where many suits of clothing hung, all of them made of beautiful feathers. Buzzard looked around. As the messenger for all the birds, he would have to pick the very best suit of all. As he looked, the Creator came to him and said, "Now, Buzzard, you must remember this. Any one of these suits of feathers will fit you when you put it on. If you do not like it, simply take it off, and it will go to another bird. But remember, once you have tried it on and taken it off, it can never be yours again." Buzzard understood, and he began to look.

8 Now, there was a beautiful suit with red feathers and a little black mask. Buzzard tried it on. It was very bright and nice, he thought, but only red? That was not enough, so he took that suit off and it went to Cardinal.

9 There was another suit with black on it, a little bit of white, a gray back, and a red vest. Buzzard tried that on. Hmmm, he thought, not quite showy enough. That one went to Robin.

10 There was a yellow-and-black suit. This too was nice, but the messenger of all the birds must have many colors in his suit of feathers, thought Buzzard. So he took that suit off too; it went to Goldfinch.



11 Buzzard tried on one suit of feathers after another. The Creator patiently waited and watched, until finally, Buzzard tried on a suit that fit so tightly, it didn't cover his legs. It left his bald, red, sunburned head bare, and the feathers were brown and dirty. Buzzard looked at himself, and Buzzard was not pleased. "Ugh!" he said. "This suit is the worst of them all!" And the Creator said, "Buzzard, it is the last of all the suits. It has to be yours."

12 So it came to be that from that day on, Buzzard wore that suit of dirty feathers. And ever since then, too, because he stopped to eat those rotten fish on his journey, Buzzard has had an appetite for things that are long dead. But still, when he flies high in the sky with his wings spread, up there close to the Skyland, you may remember that he was the messenger for all the birds. Despite his dirty suit of feathers, he still has reason to be proud.