

Nobody Says It Better

By Madeleine Franco

'Like water off a duck's back'

There are a number of time-honored linguistic expressions that have become similes and metaphors for larger and/or more complicated concepts. We often use these expressions without giving a second thought to what they mean. Let's review...

AS THE CROW FLIES—directly or in a straight line. We now know that birds probably use landmarks and may not fly in an entirely straight line.

BIRDBRAIN—Not too bright. Really? Birds may have smaller brains, but evidence suggests that they may use more of their brains than we do. Why do we have no trouble believing that?

CROW'S FEET—Uh, oh, ladies! This, of course, needn't be explained to anyone over 40. But, look at it this way . . . they're a small enough price to pay for all that smiling over the years..

SCARCE AS HEN'S TEETH—Impossible to find, rare.

EATS LIKE A BIRD—Eats lightly, though some birds eat a large percentage—even double--their body weight every day. My canaries can certainly vouch for that!

"HE WILL COVER YOU WITH HIS FEATHERS. He will cover you with His wings." (Psalm 91:4)—God will protect and shelter you from adversity.

KILL TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE—I never use this one; the flock would be so insulted. However, it is often used by non-bird people to indicate dexterity and efficiency toward simultaneous accomplishment. Please, can somebody think of something else to express that?

YOU CAN CATCH A BIRD BY PUTTING SALT ON ITS TAIL—My parents used to tell me that when I was a very small child and then laugh heartily as I'd run around the yard with a salt shaker. Truth known, of course, if you can

get that close, who needs salt?

LIKE WATER OFF A DUCK'S BACK—Easy. What makes water roll off, of course, is secretion from the uropygial gland or preen gland, which the bird collects on his bill or beak and distributes through his feathers in the preening process. So, while it may look easy, all that waterproofing is the result of some conscientious work.

A BIRD IN THE HAND IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH—The sure thing that one has is usually better than things wished for. Greener grass on the other side of the fence also comes to mind.

FISH GOTTA SWIM, BIRDS GOTTA FLY—Behaviorally, what will be, will be, and you can't force the nature of things or people. Of course, this one is often used to justify or give up on plain, old-fashioned bad behavior.

DUCKY—Nifty or happily almost perfect; sometimes used sarcastically, as in when one locks one's keys in the car and might say (among other things), "Oh, that's just ducky!"

CHICKEN SCRATCH—Something of little value or trivial. C'mon, chickens love chicken scratch! And even that thing described by a word often substituted for scratch has value as fertilizer.

CHICKEN—Timid, as in chickens that scatter when a truck comes up the lane toward the farmhouse. I call them smart; another word to describe a brave chicken under those circumstances might be dead.

CHICKEN OUT—Give it up. Sometimes, of course, this is good advice. See "Chicken," above.

COCK O' THE WALK—Proud, even arrogant, person. Typically male.

COCK-SURE—Absolutely sure, unquestionable and typically not comfortable with being questioned. Apparently roosters rarely doubt themselves. Why would they?

SPRING CHICKEN—A youthful person, often referred to in the negative; e.g., NOT a spring chicken.

TURKEY—Dullard. This is ironic, of course, since the wild turkey is a rather cunning fellow, and can be a huge challenge to a hunter. The domestic turkey was “dumbed down,” but then how ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm otherwise?

WATCHES LIKE A HAWK—Watching intently. Hawks hunt for a living, often in areas of topographical sameness, so they’d better be watching. Often, what alerts them to the presence of prey is even a small amount of movement or irregularity of surface.

EAGLE-EYE—Someone who is highly observant.

DOVETAIL—Sway from side to side. Watch a dove fly someday. The expression is also used to indicate things that mesh together nicely; for example, in woodworking, dovetailing is an actual structural process to interlock two pieces of wood using a shape similar to a dove’s tail, or with regard to ideas. Do check out that dove’s tail...and don’t forget to bring the salt!

SANG LIKE A CANARY—Now, this one gets a little dicey. It could mean that one’s sweet voice was duly noted. However, in the case of organized crime, it often meant that one had forgotten one’s loyalties, told the authorities way too much, and that one’s days were, as a result and understandably, numbered.

PIGEONHOLE—Categorize or characterize, often negatively. Pigeons do evidence a certain amount of organization and habituation in their nesting behaviors.

CARDINAL RULE—Primary or first rule. This really has little to do with birds, rather, it’s a mathematical concept. However, I do note that the male cardinal is red and rather striking, so perhaps that’s a reminder that we should take note of cardinal rules.

Once you’re down to the Cardinal Rule, you have probably spent an inordinate amount of time trying to come up with additional bird expressions.

Can you think of others? Or would that be like sending someone on a **SNIPE HUNT**? Send your phrases and explanations to afawatchbird@earthlink.net, subject line Fowl Phrases, and we’ll publish the best ones.



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