

Redbird Flutes
Basic Guide
To Playing
The
Native American Flute

By Roger R. Bennett

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Welcome to the Native Flute! I hope you will find playing this remarkable instrument as pleasurable as I have, and that it will bring you many hours of enjoyment.

About Redbird Flutes:

Redbird Flutes came into being as a result of my addiction to the Native American Flute and the high prices charged by most commercial flute makers. I constantly wanted more flutes in different keys, and as I'm not independently wealthy, I decided to learn to build my own. After some instruction from an experienced flute maker (Bob Willasch) and some experimentation, I learned to make flutes; and when they began to sound as good (or better) than some of the higher-priced flutes I had purchased, I realized that *more expensive* doesn't necessarily mean *better*.

I resolved to offer a quality instrument at a very reasonable price. I do this because I love the Native American Flute and I want others to be able to affordably enjoy this almost magical musical instrument. I use good woods; I tune using a high precision computerized tuning program, and I care about my work – I won't sell an instrument I wouldn't be willing to buy myself. It's as simple as that.

Origins of The Native American Flute

Although it is impossible to know just how far back into antiquity the Native American Flute goes, we know that it has been around for a very long time. Bone whistles (the forerunner of the modern NAF) dating back to around 300 B.C. have been found in many parts of North America, and a type of rim-blown flute commonly called

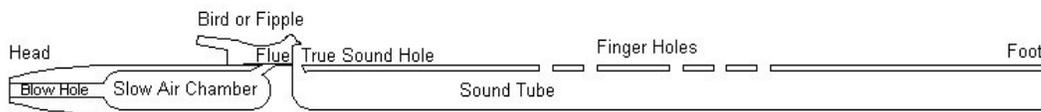
Anasazi flutes dating back to around 650 A.D. in northeastern Arizona. While these flutes differed greatly from the modern NAF (Native American Flute), they indicate that flutes have long been a part of Native American cultures. In various Native American cultures, depending on the geographic area and the peoples involved, the flutes played numerous roles, from sacred items to the everyday use. It depended in the individual peoples. Just as there are MANY different and unique Native American cultures (not one – MANY) there are MANY different uses for the flute.

The modern NAF is the end product of generations in the evolution of Native American Flutes. The modern Pentatonic-tuned flutes are actually not a traditionally-tuned flute; they were actually developed to make a Native American style flute more playable with other instruments or to standardize the tunings so flutes could be played together.

The NAF can be divided into different types, depending on the different native cultures which made them and the materials they were made from. Some were made from clay, some wood, some reed and some of river cane, which is quite similar to bamboo. What today is most often thought of when one speaks of a Native American Flute is a Western Plains style wooden flute, also known as a love flute or courting flute. These flutes were often used by the young men of the Plains peoples to win the heart of that special young lady, hence the name. However, the courting flutes are just one of many types of Native American Flutes. However, whether they are 5-hole or 6-hole flutes, they essentially play the same, with some very minor differences.

Anatomy of the Native American Flute

Before we begin to describe how to play the flute, let us first understand how a NAF is constructed. If we understand the parts of a flute and how it operates, we find ourselves better in tune with our instrument.



The NAF is a unique two-chambered instrument. In technical terms, it is classified as an end-blown flageolet. However, its' haunting sound and two-chambered design makes it unique in the entire world.

Air enters the flute from the blow hole in the head of the flute. It is captured in the SAC, or Slow Air Chamber; it exits via the exit hole into the flue, which is a narrow groove cut either into the body of the flute or into the underside of the fipple or bird. The flue directs the air stream precisely across the TSH, or True Sound Hole. The wedge shape to the TSH's cutting edge splits the air stream, creating the sound. The pitch of the sound, or note, is determined by the acoustic length of the sound tube, or bore. The finger holes effectively lengthen or shorten the acoustic length of the sound tube, creating variations in the sound pitch, or notes.

One of the more modern enhancements to the NAF has been the transition of tuning into Fundamentals, or Keys. Traditional native flutes were not tuned to a specific

base note; consequently it was difficult to play two flutes together or with another instrument. By request, flute makers began tuning the fundamental note of a flute (the note produced when all the finger holes are closed) to a specific note. For example, a flute tuned to a fundamental of F will play the note of F with all holes closed; this is also called the Key of the flute. Thus, a flute which plays an F with all holes closed is in the Key of F.

