WESTERN BIRDER AND NATURALIST

The Wings of Native America

by Richie Swanson

(hold arrow over photos to reveal captions)

If silent and void of activity, the sheer, pink rock wall of Frijoles Canyon at Bandelier National Monument might have been provocative enough, dotted as it was with shallow caves that were once the cliff dwellings of the descendants of the Pueblo Indians, the Anasazi. But during a dawn in early May, the New Mexico sunlight began to flood the top of the pink wall, and a Canyon Wren sang. Though I did not know it yet, the little brown bird and its ancient surroundings were about to expand my curiosity in a way that only mythical tales could tell.

The Canyon Wren belted out a high whinny that raced hastily down the scale from somewhere near the top of the wall. Suddenly the song rang out behind me, piercing the air above the remains of a ceremonial kiva. The song jumped up the canyon, then down, echoing, impossible to find. Finally the wren appeared atop a rock, twirled around, flapped its tail, flashed a rufous flank, and then a second wren began to sing—a Rock Wren.

The second wren was just as loud and pulsating, sounded more insistent, was easier to find, but harder to follow. It lit first atop a boulder, then atop a Juniper tree. It darted down, vanished into a seam in the canyon wall, and reappeared in a zigzagging flight above the ruins trail. It lit beside a small hole in the wall, lifting its head, chattering. It zoomed down, caught a bug, burst into one hole, burst out another. All in a short minute, zinging around like an atom.

There was a furious burr at my chest: a Broad-tailed Hummingbird

investigating my red T-shirt. I had to laugh. The hummingbird seemed fearless, the Canyon Wren sounded everywhere at once, and the Rock Wren flitted around as if it were crazy.

Meanwhile a funnel of Turkey Vultures floated in circles above the rim of the canyon, and the sun began to wash the tops of the pines and cottonwoods down along Frijoles Creek. An array of tiny yellow birds zipped all around the foliage. Lesser Goldfinches, Yellow Warblers, MacGillivary's, Wilson's, Nashville, Townsend's, Grace's, Audubon's, Western Kingbirds, Ash-throated Flycatchers, empids to study!

By mid-morning, the cliff dwellings shimmered with desert heat, and the songbirds quieted. The unhurried croak of a Common Raven crooned down from a ledge high above the caves, begging a question. Six hundred years ago the Anasazi must have experienced the same birds, but what had the avian creatures meant to them?

A book in a museum at nearby Santa Fe, *Pueblo Birds and Myths*, by Hamilton Tyler, provided at least a sketchy answer. Like all mythologies, the Pueblo stories explore cosmic meanings of the human world, but rarely had I read such keen appreciation of birds. Tyler, the son of an ornithologist, recounted Pueblo myths for almost every bird I had seen at Bandelier.

In one story, a town crier invokes the voice of a Canyon Wren, so his news can travel all around his village at once. In another, a war chief prays for the power to make an echo like the Canyon Wren so he can appear to be many places at the same time. In another, two twins meet a Canyon Wren at the base of the cliff, and the wren teaches them an echo so the twins can be at the top and bottom of a mountain simultaneously and meet the "god of all-directions."

According to Tyler, the ceaseless, erratic movements of the Rock Wren are embodied in its Zuni name, Z'lisho, which means "insane." Witches hide the bird's feathers on their victims' clothing to cast spells, and in general people do not touch the species, lest they catch its craziness.

Old Man Buzzard, the Turkey Vulture, is seen as the bird of purification. When a village becomes beset with evil spirits that cause a long drought, Buzzard's habit of cleaning up the remains of the dead after a hunt suggests he also knows the secret of how to cleanse the village. A tiny hero prepares an offering intended to invoke rain and sets out to show it to Buzzard. On his way he passes through a rainbow and

takes on the colors around his throat.
The bright-throated hero is Hummingbird. Buzzard tells him the offering requires tobacco, which will create clouds of smoke that will call forth clouds of rain. In the southwest, Hummingbird feeds frequently at the tubular blossoms of the wild tobacco plant; thus he finds the necessary offering easily. So rain falls upon his village once more.

During the beginning of the world, Hummingbird's bill provides the first sewing needle. He is called upon when the brightness of the Sun Father wanes in the winter. It is determined that Sun Father is weak because a witch has shot a foreign object into his body. Hummingbird inserts his bill into Sun and sucks out the poison. Sun Father grows warm again and rewards Hummingbird by allowing the bird to extract the nectar from summer flowers forever.

When the first people of the world plant the first seeds of corn, the plants sprout and mature, but the corn is too bitter to digest. Raven pecks the kernels with his powerful beak, making them good to eat. But Raven is as dark as storm clouds. He likes corn so much he will steal it, so he is viewed suspiciously. He has a predilection for filling silent spaces with ominous sounds. When all is quiet in a village and no one is expecting a fight, he appears flying circles, saying, "Ka, ka, enemies are coming to kill your people!"

