

Name: _____ Class: _____

Jewel Bird

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The resplendent quetzal is a bird found in Mexico and Central America and is known for its brilliant coloring. As you read, take notes on what quetzals meant to ancient civilizations.

[1] *Brilliant they were then*

And wrapped in the feathers of quetzal

And of doves.

Thence came the name

[5] *Of Kukulcán, the Quetzal-serpent.*

—from Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya

Can a bird's feathers be more precious¹ than gold? To the ancient Maya Indians,² the answer was yes. The three-foot-long shimmery green tail feathers of the resplendent³ quetzal were priceless. Only kings and high priests could adorn their elaborate headdresses⁴ with the bird's twin tail feathers. The Maya considered the bird sacred, and killing a quetzal was forbidden.

The quetzal lives in the high mountainous regions of Mexico and Central America and has fascinated Maya, Aztec,⁵ and other civilizations for more than 2,000 years. The quetzal swoops, dips, and glides through low, misty clouds. Its long, emerald tail feathers stream behind it in a glittering ebb and flow. Flashes of blue, green, and gold glisten in the sunlight. Rounded wings help the bird fly in tight spaces among mossy branches and hanging vines.



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1. **Precious (adjective):** of great value
2. a member of a group of people living mostly in southern Mexico and Guatemala
3. **Resplendent (adjective):** having great beauty or splendor
4. a decorative covering for the head
5. American Indian people who ruled a large empire in what is now Mexico during the 15th and 16th centuries

The Maya and Aztec revered⁶ the quetzal. Their royal color green imitates the lavishly colored plumes of this mysterious bird. The quetzal inspired many forms of art as well as a feathered serpent god. The ancient cultures painted or carved the image of this magnificent half-bird half-serpent on stone columns, monuments, murals, and temples throughout their lands.

- [10] The Maya called the feathered serpent god Kukulcán. *Kukul* means “feathered” and *cán* means “serpent.” The Aztec called this god Quetzalcoatl (ket-tsul-kwot-ul). *Quetzal* means “bird” and *coatl* means “serpent.”

Maya and Aztec traveling merchants used the priceless quetzal plumes as currency. They carefully plucked tail feathers from trapped quetzals and carried the plumes over treacherous⁷ trails along trade routes and through foreign lands. It was not permitted to keep a quetzal captive. Many believed that if captured and caged, the mystical bird might die. So the merchants released the precious birds into the forest, where the plumes grew back within a year.

Many Maya believed the quetzal held magical powers. One legend tells of a Maya chief and his soldiers fighting for freedom. Above the battlefield, hundreds of graceful quetzals swooped down and guarded the wounded soldiers until sunrise. When the battle ended, the birds flew away — their chests stained red forever.

The quetzal's habitat is shrinking. The destruction of highland forests for timber; the cultivation of land, especially for coffee plantations; and the illegal trapping of the birds for feathers have reduced their numbers. The quetzals are now considered “near threatened,” but countries are taking steps to save the magnificent bird. In Costa Rica, strict laws, national parks, and wildlife preserves have been established to protect the quetzal.

Although there are fewer quetzals, these jewel birds still glide through the lofty cloud forests singing their smooth, melodic⁸ song: “*Keow-kowee-keow-k'loo-keow-keoo.*” And their feathers are more precious than gold.

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6. **Revere** (*verb*): to feel deep respect or admiration for something
7. **Treacherous** (*adjective*): marked by hidden dangers
8. pleasant-sounding

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following describes the author's purpose in the text?
 - A. to inform readers about the value of quetzals in the past and present
 - B. to discourage people from harming the now endangered species
 - C. to show how a civilization's beliefs and values can change over time
 - D. to criticize human's negative relationship with the environment today

2. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. People today don't have the same respect for animals that civilizations in the past did.
 - B. Quetzals were nearly hunted to extinction by past civilizations for their valuable tail feathers.
 - C. The Maya and Aztec negatively impacted the quetzal's population by building in their habitat.
 - D. Quetzals were important birds to ancient civilizations and continue to be protected today.

3. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The three-foot-long shimmery green tail feathers of the resplendent quetzal were priceless." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Rounded wings help the bird fly in tight spaces among mossy branches and hanging vines." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "Many Maya believed the quetzal held magical powers. One legend tells of a Maya chief and his soldiers fighting for freedom. Above the battlefield, hundreds of graceful quetzals swooped down and guarded the wounded soldiers until sunrise." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "The quetzal's habitat is shrinking. The destruction of highland forests for timber; the cultivation of land, especially for coffee plantations" (Paragraph 7)
 - E. "The quetzals are now considered 'near threatened,' but countries are taking steps to save the magnificent bird." (Paragraph 7)
 - F. Although there are fewer quetzals, these jewel birds still glide through the lofty cloud forests singing their smooth, melodic song: "Keow-kowee-keow-k'loo-keow-keloo." (Paragraph 8)

4. How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. It warns people that quetzals may not be alive in the next few years.
 - B. It stresses the importance of quetzals to people's cultures today.
 - C. It shows how quetzals are being negatively impacted by humans today.
 - D. It reveals what people can do to help quetzals today.

5. Describe the relationship between quetzals and the Maya.
