

## For the Birds

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Although you probably assumed that the title of this paper is a reference to the present economic state of the country, it is not. In fact it is actually about birds . . . and other matters.

William Butler Yeats, in one of his best-known poems, wrote about the myth of Leda and the Swan. According to one Greek legend, Queen Leda of Sparta, mother of that famous ship-launcher, Helen, was quite a beauty in her own right--beautiful enough, at least, to draw the attention of that old womanizer, Zeus. One day when Zeus saw Leda bathing, he approached her in the form of a swan. Do you suppose this is why a male swan is called a "cob?" I don't think I want to go there! But I digress. In short order, Zeus had impregnated Leda. Now we might be inclined to pass moral judgment on Zeus, but what's the point of being a god if you can't have your way with beautiful women? As luck would have it, however, Leda was already pregnant by her husband and consequently gave birth to two sets of twins: Castor and Clytaemnestra by her husband; Pollux and Helen by Zeus. Castor and Pollux eventually ended as the constellation Gemini. Helen went on to ruin many a good Greek hero, while Clytaemnestra murdered her husband, Agamemnon. In general, women don't come off too well in Greek mythology.

Swans have long fascinated humans. Their size, their long necks, which allow them to feed underwater without diving, and their overall graceful beauty make them a perfect subject in many legends. Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" comes to mind. In this country we have three swans: the whistling swan which winters on the east coast; the trumpeter swan, named for its far-carrying cry; and the mute swan. The mute swan, a native of Europe, was introduced into the United States as a domesticated bird. It has since gone wild. However, the mute swan is not really mute, for it makes a low, grunting sound when alarmed. However, we will leave it to Aristotle for the final word on swans. He thought that swans "sang" a melancholy song at death, which is why we use the phrase, "swan song."

As a group, birds are amazing animals. They eat seeds, leaves, fruits, acorns, insects, water organisms, fish, reptiles, mammals, and, sometimes, each other. They can pick up sticks and pebbles, weave baskets, crack nuts, tear flesh, spear fish, and chisel holes in wood. They can live on the Arctic tundra and in the Amazon rainforest. They swim, walk, climb, and, of course, fly. But not just fly. In some cases birds have been known to fly over 10,000 miles during migration. Man has been fascinated by birds for several millennia, and they have certainly added color to our language: “A bird in hand is worth two in the bush;” “birds of a feather flock together;” a “bird-brain,” and “a bird’s-eye view” come to mind.

Individual birds have also enriched our culture. Take that wonderful resident of the north woods, the common loon. His eerie cry, almost maniacal sounding, has provided us with the phrase, “crazy as a loon.” But loons are far from crazy. Although they are clumsy walkers, even for a duck, their powerful legs, set far back on their bodies, make them outstanding swimmers. Indeed, they come on land only for nesting, and their solid bones (most birds have hollow bones) give them the necessary weight to dive deeply, as deep as 200 feet below the water surface. An Indian legend tells of two men fishing. One of the men had a very successful day, but the other had nothing in the bottom of his canoe to show for his efforts. The unlucky fisherman clubbed his friend, stole his fish, and cut out his tongue so that the crime could not be reported. Eventually the Great Spirit turned the victim into a loon and that haunting cry that carries so well over water is his cry for justice. As for the other fisherman, he became that prince of thieves, the crow.

“To talk turkey” means getting down to business, and the phrase probably originated from wanting to get to the main course on the table. “Strutting like a turkey” and the 1920s dance, the turkey trot, reflect the male turkey’s rather pompous and jerky mating display. But why a failed theatrical show is called a “turkey” remains obscure. As Ben Franklin observed, the turkey is native to North America and at one time ranged from southern Canada to southern Mexico. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Spanish brought some from Mexico to Europe. In England the strange-looking bird reminded people of a guinea hen. The guinea hen was actually a native of West Africa, a region sometimes referred to as the Guinea Coast. Geographically-challenged Englishmen, knowing that

the Ottoman Turks controlled most of northern Africa often interchanged Turkey and Africa, and they called their guinea hen the “turkie fowle.” Then the name transferred to the American bird. By 1600 the now domesticated turkey had become a Christmas dinner favorite, so when the Pilgrims and other early settlers arrived they were overjoyed to find wild turkeys. But there is no mention of the turkey at the first Thanksgiving; perhaps with all of the venison, ducks, geese, shellfish, leeks, wild plums, and beans, there was no room on the table for a 30-pound bird. Franklin, of course, recommended the turkey as the national symbol, pointing out that the eagle was cruel, lazy, stole from other birds, sometimes ate carrion, and already was a favorite symbol for several European monarchies. In other words, it was not appropriate for a Republic. Just imagine a turkey on the Great Seal of the United States, with wings outstretched, clutching arrows and an olive branch—I think not! It would be enough to make one cry “fowl.”

