THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The American robin's song has long been associated with the beginning of spring. Photo: Steve Gifford

Avian Associations

Through the ages and even today, different cultures have their own beliefs about birds and what each of them symbolizes.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Recently I was asked to speak about birds as part of a memorial service, which led me to explore some of their spiritual and symbolic aspects.

Many cultures venerate birds. They can be signs of hope and good fortune, or they can be harbingers of misfortune. They can be

symbols of bravery, peace, mischief, strength, gods, and many other abstract concepts. What birds personify is often species-dependent.

Native Americans hold numerous beliefs about birds and their spiritual implications. The Cahuilla tribe's creation stories link human migration and birds as a calendric tool. Since specific species migrate with seasonal predictability, these birds' arrival/presence acts as a natural calendar.

In Aztec tradition the powerful colors of the hummingbird are associated with the personification of *Huitzilopochtli,* a god of war.

Sheppard Kresh compiled a book entitled *The Ornithological Indian*, on the spiritual meanings that Native Americans in the southern United States ascribed to birds. One story Kresh relays dates back to 1810 when artist-ornithologist Alexander Wilson rebuked a native American for killing a mockingbird, suggesting he would have bad fortune in his deer hunts – a penance of sorts for attacking the harmless creature. At this point an elder, the father-in-law of the perpetrator, intervened, explaining that when the bird makes noise all day "somebody will surely die." Such cultural

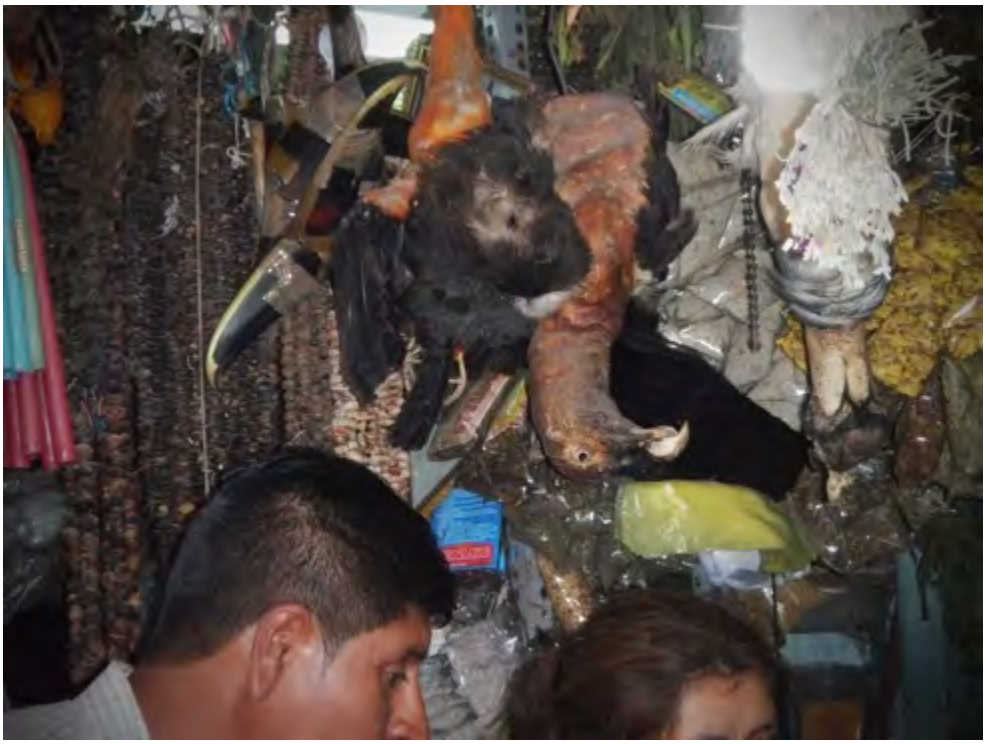
clashes over birds and their omens are not uncommon.

Kresh discusses dark forecasts like sickness and death, and conversely physical prowess, good fortune, expressions of love, and embodiments of beauty. Native Americans have used eagle feathers in ceremonies for centuries to denote strength and the status of warriors. Eagle feathers are not the only ones to adorn a head dress; plumes from kestrels, woodpeckers, and crows are also employed. Creek warriors, when victorious in battle, yelped in imitation of a turkey's gobble, but carried white tail feathers from eagles or the wings of swans to signify peace.

