

Supplement 5. Bird Remains in Central Plains Tradition Context

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Huffman and Earley (2014:668, 670) remark on the presence of what they perceive as “unusual” bird bones in the Wallace site assemblage. They cite two Central Plains tradition precedents as instances of the occurrence of similar bones: one in Upper Republican context at the Mowry Bluff site (25FT35) in the Medicine Creek valley of southwest Nebraska (Falk 1969a), and one in Smoky Hill phase context at the Witt site (14GE600) in the Smoky Hill River/Republican River confluence area of Geary County, Kansas (Brown 1981:28). Diverse bird bones are indeed reported from each site, but what was unusual about each of them was not the presence of bird bones, but the comprehensive recovery and retention of faunal remains. The large majority of reported Upper Republican and Smoky Hill phase sites were excavated in the period from the 1920s through the 1940s, before Central Plains archaeologists were screening lodge fill, and before detailed faunal analysis became routine, thus giving reason to retain most bone. For many of the collections from that era, even what bone was retained has never been identified to species. More recent excavations, where faunal remains (indeed, all classes of remains), are comprehensively recovered, retained, and analyzed, regularly include a diverse suite of birds, including raptors, waterfowl, occasional shorebirds, game birds, and passerines (Table 1, wherein bird lists are summarized by taxonomic orders, as represented on the current American Ornithologists’ Union Checklist of North and Middle American Birds). Apishapa sites have also produced a large number and diversity of bird remains.

A diversity of birds probably were procured for multiple purposes. Huffman and Earley's (2014:668) comment that these are not normal food items to the contrary, procurement for food likely was one of those reasons. Comprehensive recovery of both faunal and floral remains on Central Plains tradition sites is painting a far different portrait of early second millennium subsistence than what was tautologically inferred from analogy during the early years of professional archaeology on the Central Plains. What has emerged, and continues to be clarified, is a picture of a broad subsistence base, including a broad range of terrestrial, avian, and aquatic fauna, in addition to an important role for maize and cultigens of the Eastern Agricultural Complex, and collection of wild and weedy plant resources. This basic area-wide strategy takes many specific configurations, depending on local conditions over this broad and biologically varied area. Thus, the specific mix in any particular faunal assemblage varies, but overall is broadly composed. In view of this, there would be nothing surprising about the procurement of birds primarily as food resources. Brown (1981:83-89) documented the overall pattern of cutmarks on bird carcasses, indicating that the animals were processed in a manner not unlike that used for large mammals.

It is characteristic of traditional technologies that parts of an animal other than the flesh are used, and this is the case in the Central Plains tradition. Central Plains tradition assemblages frequently contain bone beads or tubes manufacturing by ringing and snapping bird bones. Feathers are not preserved in the archaeological record but it would seem a safe bet that they were used for fletching arrows. And since arrow points can be abundant on any given site (and that's just on the site, and does not consider those arrows lost during a hunt), the need for feathers undoubtedly required a fair number of birds to provide them.

Use of other bird parts, such as skins, cannot possibly be reliably inferred. It does, however, seem unlikely that bird remains were incorporated into medicine bundles at this time. Bird remains were so used in historic times, as Huffman and Earley (2014:658) discuss, but it is highly questionable whether or not bundles were used in late prehistoric times. In domestic context among the historic Pawnee, medicine bundles were hung above the lodge's altar. As remarked in the printed reply, no Central Plains houses have evidence for the remains of altars and certainly none of them have evidence of the close spatial association of the kinds of non-perishable items that might compose a bundle (the hide used to wrap the items would, of course, have deteriorated). Bundles may, however, have been removed upon abandonment of a structure, but ultimately, bundles may have ended up in burials. Few Upper Republican burials have been excavated (most human remains recovered from Medicine Creek sites were fragmentary and from domestic or midden context), but of the few that are known, the nature, quantity, and disposition within the grave of associated funerary objects do not suggest the deposition of bundles. The same is true of Smoky Hill phase context, where the best known and most comprehensively studied mortuary site is the Whiteford site, a cemetery containing at least 151 individuals (Roper 2006). The funerary objects within this cemetery in no way suggest that they were placed within bundles and many are not even of the object classes normally placed within bundles (pottery is common in these burials but is never a bundle item). Negative evidence is always problematic, but if bundles were assembled by Central Plains tradition people, it would seem reasonable to suppose that some positive indication of such would have been recorded by now.

