

FOLKLORE OF BIRDS

BY JOE DEVLIN

Birds are surrounded by myth and legend and here in Ireland we have a rich tradition of such stories.

Up until about seventy years ago, on St Stephen's Day, young boys would hunt the wren, and kill any they caught. These would then be tied to poles and the boys would carry them around from house to house, demanding money. If their 'request' was refused they would bury a wren under the doorstep. As this was considered a great insult, they were seldom refused money.



A Robin

The origins of this tradition are supposed to date back to the time of the Viking raids and to an incident when the Irish army were about to mount an attack on the sleeping Danes. A number of wrens feeding on crumbs left on an upturned drum made such a racket that they awoke the slumbering Danes and as a result the Irish army was defeated. The wren was declared a traitor, and hunted on St. Stephen's day from that day forth.

Another legend elevates the wren to the 'King of Birds'. It is said that one day all the birds in the country decided to have a competition to see who could fly the highest,



A Wren

and the wren being rather astute, concealed itself under the feathers of an eagle. As the birds climbed up into the sky, the eagle rose up higher than the rest until it could go no further. At this point, the wren flew from its concealed position, flying away above the eagle and declaring itself the 'King of Birds'.

Our most familiar bird, the robin, is supposed to have acquired its red breast by plucking a thorn from Our Lord's crown and as a result, a drop of blood spilled on its feathers

Other birds, such as the yellowhammer and pied-wagtail, have more sinister associations. In the early 1900's, children in the Warrenpoint area chanted "Yellow, yellow yarlin, you're the devil's darlin" ('Yellow yarlin' is an old country name for the yellowhammer). An ancient piece of verse likens the pied-wagtail to a goblin.



A Pied Wagtail

Wee mister wagtail hopping on a rock

Daddy says your pretty tail is like a Goblin's clock

Wee willy wagtail how I love to see

Wee willy wagtail wag his tail at me

Wee mister wagtail running by a pond

Daddy says your pretty tail is like a Goblin's wand.

There are a number of folk stories about birds and human ailments. If you were unfortunate to suffer from jaundice you were advised to seek out a yellowhammer, and if you could fix your gaze on the bird you would be cured -but the unfortunate bird would die.

The crow and the barn owl have associations with death. If a barn owl flies past your house, someone in the household is sure to die. This story is particularly prevalent in the Omeath area. An old country saying relating to crows is, 'A crow on the thatch soon death lifts the latch'.

An old cure for aches and pains was to acquire the body of a grey heron place it in a barrel and bury it at the bottom of a duncle (manure pit). You were advised to leave it there for a number of days before digging it back up again. On opening the barrel you would find that the



A Yellowhammer

heron had decomposed leaving a liquid remaining which you were advised to rub on your sore areas. While this may have cured you it is unlikely that you would have many people standing next to you for a considerable time!!

In order to avoid suffering headaches it was advisable to carefully dispose of your hair clippings because if a swallow were to line her nest with them you would have to endure a headache for the entire summer. It was also not a good idea to harm a swallow's nest as this would mean your cows' milk would turn to blood.

To this day magpies are either a sign of good fortune or a portent of bad luck depending on the number seen. As the old rhyme goes "one for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy....." If you are unfortunate and see only one, you are advised to salute the magpie and say "Hello mister magpie how do you do? How is your wife and children too?" By doing this you should ward off any misfortune. Some people believed that magpies were the repositories of the souls of evil-minded or gossiping women. If a magpie tapped your window it was a sign of a death in the household.

Most people will have heard the old saying that one



A Grey Heron



A Magpie

swallow does not a summer make but there are quite a few other weather predictions relating to birds. Swallows flying low is a sign of rain, as is the evocative call of the curlew.

Rooks feeding close to their nests is an omen for bad weather as is the sighting of gulls inland.

Seagull, Seagull, sit on the strand

There's an end to fair weather when you come to land

If you were fortunate to hear a skylark sing on St. Brigid's morning (1st February) you were to be blessed with fine weather for the coming summer.

Farmers could plan their farming activities by observing the cuckoo:

If a Cuckoo sits on a bare thorn

You may sell your cow and buy corn

But if she sits on a green bough

You may sell your corn and buy a cow

To finish off on a romantic note here are a few stories relating to birds and the prospects of marriage. A girl would venture out on St. Valentine's Day and observe the first bird she would encounter. If it was a robin she would marry a sailor, a blackbird a clergyman, a sparrow a poor man but she would be happy, a dove a good man but the real catch was to see a goldfinch as she would marry a millionaire. Having married, the girl could ensure that her spouse wouldn't stray by secretly sewing the feather of a swan into his pillow.

On hearing the first cuckoo of the year you were meant to look under your right foot as there would be a hair under it. The colour of that hair would be the colour of your future husband or wife but if the hair was grey you would not marry but live to a ripe old age.

Birds and their song, were a constant, vivid presence in the lives of country and village people in pre combine-harvester days so it is no wonder that so many stories of their ability to intervene for good or ill in the affairs of human beings have gathered over the centuries.