

The Election of the King Bird

A Nigerian Folk Story By Elphinstone Dayrell, 1910

Old Town, **Calabar**, once had a king called Essiya, who, like most of the Calabar kings in the olden days, was rich and powerful; but although he was so wealthy, he did not possess many slaves. He therefore used to call upon the animals and birds to help his people with their work. In order to get the work done quickly and well, he determined to appoint head chiefs of all the different species. The elephant he appointed king of the beasts of the forest, and the hippopotamus king of the water animals, until at last it came to the turn of the birds to have their king elected.

Essiya thought for some time which would be the best way to make a good choice, but could not make up his mind, as there were so many different birds who all considered they had claims. There was the hawk with his swift flight, and of hawks there were several species. There were the herons to be considered, and the big spur-winged geese, the hornbill or toucan tribe, and the game birds, such as guinea-fowl, the partridge, and the bustards. Then again, of course, there were all the big crane tribe, who walked about the sandbanks in the dry season, but who disappeared when the river rose, and the big black-and-white fishing eagles. When the king thought of the **plover** tribe, the sea-birds, including the pelicans, the doves, and the numerous shy birds who live in the forest, all of whom sent in claims, he got so confused, that he decided to have a trial by ordeal of combat, and sent word round the whole country for all the birds to meet the next day and fight it out between themselves, and that the winner should be known as the king bird ever afterwards.

The following morning many thousands of birds came, and there was much screeching and flapping of wings. The hawk tribe soon drove all the small birds away, and harassed the big waders so much, that they very shortly disappeared, followed by the geese, who made much noise, and winged away in a straight line, as if they were playing "Follow my leader." The big forest birds who liked to lead a secluded life very soon got tired of all the noise and bustle, and after a few croaks and other weird noises went home. The game birds had no chance and hid in the bush, so that very soon the only birds left were the hawks and the big black-and-white fishing eagle, who was perched on a tree calmly watching everything. The scavenger hawks were too gorged and lazy to take much interest in the proceedings, and were quietly ignored by the fighting tribe, who were very busy circling and swooping on one another, with much whistling going on. Higher and higher they went, until they disappeared out of sight. Then a few would return to

Calabar, town and port, capital of Cross River state, southeastern Nigeria. It lies along the Calabar River.

Settled in the early 17th century by the Efik branch of the Ibibio people.

the town became a centre for trade between Europeans on the coast and Africans farther inland. Fish, cassava, bananas, palm oil, and palm kernels were traded at Calabar for European manufactured goods, and the town also served as a major slave-trading depot.



Plover, any of numerous species of plump-breasted birds of the shorebird family Charadriidae (order Charadriiformes).

There are about three dozen species of plovers, 15 to 30 centimeters (6 to 12 inches) long, with long wings, moderately long legs, short necks, and straight bills that are shorter than their heads.



earth, some of them badly torn and with many feathers missing.

At last the **fishing eagle** said—

“When you have quite finished with this foolishness please tell me, and if any of you fancy yourselves at all, come to me, and I will settle your chances of being elected head chief once and for all;” but when they saw his terrible beak and cruel claws, knowing his great strength and ferocity, they stopped fighting between themselves, and acknowledged the fishing eagle to be their master.

Essiya then declared that Ituen, which was the name of the fishing eagle, was the head chief of all the birds, and should thenceforward be known as the king bird.

From that time to the present day, whenever the young men of the country go to fight they always wear three of the long black-and-white feathers of the king bird in their hair, one on each side and one in the middle, as they are believed to impart much courage and skill to the wearer; and if a young man is not possessed of any of these feathers when he goes out to fight, he is looked upon as a very small boy indeed.

Sea eagle, any of various large fish-eating eagles (especially in the genus *Haliaeetus*), of which the bald eagle is best known. Sea eagles (sometimes called fish eagles or fishing eagles) live along rivers, big lakes, and tidewaters throughout the world except South America. Some reach 1 metre (3.3 feet) long, with a wingspan nearly twice that.



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