Almost Ready to Play?

We're almost there. In a moment, we'll place flute to lip and make our first sound. But first, there are some basic points we need to cover.

- 1) Be sure to cover all holes **completely**. If there's even the slightest bit of a hole not sealed, you'll get an ugly squeaking sound. This is **not** how the flute is intended to sound.
- 2) Don't use your fingertips. Instead, use the pad - the meaty part of the upper finger, about halfway between the last joint and the fingertip. This will better allow you to seal the finger holes and make good, crisp notes.
- 3) Breathe at normal intervals. If you have to gasp for air, you're doing it wrong. Keep in mind that breathing is something which will develop automatically as you become familiar with the flute.
- 4) Play slowly at first. Take your time with each note; get the feel of the flute. Speed of fingering is not important at first; this is also something which will develop automatically as you progress.
- 5) Close your eyes when you play. This will enable you to develop your fingering skills and coordination more quickly.
- 6) If you're having trouble sealing all the holes, play in front of a mirror. Watch your fingering – that little bit of uncovered hole that is driving you insane will reveal itself.
- 7) Don't be afraid to experiment. Play each note singly, learn its full range. Start by blowing softly and then increase the air pressure until it shifts. This is called overblowing; back off on the air pressure to keep the note stable and clear. The most difficult of all the notes to play is the lowest note; it is easiest to overblow. A simple rule of thumb is 'the lower you go, the softer you blow'.
- 8) Don't forget to have **fun**. The NAF is a very enjoyable instrument which practically plays itself. One does not need to read music notation to play beautiful music on it (but that doesn't mean you can't play sheet music on the NAF). It lends itself well to playing 'by ear'.

Preflighting the flute...

First, make sure that the bird is lined up directly behind and centered on the True Sound Hole, with the leading edge of the bird should just be touching the edge of the True Sound Hole. The bird should be snug against the body of the flute, and you shouldn't be able to easily move it. If it is too loose, tighten the leather ties.

Get a Grip, Man...

Next, take the flute with both hands. The thumbs of both hands should be under the body of the flute. One hand, either left or right, should be used to play the lower three holes; the other hand is used to play the upper two holes. The middle finger of this hand should be placed on the blank spot between the upper and lower holes. This allows you to keep a loose yet secure grip on the flute while playing.

Pucker Up!

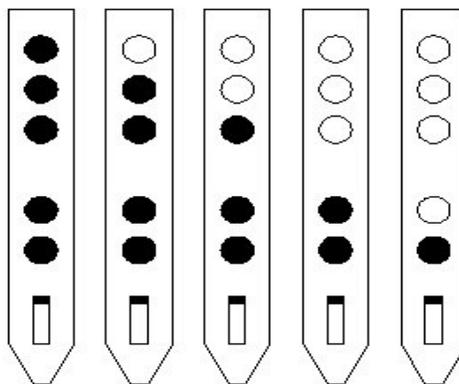
Yep, just like you're about to lay a big smooch on someone. Next, lay the head of the flute on top of your lower lip, with the lip under the flute. The flute ***does not*** go into the mouth! The upper lip presses against the head of the flute, with the lip partially sealing the blowhole (also known as the embouchure). Add just enough pressure to seal the lips against the flute.

And now, the moment you've been waiting for...

With all the finger holes covered, gently blow into the flute. If you don't get a sound, increase the air pressure until you hear a note. Keep increasing the pressure until the note shifts sharply higher (overblowing). Back off a bit; hold the air pressure at a level where you get a clear, clean note. This is your fundamental note; the note which defines the Key of your flute.

Scales

The first scale that we shall discuss is the *Minor Pentatonic Scale*, which is the natural scale of the 5-hole flute. The first Redbird Flutes were all 5-hole flutes – I didn't produce a 6-hole as I found the sixth hole a bit confusing to integrate into my music. The notes of a 5-hole flute are each in harmony with the note above and below it, making it easy to play some rather pleasing ad-lib type music. This 5 note scale is called the Pentatonic Scale, Penta meaning five.

