

King of the birds

South African Folktale

English





Once long ago, the birds had a meeting. They wanted a king, just like people and animals.

Which bird should be king?

"Eagle, he is strong and kingly!" said one bird.

"No, he has no crown, and when he calls, he sounds too sad," said another.

"Then Ostrich, because he is the largest and roars like a lion," one called out.

"No, he can't fly. The king of the birds must be able to fly."





"I think I should be king," said Peacock, fanning his tail. "I am so beautiful."

"You are too proud," said Owl. "I have the largest eyes of any bird. I should be king."

"No, not you, Owl," the other birds shouted. "You go to sleep when the sun rises!"

And so they didn't get very far with choosing a king.

Then one bird had an idea. "The one who can fly the highest will be king," she said.

"Yes, yes," all the birds shouted, and they all flew up, up, into the sky.





Goose flew for one day, straight over the highest mountains in the world.

Eagle flew for two days, into the sky high above the mountains.

But Vulture soared for three whole days without stopping, straight toward the sun. Far above them, the birds heard Vulture cry, "I am the highest, I am king!"



But then just above him Vulture heard a tiny voice, "Tink, tink, tink! I am the highest, I am king." It was Ncedede, the smallest bird of all.

He had held onto the great wing feathers of Vulture as he soared into the sky.

"You won't beat me again," said Vulture, and flew straight up into the air.

He flew up and up until he could fly no more. "I am higher than any other bird. I am your king!" he cried.





But out from under Vulture's wing crept the tiny bird. "Tink, tink! Tink, tink! It is I, the smallest one! I am your king."

Vulture was too exhausted to fly any further.

So down he sailed - with the little
bird still under his wing.

The other birds were furious with
Ncede.
They waited for him, ready to pluck
out all his feathers.



But quick little Ngcedede saw how angry the other birds were, and flew into an empty snake hole.

The waiting birds told Owl, "With your big eyes, you must keep guard at the hole and catch him when he comes out."

So Owl sat in front of the hole.



But the sun was warm and soon Owl fell fast asleep.

Little Ngcede peeped out of the snake hole. When he saw that Owl was asleep, he flew up and away.





Owl was very ashamed that he had let the little bird escape.

Now he only hunts at night.

In the day, he sleeps, away from the sight of the other birds.

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Writer: South African Folktale

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