Songbirds such as kingbirds and warblers are extolled. During the start of the world, Hard Beings Woman, an earth goddess, wishes to make a gift for Sun Father. She rubs the scales of her cuticles upon feathers and bones from winter birds and lays a cloth above the pile. Sun Father kindles a fire on the east side of the cloth, chirps and whistles commence, and new, bright-colored birds fly into being. Each spring their yellow plumages bring the warmth of the sun and scatter pollen on earth. Summer birds sing pleasantly to keep people happy while they work in hard heat. But in the winter the musical, yellow birds vanish. They are kept far away, locked in a crystal cage that can only be opened again by Sun Father.

Pueblo Birds and Myths was my first glimpse of Native American stories about birds, and the discovery was like seeing my first wood warbler. Here was something fascinating, and I had to see more! As I read other Indian myths, I was delighted to find that birds play integral roles in stories describing the creation of the world.

I found the Cheyenne account of creation in *American Indian Mythology*, by Alice Marriott and Carol K. Rachlin. The Cheyenne

once lived in the Great Lakes region, so it is not surprising that at the beginning of time the Creator finds himself surrounded by an endless body of water. The Creator makes daylight and then fish and waterfowl. A Snow Goose complains that he cannot swim indefinitely like a fish. "Then fly," says the Creator, and the waterfowl do, winging their way in all directions, searching for land to rest upon.

A loon, mallard and snow goose fly until they are mere specks in the sky, and still they find no land. Then a coot comes paddling along,

dips its head in the water and sees a murky substance at the bottom of the lake. The coot dives down and re-emerges, opening its bill, letting a ball of mud roll off its tongue. The Creator enlarges the mud and spreads it on top of Grandmother Turtle to form the earth. As a reward the coot's flesh is made to taste like mud, which causes hunters to ignore "mudhens" even today.

In the Hopi creation story the first people live underground in dim, gray light. In *The Fourth Word of the Hopis*, Harold Courlander writes that when they plant corn, it does not grow well, and when they make pots to store water, the pots crack, Hummingbird appears, and with his lightning-quick bill provides a fire drill. Then people set fires to warm their fields and bake their pots. When footsteps are heard at the top of the sky, a swallow is formed from clay and brought to life with song. Swallow flies up, circling higher and higher until he glimpses an opening in the sky. Dove and Hawk, stronger fliers, fly through the opening and glimpse a new world.

A more chatty bird, Catbird, flies to the upper world and has a talk with the spirit who owns it. Catbird gains permission for people to come to the upper world, and down below Chipmunk plants a bamboo seed that grows all the way to the opening of the new world.

As the people climb the bamboo, garrulous Mockingbird flies around them, scolding, "Be careful! Be careful!" As the people emerge into the new world, Mockingbird shares his gift of mimicry

and knowledge of migration. Mockingbird gives each person a new language, creating different tribes. After the sun rises in the new world, Mockingbird points tribes in the directions they must travel.

In *Myths and Tales of the Jicarilla Apache Indians* by Morris Opler, the first people also find themselves in darkness. Even when the sun appears, it vanishes quickly due to an eclipse. But a Wild Turkey struts forward to recall the light. He struts east, south, west and north, and then four mounds of sand are made, each mound a color of a cardinal direction.

Earlier these colors were made from bird feathers. The white of the east is from the white tail of one eagle, and the glitter of the north is from the spotted tail of another. The yellow of the west is from the Western Tanager, and the blue of the south is from a jay. The more Turkey struts and gobbles, the higher and larger the mounds grow. The mounds grow into a single, tall mountain until the sun can be seen again.

After the Jicarilla begin to live in their new, sunny world, a man gambles away all his things and must leave his village. He cuts down a spruce tree, and woodpeckers peck an entrance in the trunk and then hollow out the inside. The gambler climbs into the trunk, and the

Green-backed Swallow, certainly the violet-green swallow, seals the entrance with mud. The gambler floats down a river with his pet Turkey until stopped by a whirlpool. The two embark on a new bank, and the gambler is hungry. Turkey produces corn seeds he has carried inside himself, and the practice of agriculture begins.

In Indian stories, specific characteristics of birds constantly save the day. In western North America, the Water Ouzel dives into swift-running creeks to feed on insect life; thus when a Redhead disappears beneath a lake in Kutenai territory, British Columbia, it is the ouzel who dives into the surrounding streams, calling the fish to council.

In Ella Clark's *Indian Legends from the Northern Rockies*, a snipe is sent around the edge of the lake, also calling fish. When the fish report that a monster has been seen fleeing into a river, the warlike hammering of woodpeckers becomes essential. While Beaver builds a

dam and forces the monster to surface from the water, Sapsucker waits, ready to spear the monster with his bill. But Sapsucker is too excitable. He cries out nervously, and the monster laughs at him, breaking through the dam. Red-Headed Woodpecker gives pursuit, and the stroke of his bill is bold and sure. He pecks open the belly of the monster, and Redhead springs out freely.