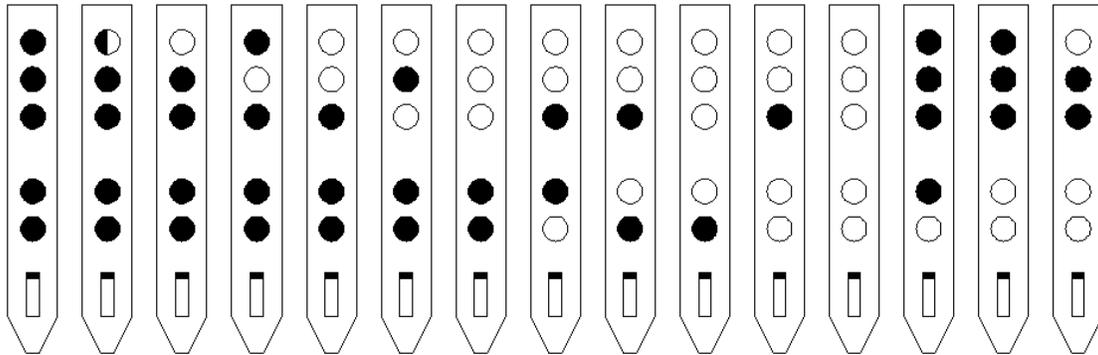


Dark = closed Light = open

Try playing up and down this scale. Get used to the sound of the notes; don't be afraid to experiment. Try doubling or tripling up on notes; or fluttering (rapidly covering

and uncovering a hole). Once you're comfortable with this scale, continue with the next paragraph.

Next, let's discuss the *Chromatic Scale*. The Chromatic Scale uses combinations of holes to produce a full range of notes, including the sharps and flats one needs to play more contemporary music. While it is not completely possible to play every single piece of music out there, one can play a wide range of music on the NAF – from jazz to bluegrass and beyond.



Dark = closed Light = open Half = Half-hole covered

Experiment by playing the Chromatic Scale just as you did the Minor Pentatonic Scale. Become familiar with the location and sound of the notes. Once you feel you're comfortable with the Chromatic Scale, we'll discuss some playing techniques and the care of your flute.

5-Hole versus 6-Hole Flutes

As I said in the last section, the first Redbird Flutes were all 5-Hole flutes. The difference between a 5-Hole and a 6-Hole is that the 6-Hole has an additional hole in the area between the three lower holes and the two upper holes of a 5-Hole flute. This additional hole is not in harmony with the basic pentatonic scale, and can be a bit confusing as it sounds off as compared to the rest of the pentatonic scale. However, this shouldn't throw you – a 6-Hole can be easily played in the pentatonic mode like a 5-Hole flute simply by keeping the extra hole (the 4th hole from the foot) covered. As you gain playing experience, you'll be able to use the extra hole from time to time, but it shouldn't keep you from trying a 6-Hole.

If you find the extra hole to be problematic, you can always make a leather cover and tie it off. Some flutemakers provide a tie that does just this; but they are easy to make. Any tanned hide, such as leather available in the 'Indian Crafts' section of most craft stores, will work fine for this purpose. Just cut a long strip, slightly wider than the hole and long enough to tie underneath the flute and perhaps dangle a bit. Trim the ends of the strip so they taper down to slightly wider than a heavy shoelace. Then, cover the third hole down from the top and tie tightly around the flute. Make sure the hole is covered **completely**.

Playing Techniques

Tonguing – tonguing is simply cutting off the airflow by tapping the tongue against the top of the mouth or opening in the lips. It's like making a T sound without vocalizing the T. Pucker your lips and blow as if you were whistling (only without sound). Tap your tongue against the top of your mouth, cutting off the airflow and making a 'tuh-tuh-tuh' sound. Now try it with the flute. Tonguing controls the start and stops of the note, and can be used as a form of rhythm. Play rapidly for fast pieces or more slowly depending on the mood of the music. Experiment, see what you like.

Fingering – fingering affects the sound of the flute drastically. We've already discussed sealing the holes; now we can discuss sliding a note, which is sliding your finger slowly off and/or on a hole, producing a slow shift in pitch, and half-holing, which as its' name implies is covering only half a hole. Half-holing takes a lot of practice, so be patient and keep trying.

