

Doing the Funky Grouse

When our feathered friends start dancing with you, watch out.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Marion Moran was reporting on life at High Meadows, the rehabilitated old hillside farm up in the Durward Glen country that she and husband Gene have turned into a refuge for wildlife rivaled only by the American Legion Bar.

"I must tell you about our grouse," Marion said. "It took a liking to Gene and it just followed him all over. It was a male and Gene named it Ralphie."

It turned out that Ralphie had not taken a liking to Marion. The bird would

fly at her sometimes, and Marion said she didn't know why. She meant the bird no harm.

"Jim Stephens even danced with it," she said.

That didn't strike me as being too odd. After all, George Archibald danced with birds up at the International Crane Foundation at Baraboo. And at the Polish weddings in Three Lakes you will always find yourself dancing with some pretty strange birds, eventually.

Jim Stephens, of course, is the editor who put *The Journey Home* together, the three-volume anthology that presents the literature of Wisconsin through four centuries. Much of the first volume, titled "Land of the Red Earth," is given over to the stories and legends of the Native Americans who occupied *Meskousen* after the great ice sheets retreated and before the rivers

of white people flooded in from Europe.

Stephens is not only a scholar of Native American culture, he is also a poet.

It was Stephens who built a "medicine circle" for Marion and Gene at High Meadows and it was near that

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medicine circle, Marion reports, that Ralphie the grouse seemed to hang out.

Jim says the idea of dancing with the grouse came to him when they were all standing on the Moran porch one day and Ralphie was walking around their legs without a fear or care in the world. They all saw this, he says, including the

Native American teacher and writer, Keewaydinoqway, who was visiting.

The Morans began to see Ralphie hanging out around the medicine circle, and on his visits, Jim hung out there too. He also brought his flute and played, waiting for the bird to appear.

"The Lakota name for flute," Jim says, "is *siyo tanka*, which translates into 'great grouse' or 'great prairie chicken.' The bird came and started singing. It sounded like a flute! It was a tiny sound, but the same sound that a flute makes."

The flute and the bird sang together, and it became a constant chant. Before he knew it, Stephens and the bird were dancing.

"We were chanting," he says, "and dancing around each other. The bird was going counterclockwise around me, which creates negative energy. It's like a planet going retrograde. Everything started going badly for me, and that lasted about two months. Then I danced with the bird again and this time it went around me clockwise, and I just felt

'The bird was going counterclockwise around me, which creates negative energy,' says Jim Stephens. 'Everything started going badly.'

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better right away. This bird was like a little Yoda teaching me medicine!"

After the dance, Stephens wrote "Dance for the Moon of Bird Grandparents" and dedicated it to Marion and Gene:

1

Across the slope above the medicine
circle lives Siyo
Earth-feathered creature of the woods
He lost his mate to the highway
several moons ago this winter
Now his covey is among the humans
who live in these high meadows
It is the path he has chosen for
himself, love and song
Beneath sun and stars and the
talking waters beside his drumming
ground
Siyo goes about his business and he is
spirit of this circle

2

How does one begin? Begin with
heart...
The four spirits are watching in this
music, we are alone
In my music and in Siyo's soft music
of the throat, we are
dancing, going round and around
each other counter the sun
We make a great circling water
energy in the place between our bodies
In our singing we find the silence, a
Red-Sun-Coming in the world of the
aspens
The world is clear in this place of the
green wind
For you see, we have brought back the
big-bellied cup of our dance along the
whirling light

3

We put our feet down with care, in
our legs does all this fire begin
We know how to disentangle blood
from the night snow from the flowers
We cry to make this spirit come
together
Our love exists beneath us, flying to
the Sun beyond Suns
Now we are one, both at the same time
We are living the Dream-Time,
feeling the Manedog of many worlds
but all are one world
Now there is the Jade Silence, it
comes into our wings
and hands.

The song of the grouse is known among the Lakota as Wisahibu, "Red-Sun Coming." ■