

# Molting

By Lin Jensen

It was a tiny feather, not more than an inch and a half in length, pale gray and barely discernible against the matching gray surface of the sidewalk. And then there was a second feather as well. It's unlikely that I'd have noticed them at all if a little breeze hadn't blown them about just as I came along. This was in mid-August, and the House Sparrows that nest in the hollows and crevices under the eaves of the building that houses Chico Natural Foods were beginning their fall molt from breeding plumage into their winter feathers.

Most birds molt once or twice a year, and of a variety of reasons the most common is to replace old worn feathers. But they may also molt from a lighter summer plumage into a heavier plumage in cold areas where they intend to stay on through the winter. In addition birds molt in and out of breeding plumage, and adolescent birds molt into their adult feathers.

Molts can enact quite startling transformations. The little male Ruddy Duck, for example, common to North America, is a rather nondescript bird in its winter plumage, brownish overall with pale sides, a slightly darkened cap and white cheeks being its most distinguishing features. But when it molts into breeding plumage, its whole body turns a deep ruddy red and its large flat bill converts from a rather drab gray to a brilliant, luminous blue, its contrasting white cheeks flashing on and off with every turn of its head like mirrors deflecting the sun.

I don't know how a Ruddy Duck or any other bird for that matter experiences the occasion of these sometimes radically transforming molts. First they're one sort of bird and then they're quite another. Do they realize this? Does the little Ruddy Duck realize his own sudden brilliance when he emerges into breeding plumage, or feel dimmed when he reverts once again to his ordinary winter feathers?

I've been losing a lot of "feathers" myself these days, and I *do* notice the change. Little bits of me are dropping away – worn out thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and certainties. Sometimes whole identities drop away, along with a world I thought I once knew. The mechanism for a molt is that the old, worn feathers are loosened in their follicles by the growth of new intruding feathers, which eventually push them out. I'm aware that what is being pushed out is "me" but have as yet no clear awareness of who's coming to take my place. I've had other molts in my long life, some more dramatic than others, but none more comprehensive, more thorough, than what's occurring now. Zen is a practice that self-destructs, disappears in order to become what it is. I'm seventy-five years old as I write this. I've been a teacher of Zen for years, yet when people ask me if I'm a Buddhist, I don't know what to say. Any answer I might give somehow seems irrelevant to what's actually taking place. I've lost any convincing identification and seem to be a prospect for a missing persons alert. It's as if I've awakened to the company of a stranger, or as if I've reached out at last and taken hold of my own unfamiliar hand.

The molting of birds can be either sudden or gradual. The sudden or synchronous molters change their feathers all at once in a period as short as two weeks. Waterfowl typically do this, and are unable to fly until the molt is complete, leaving them exposed and vulnerable for the duration. Other birds molt in stages, dropping their feathers in a pattern that allows them to sustain flight throughout the adaptation. These variants of the molt seem to me particularly analogous and expressive of what Zen calls "awakening" – the self losing itself in order to realize itself, the self settling into itself, awakening to what it truly is. It's an awakening that might come with the startling suddenness of brilliant new feathers or arrive in increments, one feather at a time, in a transformation so subtle as to be nearly indiscernible until complete.

Awakening may result in radically altered plumage, but the crucial insight, the actual enlightenment, is not so much

about getting new feathers as it is about being stripped of the old. Awakening is within the interim between molts when what you were before has passed away and what you are to become is not yet realized. Awakening arises in times of vulnerability and awkwardness between before and after where all prior identities are cancelled and anything is possible and nothing certain. It is in that place of *no* place and in that “person” of *no* particularity, that you come closest to the source of all feathers and to the act of feathering itself. You are the very expression of the follicle, the vehicle and container, where the drama of the molt itself is being enacted.

Birds have no option but to trust the molt to do its work; indeed, the renewal and perpetuation of all species of birds absolutely depends upon its occurrence. In like manner we humans are overtaken by change, and we do well to entrust ourselves to its care. I may not have desired any change at all or see any particular need for it, but the continuing transformation goes on regardless, and has gone on the whole of my life whether I choose to acknowledge it or not. On the sidewalk outside Chico Natural Foods, I watched one day as two tiny gray feathers drifted over the curb edge and into the street. The stoplight turned to green once more and the traffic flowed through and the feathers were lost to sight. And I too was lost to sight, saying goodbye once more to whoever I’d once been, drifting along like a loosened feather on its way to who knows where.

Overhead, House Sparrows, their nesting season finished, were hopping about in the Sycamores the city had planted there. ●

*Lin Jensen is the author of Bad Dog and Pavement, both published by Wisdom Publications, [www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org)*



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