Embouchure – As I said in an earlier section, the end of the flute **does not** go in your mouth. There's a natural tendency to want to do this, but you simply must resist the impulse. Placing the end of the flute in your mouth can create excessive moisture in the slow air chamber, which eventually migrates to the flue and creates problems when playing. This is a condition known as *wetting out*. Embouchuring or placing the flute against the lips helps reduce the moisture created by condensation from the breath. It can even help reduce the condensation problems as the upper lip actually seals off part of the blowhole.

Wetting Out – if your flute's flue becomes clogged with water, simply place your finger partially over the true sound hole and blow hard, then shake off or wipe off any moisture you blow out. Also, take the foot end of the flute in one hand, and hold it with the head down towards the ground. Shake the flute and let the water run out of the blowhole. Please use a bit of common sense when doing this; people might get a bit unhappy if you shake your breath water out on that new carpet of theirs. The best place to clear a flute of water would be outdoors or over a bathtub.

Special Note:

One of the first things I try to communicate to new flute players is simply this: at first, don't try to play the flute. Instead, let the flute play **YOU**. Once you have played the scales and become familiar with the basic scales and fingering, it is very tempting to jump in and try to play familiar songs. This, in my opinion, is a mistake; many people do this and quickly become frustrated and discouraged. However, there is an alternative which is easier and allows you to gain a bit more playing experience before trying familiar songs.

This is a concept I have heard called 'heart music'. Inside of every human being is music. This is the music of the heart – the songs of one's soul, so to speak. The human spirit within us longs to express itself in many ways: through art, creative writing,

competitive sports and other activities. However, the most powerful expressions come through music in one of its' many forms.

When you take up your flute, allow this musical expression of your inner spirit to manifest itself by letting the flute give it a voice. Don't try to play anything in particular; just let your mind and fingers wander up and down the flute, playing the notes. The notes of the basic pentatonic scale of the modern Native American Flute are fairly well in harmony with one another, so you may be surprised at the beauty of the music you will find yourself playing. You will also find yourself creating your own compositions simply by repetitive playing of what sounds good to you.

Now I must confess at this point that this is a sneaky way of teaching you more advanced fingering and breathing. However, it will allow you to become more comfortable with the flute before more playing more advanced music.

Keep in mind that just as with all other things in life, you get out of it what you put into it. You won't sound like R. Carlos Nakai or Mary Youngblood right away – like that old axiom about getting to Carnegie Hall, it takes practice. However, the peace and enjoyment the flute can bring to you is something which I feel no one should miss.

Care of the Flute

Cleaning - Your Redbird Flute has been finished with a gloss coat of Minwax Wipe-On Polyurethane. Polyurethane is moisture-resistant (not moisture proof!) and should last for years under normal circumstances. However, should your flute become soiled, simply wipe off the soil with a damp cloth and then dry with a soft dry cloth or paper towel. Should the finish become worn or scratched, simply apply some Minwax Wipe-On Polyurethane Glossy to a clean paper towel and rub on the affected area of the flute, and then allow to dry for several hours.

Storage – When you're not playing your flute, you want to store it in a cool, dry place, away from sunshine, heat and humidity. A flute bag is a great thing; you can either make one from some soft cloth, like a felt like blanket material or you can even use an old heavy sock. Or you can opt to buy a nice flute bag; many manufacturers out there make some beautiful flute storage bags from cloth or even leather or deerskin.

One thing you **must** be careful of: **DO NOT** leave your flute in your vehicle on a warm day. The temperatures inside your vehicle can exceed 150 degrees Fahrenheit, at which point the glues I use may start to separate. If this happens, you may notice a failure in the seam in the Slow Air Chamber, between the mouthpiece and the bird. If this indeed happens, the flute will still be playable, but it will leak air.

Emergency Repairs – if you do get a separation in one of the seams, don't panic. The flute is not ruined; it can easily be repaired by resealing the separated seam with Super Glue. Simply remove the bird from the flute, and apply the Super Glue along the seam that has separated. Use the gel type Super Glue as it is a bit thicker and will fill cracks better. Let the glue run down into the separated seam and seal it. Wipe off any excess from the exterior of the flute before it sets, but be careful: you don't want to stick your

fingers together or to the flute. If necessary, apply more than one coat to seal the separation, but allow several hours between coats for drying.