Some birds were associated with medical issues. Cherokee believed the yellow-breasted chat caused urinary tract infections. Additionally they thought that insectivorous birds, particularly woodpeckers and flycatchers, could cure toothaches.

I remember being horrified by seeing Andean condor heads for sale at an indigenous traditional Peruvian medicinal market. I talked with the medicinal merchant through a translator, and our conversation yielded the information that the head was believed to insure virility - manliness. I suppose if I had offered the vendor a pill from our culture

for the same purpose he would have thought me just as crazy.



A condor head hangs in a Peruvian indigenous traditional medicinal market. It's medical properties are falsely believed to insure virility. Toucan beaks are also pictured although the author did not determine their purported properties. As a tribal totem toucans provide medicine men as an incarnation to fly to the spiritual world.

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Herbal remedies at vendor's stall in Peruvian indigenous market. Photos: J. Morton Galetto

The size of this market filled with merchandise was equivalent to a few city blocks (similar to our Reading or Amish Markets). Interestingly enough, pharmaceutical companies frequent these markets to test out ethnobotany items for efficacy in applications for modern medicine/s.

Birds are often seen as spirit guides. In Tibetan Buddhist cultures peoples' bodies are prepared (incised) for a "sky burial." The corpse is placed on a mountaintop to decompose and be consumed, primarily by vultures. In the Middle East and India some sects like the Zoroastrians use Dakhmas, or

Towers of Silence, placing their dead atop platforms that look like a short silo perched on a hilltop for the vultures to do their cleansing work. In both faiths bodies are viewed as being carried up to the heavens.

Before you dismiss the practice, think about all the chemicals and the number of days bodies are preserved for viewing by many people in the Western world, who might remark "how good Aunt Ethel looks" laid on display in the casket. My point is that our culture dictates that which we perceive to be normal.

We regard turkeys as a symbol of thankfulness, and doves are used to represent peace. Along with Native Americans we also see owls as a sign of wisdom. These birds seem to take on many connotations. The Japanese regard owls as lucky but in more distant times they were connected with death. Ancient Greece associated them with Athena, the goddess of wisdom and victory in battle. In Arabian culture owls are considered to be evil spirits. A number of African cultures associate them variously with misfortune, witchcraft, and foolishness. For Celtic cultures owls symbolize the mystery of life and death.


The Hopi tribe called the burrowing owl Ko'ko, meaning "Watcher of the Dark." They associated it with Masauu, a god of the dead. Because it lives underground, the belief was that it could communicate with the dead. The symbolism of owls (right, screech owl) is a worldwide phenomenon. They denote a wide range of divergent meanings from evil to good luck, wisdom, sorcery, bad to good omens. Photos: J. Morton Galetto

Clannada na Gadelica, a Gaelic culture education facility, has compiled stories of birds in Celtic lore. Their mythology embraces many bird associations with species specificity. Ravens were messengers from other worlds. Cranes were linked with war. In Irish myths cranes often transform to women and back to cranes. Most of the associations come from their mythology where gods, goddesses, and birds are intertwined through transformations.

In more modern-day literature birds abound in both presence and symbolism. Readers of JK Rowling's Harry Potter series saw owls as tools of wizards. Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," symbolized the narrator's unending

grief at the loss of his beloved Lenore. Cambridge lecturer and writer Helen McDonald's book "H is for Hawk" described her training of a hawk after her father's death. Romeo and Juliet argued over identifying a song as either a nightingale or lark. In John Keats' poem "Ode to a Nightingale" he envisioned himself as dead earth, over which a nightingale sang.

Ravens are often considered portentous of things to come. Corvids abound in literature. Who can forget Edgar Allen Poe's, "Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore.' " Photo: Steve Gifford

It seems to me that one of the best-known associations with a bird is the robin's cheerful morning song, heralding the beginning of spring. Living on the Maurice River, it is the call of the osprey that informs me that earth's awakening will soon be upon us.

As February approaches its end I long for spring and the longer days that await us. I look forward to the first mourning cloak to flutter ahead of me on a wooded path, and the gobble of tom turkeys. I'm sure you too have avian associations with spring - soon, soon.

Americans spend $107 billion annually on birdwatching, including equipment, travel, and food, attesting to our fascination with our avian friends. Of that total $12.6 billion is spent on feeding birds (source: Wild Bird Feeding Institute).

Sources

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