While wild turkeys are making a comeback, our next bird simply needs to go back. Those of you who work downtown are all too familiar with pigeons. The name comes from “pipio,” Latin for a peeping baby bird. The French converted this to “pyjoun” and attached it to a baby dove. After 1066 the word fluttered into the English language and became almost interchangeable with “dove,” a word previously introduced by the Danes in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Our pigeon—more accurately called a rock dove—was imported into Canada by the French who rather fancied young roast pigeons. Over the centuries, pigeons have been domesticated, used as messengers, and hunted. John Audubon described the huge flocks of passenger pigeons that he encountered, and at one time migrating flocks might take up 30 square miles of forest. A nesting ground was not a tidy place. Young passenger pigeons were much desired and hunters killed millions in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The last large flock was observed in Michigan in the 1870s, and the last survivor, “Martha,” died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. Domesticated pigeons are kept in a dove-cote, a multi-room wooden box, and from this we get “pigeon-hole” as a small storage area. Pigeons are not very intelligent animals, even by bird-brain standards, and a person easily duped is sometimes called a “pigeon.” Wild pigeons were easily caught with the aid of a tame decoy known as a stool pigeon, and eventually the label referred to a criminal who gave information to the police. Pigeons conjure up little that is pleasant, but doves are a different story. Noah sent one from the Ark, and the

word “dove” has long been a term of endearment, as in “lovey-dovey.” It is still widely used as a symbol of peace.

We hope we are never “pigeons”—stool or otherwise. We also would not want to be the caged canary. About 2000 years ago, the Romans named a cluster of volcanic islands off the northwest coast of Africa for the dogs that roamed there. “Insulae canariae,” or Dog Islands, morphed into the Canary Islands after the Portuguese arrived some 1500 years later. They discovered a small green and yellow wild finch with a pleasant voice. After considerable breeding, these became the caged canaries much prized by European nobility. Life in a cage, however circumscribed, was preferable to one of the canary’s other career paths, the gas detector, as in “canary in a coal mine.” By the way, the American goldfinch, although sometimes called a wild canary, is not closely related.

Early Egyptians domesticated ducks perhaps 5000 thousand years ago. The name, however, is Anglo-Saxon, deriving from “ducan,” meaning to dive. Strictly speaking, a duck is female, the male being a drake, but few make this distinction, except the ducks, of course. If you prefer to be left alone at a cocktail party, you might want to inject that observation into the conversation. “Duck” as a term of endearment goes back at least to 16<sup>th</sup> century England, and “ducky” eventually became slang for “cute” or “really great.” This is not to reflect on any current club members. By the time of World War II, “just ducky,” spoken sarcastically, meant things were not going well and that the individual was probably in a “foul” humor. A duck’s slow gait gave rise to a recently defeated politician being called a “lame duck,” one who could only waddle through his final days in office. A “lame duck,” however crippled, is certainly better than someone who is a “dead duck.”

Some years ago, I recall a book titled, “I Heard the Owl Call My Name.” This was a reference to an Indian legend in which the call of an owl signified a coming death. Long before Harry Potter and Hogwarts arrived on the scene, owls had earned their place in legends. Owls are the only birds with eyes set side-by-side, a position that provides depth perception but limits peripheral vision. To compensate, owls can rotate their heads about 240 degrees. If you walk around one, it will follow you with its head as far as it can turn and snap around the other way to keep you in sight. This is done so quickly that

unsophisticated people thought the owl turned its head completely around. Thus, they assumed, if you walked around an owl several times, its head would twist off. There is no record of this ever happening. Because owls are linked to nighttime, some people have long associated them with demons and witches. But, in the minds of others, they have also been given mystical powers. The Chinese believed that an owl could keep lightning away; while English physicians at one time advocated eating owls' eggs to cure a hangover. There is also no known record of this having worked. The ancient Greeks associated owls with Athena, leading to its reputation for wisdom. It can perch very still, looking grave, saying little—and for some people that can pass for wisdom.

Canadians often complain about the acid rain that arrives in their eastern provinces, a product of the sulfuric residue from coal-fired power plants. Think Duke Energy! Either in retaliation or a result of NAFTA, they have sent us the Canada goose to foul our lakes and golf courses. Unlike the Hawaiian goose, the Nene, which is endangered, the Canada goose has found modern civilization much to its liking. Before it became a nuisance, however, the goose was a great asset to humans. Goose feathers went into quilts; its quills served as pens for writing. Indeed, the small knife once used for trimming quills is still called a penknife, but none of your grandchildren know that. Roast goose adorned the table and its strongly flavored eggs can be eaten. This no longer noble bird has also contributed much to our language. “To cook one’s goose” is to end up on the table or in some similar difficult situation; “to take a gander” is to look at something; and a “goose egg” defines a score of zero. Shivering brings us goose bumps, and the goose step is associated with the German army of Hitler’s time but is still seen in several totalitarian countries. And then there is Mother Goose. At one time New Englanders believed the original Mother Goose was the wife of an early Bostonian named Isaac Goose who supposedly told traditional stories to children. Not so. The honor instead goes to a Frenchman, Charles Perrault, who published *Tales Told by Mother the Goose* in 1696. But why Mother Goose? I will leave that for Ted Silberstein’s next paper.