

The Miracle of the Gulls – the Story of how the California’s Gull became Utah’s state bird
Name _____

Mormon settlers led by Brigham Young settled in Utah’s Salt Lake Valley in 1847. They had settled in Utah to practice their religion without the persecution and violence they had experienced in Missouri, Iowa, and Illinois.

In the late spring of 1848, after the Mormons had settled the land and built their homes, they were attacked by a terrible swarm of katydids that were nicknamed “Mormon Crickets.” The flightless crickets emerged by the millions on the Mormon settlement and threatened to destroy the crops that sustained the settlers. The Settlers were powerless to stop the winged destroyers and turned to prayers and fasting. According to legend, their prayers were answered. A flock of thousands of California gulls appeared from the west and tenaciously feasted on the katydids until the entire horde was consumed over a two-week period. The grateful Mormons henceforth held the gulls in high esteem. Eventually, the California gull was honored as the state bird of Utah and a statue was built to honor the birds in downtown Salt Lake City. The gulls had saved the harvest of the 4,000 settlers.

Truth or Hyperbole?

While elements of the “Miracle of the Gulls” may have been true, the story could be “too good to be true” according to William G. Hartley, author of the novel published in 1992: *New Mormon History*. According to Hartley, the cricket plague was well-established in Utah in 1848 and by the time the gulls had reached the Mormon settlement the damage had already been done. Even if there was a large flock of gulls feeding on the crickets, it might have helped the situation but would not have prevented the destruction of the crops. Furthermore, the event was hardly unique as California Gulls live in colonies on the Great Salt Lake and are known to feast on insect hordes far from water.

Whether the legend is true or embellished, it is still the subject of conversation and debate today and the California gull remains the state bird of Utah.

1. Why were the Mormons in Utah?

- A. To grow crops
- B. To escape religious persecution
- C. To own land
- D. To honor the California gull

2. Which of the following IS NOT true about the insects that attacked the settlement?

- A. They could fly great distances
- B. They came by the millions
- C. They were called “Mormon Crickets” but were actually katydids
- D. They threatened to destroy the entire harvest

3. Why might have the “Miracle of the Gulls” story been “too good to be true?”

- A. Because damage had already been done to the crops before the gulls arrived
- B. Because the gulls themselves would have done damage to the crops
- C. Because California gulls only occur near water
- D. Because California gulls do not live in Utah

4. What does the word “embellished” mean as used in the following sentence?

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- A. downplay
- B. validate
- C. minimize
- D. exaggerate

5. Which of the following is NOT answered in the passage?

- A. How long did it take the gulls to dispose of all of the katydids?
- B. Why did the Mormons settle in Utah?
- C. Do California gulls venture to areas without water?
- D. What year was the California gull made Utah’s state bird?

6. Which of the following is likely true about William G. Hartley?

- A. He was in Utah in 1848
- B. He is an expert on the history of the Mormons
- C. He is an expert on gulls
- D. He is an expert on the wildlife of the Great Salt Lake

7. William G. Hartley believed...

- A. the gulls may have helped the situation, but the crops were likely damaged or destroyed anyway.
- B. that the story is fiction and there was never a massive horde of katydids that destroyed Mormon crops.
- C. that California gulls never visited the Mormon settlement in Utah.
- D. that the “miracle of the gulls” was a unique event in Utah history.