In *The Bear who stole the Chinook*, by Frances Fraser, Magpie "goes everywhere and sees everything." She is a "dreadful gossip," so when a bitter winter clamps down on the Blackfoot people, it is she who slips the word that a bear has stolen the moderating wind that blows from the west coat.

A feathered and furry crew travel to Bear's cave to investigate. Owl pokes his head in the cave, and Bear hits him with a fire stick, making Owl's eyes large to this day. Weasel espies the chinook in an inflated elkskin bag, and a boy blows smoke from a pipe that causes Bear to fall asleep. Coyote drags the bag out of the cave but cannot sever its thongs with his teeth. Prairie Chicken asks in a small voice if he may try. For who knows more about air sacs than he who can inflate them from the sides of his neck? The boy grants permission, and Prairie Chicken picks at the thongs until they loosen. The the warm wind blows again, and snow begins to melt.

The Bald Eagle flies very high and possesses mysterious powers from the sky. When he is gigantic, he is the well-known Thunderbird. In *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, he has wings twice as wide as war canoes and a huge, hooked beak. When he opens and shuts his eyes, lightning flashes down on the land of the Quillayute, the Lapush Indians. When hunters come too near his cave, he rolls out boulders of ice, instigating avalanches in the Olympic Mountains. But like most supernatural beings Thunderbird can give life as well as threaten it. When gigantic hailstones fall and the Quillayute must flee the food-rich shoreline, he snatches a Killer Whale from the sea and sets it down on a prairie for hungry people to eat.

In the Bitterroot Mountains in Montana, Thunderbird's favorite daughter is Blue Jay, who is privy to mysteries throughout the northwestern woods and prairies. Until the 1930's, the Salish of Montana conducted a ritual called the Blue Jay ceremony. Participants purified themselves, waiting for visions and knowledge.

In one story, Blue Jay encounters a shelf of land that rises and falls continuously, shaking the earth. She flies beneath the shelf, and the sides of her head are flattened, an appearance found in a common

begging bird at Rocky Mountain campgrounds, the Steller's Jay.

In another story, buffalo hunters are caught in a blinding snowstorm and take shelter beneath a spruce tree. The hunters hug the ground and begin to sing their death songs. From the tree comes a sharp scolding. "Get up and stamp your feet!" says Blue Jay. "Use pointed bones to punch holes and sew your buffalo hides together!"

The invention of the tipi saves the hunters, and afterward Blue Jay follows the Salish on autumn buffalo hunts. Blue Jay feeds on buffalo berries sweetened by frost and stays at camp with the women who are smoking meat. Since the bird amuses everyone with its unique vocalizations, barking like a dog and whinnying like a horse, she is fed suet.

Blue Jay flies to another tribe's buffalo camp and draws nearer and nearer to women making pemmican. As Blue Jay accepts scraps, she hears talk of an attack planned against the Salish camp. Blue Jay returns at dusk unsure how to tell her people. She finds Owl, who puts the warning inside a medicine man's dream.

Other birds bring a different warning to the wandering Indian hero, the trickster Coyote. In *Folktales of the Native American* by Dee Brown, Coyote meets a bird that seems to wear a fire atop his head, Red-headed Woodpecker. To impress the woodpecker Coyote places a bunch of burning straw on his own head, then he runs howling to dowse himself in the river.

Another day Coyote watches as a bluebird bathes in a beautiful blue lake and emerges with beautiful blue feathers. Delighted with the color, Coyote jumps into the lake and also comes out blue. He is so proud of his new color he walks around, looking continually to see who is noticing. He trips, rolls in the dirt and becomes dust-colored to this day.

Coyote also watches as a kingfisher dives into an open pool of water in an icy river and flies up with a delicious-looking fish. Coyote dives into the pool and comes out cold and wet, his ambition thoroughly humbled from trying to practice the powers of a winged creature.

During a moony night in Monument Valley in Utah, a mockingbird sang ceaseless songs beside my tent, keeping me awake well past midnight. I decided to match wits with him. Every bird he would mimic, I would correctly identify. There was the scree of robin, the rich note of the Pyrrhuloxia, the squawk of Steller's jay, the piping of an oriole and the screams of a Gambel's Quail and Red-tailed Hawk. But suddenly my midnight friend delivered about eight difficult songs in rapid succession, and I was utterly confused, soundly defeated.

I was, after all, only human—not Mockingbird, the keeper of languages. But I remembered that he was also the giver, and as a writer I accepted him as a mentor. He seemed to tell me that as long as I have a bird in my heart I can try to sing any song I choose.

The wren in the canyon at Bandelier had already taught me how an echo can enliven a spirit, and so I have shared these stories with you.

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