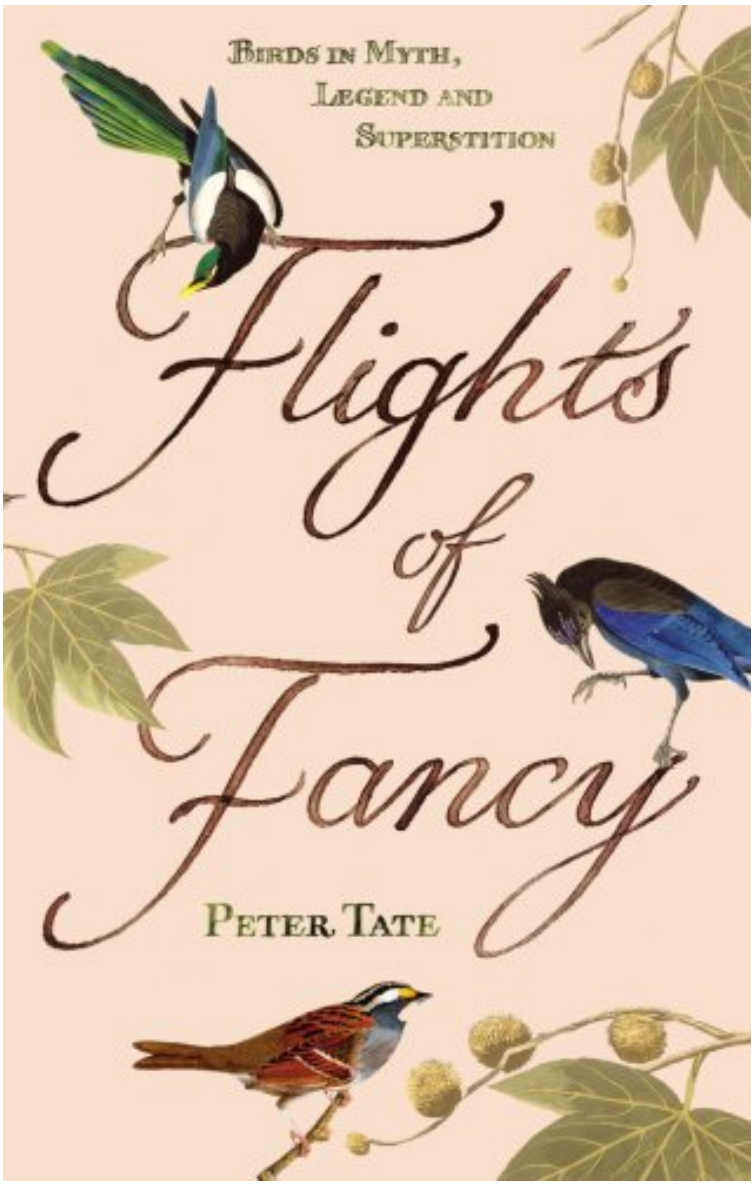
Flights of Fancy: Birds in Myth, Legend and Superstition



Par Peter Tate
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[Online library] Flights of Fancy: Birds in Myth, Legend and Superstition

Par Peter Tate : Flights of Fancy: Birds in Myth, Legend and Superstition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Flights of Fancy: Birds in Myth, Legend and Superstition:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDid you know that Barnacle geese were once classified as fish? That both the Cherokees and the ancient Greeks were convinced that cranes regularly fought battles with pygmies? That the Swiss believed that any cuckoo that managed to survive for a year would turn into an eagle?Throughout history, birds have fascinated and intrigued mankind, so it is hardly surprising that an astonishingly rich body of myth, legend and superstition has grown up around them. Flights of Fancy explores the stories told