Flute Racks - Some folks want to keep their flute on display where it can be seen. If you decide that this is what you'd like to do, I'd recommend either making or purchasing a wooden flute rack. However, keep in mind that the rack should not be placed in sunlight, near a heat source or in an area where there is high humidity. Keep your flute cool and dry.

TABlature and Sheet Music

The Native Flute can be played without knowing any type of music notation whatsoever. The Native Americans had no system for recording their music; songs were taught by the old to the young and thus passed generation to generation. Only in the modern era have systems for writing down music for the native flute been developed.

The first thing one must realize is that there are two separate ways a native flute can be played. One system is by learning a song on one flute by memory or by using one of several types of music notation; the other is by knowing exactly where the notes are on your flute and being able to read standard music notation. In the first method, once a song is learned on one native flute, it can be played on any native flute regardless of what Key the flute is in – the song is now merely played in the Key of the flute. This is possible as the relationship between the finger holes on one flute is exactly the same as the relationship between the finger holes on another. This allows one to play a song on a C flute and then immediately pick up an F or G flute and play the same song with the same fingerings.

There are several specialized systems of music notation that take this special relationship into account. The first, and one that I personally use, is the Flute Icon system. The FI system uses drawings of a flute with the finger holes either open or closed. By matching the open and closed holes on the fingering chart, a song can be played. Other systems include TABlature, developed by the premier native flute player and recording artist R. Carlos Nakai, and SNAFT (Simplified Native American Flute Tablature).

Nakai's TABlature uses standard musical staves and notation and flute icons to represent the notes of a song. SNAFT uses X and O text to represent open and closed holes. As both of these systems require a bit of getting used to and the FI system is easier, I recommend it highly.

One thing to keep in mind: I had the genuine privilege of hearing R. Carlos Nakai speak about the Native Flute at a symposium I attended a while back; and during his talk, Carlos spoke about the essential nature of the flute. It is, as he explained, an instrument of personal expression, one that is truly meant to be played from the heart and not one that is meant to play (as he put it) 'music in a box'. So while it is possible to play preprinted music on the NAF, it is not necessary. Indeed, I seldom play preprinted music, opting instead to figure out songs by ear and then memorizing them by rote.

Resources

There are numerous resources available to Native Flute Players out there. I will list the best of those resources here.

Flute Circles – one of the best things a flute player can do is to join a flute circle. A flute circle is a group of fluties (the unofficial title Native Flute Players give themselves) who meet periodically to share their common interest in the Native Flute. A comprehensive list of flute circles can be found on the web page of the International Native American Flute Association at <http://worldflutes.org/>. The INAFA website also lists flute instructors, fluting events and Native American Flute related links.

Yahoo e-Groups – There are a number of Native American Flute discussion forums at the Yahoo! Website. Click on the Groups link on the left side of Yahoo!'s main page (www.yahoo.com) and type Native American Flute in the Find A Group search field.

A few of the Yahoo e-Groups I find beneficial are listed below:

NAFMusic

<http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/NAFMusic/>

Native American Flute Sheet Music

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nativeamericanflutemusicsheet/?yguid=48106616>

Websites – Here are a few beneficial websites related to the Native American Flute along with a brief description of what can be found there:

Flutetree

<http://www.flutetree.com/>

Flutetree is Robert Gatliff's excellent website which features the most comprehensive songbooks for the NAF on the Web I've seen.

FluteKey

<http://www.flutekey.com>

FluteKey is Clint Goss's excellent website with a lot of different information and background on the NAF.

Native American Flutes

<http://www.zadjik.com/flutes/main.htm>

Zadjik Productions' excellent website with oodles of information and downloads on the NAF.

The Native American Flute Portal

<http://www.fluteportal.com/>

The Native American Flute Portal is a new site, the brain-child of Native Flute Players and recording artists Jeff Ball and Geoffrey Ellis. It is intended to be a central clearinghouse of all things related to the Native American Flute. Here, also, you can find information about flute circles, new CD releases, flute events and a host of other flute related information.

<http://www.fluteflights.com>

Dick Claasen's website is a new one I've found which is family-friendly and features a number of e-books, flute tips and other information about the NAF.

Well, that's about it. I do hope you enjoy the journey with the Native American Flute, and I hope that you have found this guide helpful.

Happy Fluting!

Redbird Flutes

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