We thus see no valid reason to regard the bird bones in the Wallace site as at all unusual or at all indicative of any special purpose. We will not deny that late prehistoric people may have

assigned some symbolic significance to various of the birds, or even that historic Pawnee bird symbolism may have emerged from precedents begun in previous centuries in the region, but we suggest that, when properly reasoned, we have no basis for wholesale attribution of the historic bird lore to late prehistoric people.

Some notes on specific sites:

Cramer (5PE484) — This is an Apishapa site whose contents were screened (Gunnerson 1989:21). Birds bones mostly were from raptors and included eagles, several species of hawks, and at least two species of owls, in addition to a few other bird remains (Hamblin 1989:210-211).

25FT22, H4 — This is an Upper Republican site in the Medicine Creek valley excavated using screening and flotation for recovery (Roper 1996:31-32). Bird bones in the faunal assemblage included at least five species of waterfowl, in addition to at least three species of hawks, two species of owls, two species of woodpeckers, and several other species. Some small bird remains were unidentifiable (Turnmire 1996:188-189).

Mowry Bluff (25FT35) — Another Medicine Creek valley Upper Republican site, this one is cited by Huffman and Earley as one of the two sites with unusual birds. Screening was used during excavation. Ten identified species of birds included four species of waterfowl, plus one each of hawk, owl, woodpecker, turkey, and a few other smaller birds (Falk 1969a:49).

Hulme (25HL28) — Hulme is an Upper Republican site in central Nebraska, excavated using screened recovery (Bozell 1991:231). This is one of the most diverse reported Central Plains tradition bird assemblages. This site is within a major North American flyway and about a dozen species of waterfowl were represented here. Also present were hawks, owls, upland game birds, woodpecker, and several passerines (Bozell 1991:232-233).

Witt (14GE600) — This is a Smoky Hill phase lodge in northeast Kansas excavated using screened recovery and cited by Huffman and Earley. Although touted for its unusual bird assemblage, in fact the assemblage is neither overly diverse nor unusual compared to other Central Plains tradition sites. Eagle and owl remains were present, as were woodpecker, Northern Bobwhite, and a passerine. Waterfowl were limited (Brown 1981:28).

Budenbender (14PO4) — Another Smoky Hill phase lodge, this one is in the Blue River valley of northeast Kansas. Screened recovery was not used during its excavation in 1957 (Johnson 1973). Although not containing any raptors, the bird assemblage nevertheless includes prairie chicken and several species of waterfowl (Brown 1981:28).

Beaver Creek (25BO23) — An Itskari phase lodge site along a tributary of the Loup River in east-central Nebraska. Screening and flotation were used in the course of excavation (Koch 2002:11). Several species of ducks, plus hawks, osprey, woodpecker, and some passerine bones were among the bird remains (Koch 2002:85-86).

Patterson (25SY31) — A Nebraska phase site with multiple excavated lodges in the lower Platte River valley of eastern Nebraska. Mechanical stripping was employed and hand-excavated units were not screened, but portions of the fill were saved for later flotation (Bozell and Ludwickson 1999:3-4). Waterfowl, owls, woodpeckers, and Northern Bobwhite, in addition to several shorebirds and passerines were part of the reasonably diverse assemblage of bird remains (Koch et al. 1999:81-82).

Other sites — A few other sites might be mentioned. These are components that were excavated without screening and/or for which faunal assemblages are limited. William Duncan Strong did not use screened recovery at the Upper Republican type site, the Lost Creek site (25FT3), nor were the recovered faunal remains systematically identified. He did, however,

report that “[M]any bird remains were found” and he noted that the assemblage contained geese, ducks, and probably prairie chicken (Strong 1935:101). The Phil site (14JW48) in north-central Kansas yielded a somewhat limited faunal assemblage that nevertheless included bittern, several species of ducks, prairie chicken, and passerines (Bozell 2011:98). The limited faunal assemblage from 25CC17, a Nebraska phase site in the Weeping Water Creek valley of eastern Nebraska, included a bone identified as probably from a prairie chicken (Gradwohl 1969:143). Area 2 of the Duck Creek site (25NH88) in southeast Nebraska, yielded only 9 identifiable faunal elements. These, however, included turkey, Northern Bobwhite, and a Red-tailed Hawk (Koch 2009:120). The faunal assemblage from House 1 at the Nuzum site (14DP10), a Nebraska phase site near the northeast corner of Kansas is limited to only nine elements, one of which is from an eagle (Falk 1969b:80). The Platteford site (25SY45) is another Nebraska phase site, this one adjacent to the lower Platte River in eastern Nebraska. The small faunal assemblage includes waterfowl, prairie chicken, Northern Bobwhite, and passerines (Bleed et al. 2008:70).

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