about 30 of the world's best-known species, from the blackbird to the wryneck, drawing on traditions from every quarter of the globe. Some of the stories included clearly arose as a result of faulty observation, such as the widely held belief that nightjars sucked milk from cows. Others stemmed from attempts to explain unusual aspects of appearance or behaviour. But the vast majority seem to have their origins in people's delight in inventing stories - whether the legend that the blackbird was originally white, or the suggestion that witches kept owls as their familiars. And, as Peter Tate points out, what is so extraordinary is that the same story often crops up in many different parts of the world: the belief that eagles and snakes are sworn enemies can be found as far apart as Iraq and Mexico; the view that the raven is the harbinger of bad luck can be found throughout Europe from Denmark to Spain.A fascinating and wonderfully entertaining read, this is the ideal book for anyone interested in birds or myths - or both.ExtraitBlackbird(Turdus merula)A rather plump species of thrush with very obvious differences between males and females. The male blackbird lives up to its name and has black feathers with a bright orange bill, while the female is mainly dark brown. Related to what in the US are called robins (Turdus migratorius), it is one of Northern Europe's most familiar birds, and can be found in most gardens and parks. Its song is clear, beautiful and distinctive, making blackbirds one of the most recognizable songsters.Like so many birds with a black plumage, blackbirds were once thought to have been white. In Brescia in Italy, for example, it was believed that the blackbird changed colour as a result of a cruel and cold winter. Forced to take shelter from the wind and snow, the bird sought refuge in a chimney, where it became blackened by the soot. In commemoration, the last two days of January and the first of February became known as i giorni della merla, 'the blackbird days'. White blackbirds can also be found in ancient Greek tradition: Aristotle describes them in his History of Animals as living on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. These mythical birds were supposed to have a wider range of notes than other blackbirds and to appear only by moonlight.An alternative legend was recorded by the nineteenth-century French author Eugene Rolland. It tells how a white blackbird, while lurking in a thicket, was greatly astonished to discover a magpie hiding diamonds, jewellery and golden coins in her nest. Upon asking the magpie how he too might acquire such a treasure, he received the reply:'You must seek out in the bowels of the earth the palace of the Prince of Riches, offer him your services and he will allow you to carry off as much treasure as you can carry in your beak. You will have to pass through many caverns each more overflowing with riches than the last, but you must particularly remember not to touch a single thing until you have actually seen the Prince himself.'The blackbird immediately went to the entrance of the subterranean passage to discover the treasure. The first cavern he had to pass through was lined with silver, but he managed to keep the magpie's advice in mind and continue on his way. The second cavern was ablaze with gold, and though the blackbird tried to master himself, it proved too much for him and he plunged his beak into the glittering dust with which the floor was strewn. Rolland continues:Immediately there appeared a terrible demon vomiting fire and smoke who rushed up to the wretched bird with such lightning speed that the bird escaped with the greatest difficulty. But alas the thick smoke had besmirched forever his white plumage and he became as now, quite black with the exception of his bill which still preserves the colour of the gold he was so anxious to carry off.This legend also sought to account for the piercing cries of terror uttered by a blackbird when startled: it claims the bird is expecting to be attacked by another terrible demon.Blackbirds tend not to play much of a part in religious stories (unlike, for example, doves and ravens), and where they do appear their role is generally a subsidiary one. One rather charming story tells of St Kevin (498-618), an Irish saint who, like St Francis of Assisi, preferred the company of animals to humans and was said to have a mystical command over them. Once, when he was praying during Lent, a blackbird landed on his outstretched hand and laid an egg there. St Kevin then remained perfectly still until the egg had hatched - an illustration of the virtuous saint's patience and gentleness.Although the blackbird is not generally credited with the gift of prophecy, there is a reference to its weather-forecasting ability in a saying from County Meath in Ireland: 'When the blackbird sings before Christmas, she will cry before Candlemas'. This means that if the bird should start to sing before its usual time of early to mid February, a cold spell will occur before 2 February, when the rite of Candlemas is observed. Blackbirds were also the subject of weather-based superstitions in Germany, where it was thought that a blackbird kept caged in a house offered protection against lightning.Cockerel(Gallus gallus)Bred from oriental junglefowl which originated in India, Burma and South-East Asia. Over the years, selective breeding has vastly altered its form and colours, ranging from white to black with many variations in-between. Known as roosters in North America and Australia, the female of the species is the hen.As urban society has spread and farming practices have changed, the waking of the whole community by a farmyard cockerel who crows at first light

has all but ceased to exist. But not so long ago, when country dwellers had no watches or clocks, the farm worker's day literally began at cockcrow. This use of cockerels as alarm clocks seems to have been universal in countries where they had been domesticated. In Abyssinia, for example, the Coptic Church used cockerels to rouse local villagers to worship.Cockerels are associated with many different aspects of folklore, from augury to popular legend, and many of the ideas and stories about them go back to very early times. In Greece, for example, where the bird was first introduced in around 700 bc, it became linked with several of the gods: it was dedicated to Apollo, the sun god, as people believed that its crowing heralded the sunrise and its red comb symbolized the sun; it was also sacred to Hermes, the winged messenger; and it was associated with Ares, the god of war, perhaps because of its reputation for vigilance and valour (one was even reputed to have put a lion to flight).One story about Ares and a cockerel, however, casts the cockerel in a less flattering light. It tells how Ares planned to spend the night with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and ordered a cockerel to keep watch for Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus (the blacksmith god). Unfortunately, the bird fell asleep, and when Hephaestus came home unexpectedly he caught the couple together. Deciding to embarrass rather than punish them, Hephaestus bound them to the couch on which they lay and called the other gods to come and see how ridiculous they looked.Perhaps because they have been so closely associated with vigilance, cockerels are often linked to augury and divination. The Greeks invented a method of forecasting in which grains of corn marked with letters of the alphabet were fed to cockerels. The order in which the birds pecked at them was carefully noted and used to make predictions. A more simplified version of this method was recorded in Roman times: unmarked grain was fed to a group of hens, known as sacred chickens, and if they fed so eagerly that some spilt from their beaks it was considered a good omen. So important were the predictions of sacred chickens that the Roman army carried a cage of the birds with it wherever it went, and even appointed an official sacred-chicken keeper, known as the pullarius.In De Natura Deorum (On the Nature of the Gods), Cicero tells a salutary tale about the great Roman general Publius Claudius (d. 249/246 bc), who foolishly disregarded the importance of these sacred birds:Shall we remain unimpressed by the tale of the presumptuous conduct of Publius Claudius in the first Punic war, who, when the sacred chickens, on being let out of the coop, refused to feed, ordered them to be plunged into the water, that they might, as he said, drink, since they would not eat? He only ridiculed the gods in jest, but the mockery cost him many a tear (for his fleet was utterly routed), and brought a great disaster upon the Roman people.Central and North European pagan beliefs link the cockerel with both the corn god and fertility. In Britain, the cockerel not only formed part of the harvest celebrations, but was also used in a number of the fertility ceremonies that took place at the time of the sowing of the crops. These tended to cluster around Shrove Tuesday and generally involved some sort of sacrifice. One example was 'Cockshies', when a cockerel was tied to a pole so that men could throw stones at it, rather like at a coconut shy. Whoever killed the bird was allowed to keep the carcass. The same rite was practised in France, while in Transylvania the cockerel would be cut up and mixed with the seed corn destined for the following year's harvest. An even crueller ritual was one where a cockerel was buried in the ground with only its head protruding. As the harvesters cut the last stalks of corn, the cockerel's head would be cut off.As well as being linked with the harvest, the cockerel was also closely associated with medicine and healing, often being employed in rather bizarre rituals. For example, in Transylvania when a woman left her house for the first time after having a baby, a cockerel (or a hen, if the newborn child was a girl) would be cut in half and the two sections nailed to the doorpost. The idea was that magic properties from the bird would pass to the new mother and help her to regain her health and strength.The beneficial properties of the cockerel were noted by the Roman writer and naturalist Pliny the Elder. He suggested that stewing and eating red cockerel would provide protection against wild beasts and also grant extra strength. In a similar fashion, during the Middle Ages, a brew called 'Cock Ale', prepared from a boiled red cockerel and strong ale, was thought to make people stronger.Many ancient pagan beliefs and customs were adopted and then adapted by Christians, often resulting in a strange amalgam of Christian and pagan rites. A good example of just such a meeting of cultures could once be found at Llandegla in Wales, where a well near the church was thought to have magic properties. Sufferers from 'falling sickness' (epilepsy) would bathe in the well, then walk round it three times while reciting the Lord's prayer, before throwing in some money. Following this, a cockerel or a hen (depending on the sex of the sufferer...Revue de presse"Here is a book that will change the way we look at our feathered friends for ever." (National Trust Magazine)"Some of the rituals constructed around birds are truly extraordinary, as Peter Tate's exquisitely produced book reveals ... there are wondrous tales from all over the globe here" (Financial Times)"Flights of Fancy is a welcome reminder of how birds were once (and should remain)

nature's great indicators." (Times Literary Supplement)