

Tree of Life



✿ Hook: Bird Myths

- Brainstorm as a group about various bird myths, superstitions, symbols and folklore:
 - A bird hitting the window or inside the house is said to announce a death or an impending death.
 - Legend has it that the Original Man of the Anishinabe people learned how to paddle a canoe by observing and imitating the flight of the big birds. As the birds evenly and alternately dipped their wings from side to side, they flew in a straight line. When the Original Man did the same with his paddle, he too was able to navigate the waters as he wished.
 - The phrase 'eat like a bird' means the opposite of what it implies as in most cases we would have to eat our weight in food each day to truly eat like a bird!
 - The Griffin symbolizes Polish/Kashub culture; the American Eagle represents the United States of America; the Red-headed Woodpecker was a war symbol of Cherokee Indians; the raven is the trickster in Aboriginal culture; the white dove is a universal symbol of peace.
- Explain to the class that they will increase their appreciation for birds in our culture by dramatizing a traditional creation myth.

Background: Cultural Relevance of Birds

Birds have long figured in the traditions, music, literature and art of countless cultures. Their acrobatic flight patterns, heart-lifting sounds, bright eyes, beautiful plumage and elusive lifestyle have fascinated us throughout history.

In many pieces of literature and art – including most of Shakespeare's plays – birds symbolize a wide range of aspects of human experience, from hope to grace to death. The white dove represents peace and love. Our language is full of bird-related terms, from pigeon-hole (to firmly label someone), to chicken (coward), to nest-egg (savings).

Consider poet Emily Dickinson's famous poem *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, and Tolkien's use of giant birds in *The Lord of the Rings* to save the heroes Frodo and Sam. One of Margaret Laurence's famous short stories, in which a grandfather passes away, is entitled *A Bird in the House*. Many children's stories, such as *The Goose with the Golden Egg* and *Hansel and Gretel* also feature birds. The raven plays the trickster role in First Nation legends; the eagle feather features prominently in Native art and ceremonies. The mythical phoenix rises from the ashes in Greek culture, a symbol of preternatural renewal.

Birds have inspired us since time immemorial to take flight, first accomplished by the Wright Brothers in 1903. Birds continue to inspire us with their hope and beauty, but now more than ever, they need our help to survive.

Age Range: 10 to 16 years

Time: Several 90-minute sessions

Themes: Birds in our cultures

Resources

- *Habitat: There for the Birds!* info sheets
- class set of *Renfrew County Bird Species at Risk* and *Renfrew County Bird Habitat Elements*.
- student Internet access
- art materials
- theatrical props

Learning Outcomes

Students will investigate the cultural and ecological significance of birds.

This we know:

*All things are connected
like the blood that unites us.
We did not weave the web of life,
We are merely a strand in it.
Whatever we do to the web,
we do to ourselves.*

Robert Lynd



Desk Activity: Tree of Life Screen Saver

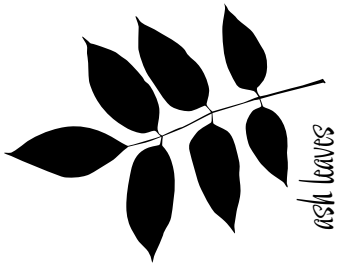
1. Share *Background: Cultural Relevance of Birds* with class.
2. Have students go online to research a Renfrew County bird species at risk:
www.bonnecherepark.on.ca/programs/resources-birds.html
Ask them to choose one of the bird species and research the bird and its niche info in detail (trees, leaves, seeds, grasses and/or flowers; insects and other prey):
 - Kirtland's Warbler: jack pine needles and cones
 - Cerulean Warbler: caterpillars, maple leaves
 - Loggerhead Shrike: hawthorn flowers, berries
 - Bald Eagle: white pine needles and cones
 - Golden Eagle: lichen, small rodents and animals
 - Peregrine Falcon: dead tree branches, ferns
 - Golden-winged Warbler: alder and ash leaves
 - Chimney Swift: moths, insects
 - Least Bittern: frogs, crayfish
 - Red-headed Woodpecker: acorns, oak leaves
 - Black Tern: minnows, cattails
 - Short-eared Owl: frogs, snakes, rodents
 - Barn Owl: vole, rodents
3. When students are online, ask them to conduct a Google image search on the phrase "tree of life." Have the students browse the various samples.
4. Students should then illustrate a tree of life incorporating the silhouettes included in this lesson plan. They can use these natural elements (play with scale) on paper or using a computerized drawing program such as Adobe Illustrator/Photoshop or Corel Draw. If creating in paper format, keep sheet size small enough to fit on the scanner.
As the basis of the drawing, illustrate a tree trunk, then arrange bird and habitat elements on tree trunk. Often – but not always – one builds the left or right half of such an illustration, then flips it to create a symmetrical image.
5. The final silhouette can then be overlaid on a coloured or patterned background.
6. If created electronically, students should save their Tree of Life as .jpg file and follow system instructions to import as a screensaver. If the Tree of Life was created on paper, the image can be scanned and imported accordingly.
7. To learn more, students can go online and play the *Flying to Survive!* migration game:
www.bonnecherepark.on.ca/games/game-birds.html
They can then take the online quiz *Habitat: There for the Birds!*:
www.bonnecherepark.on.ca/games/quiz-birds.html
Remind them to hand in their scores.

Discussion

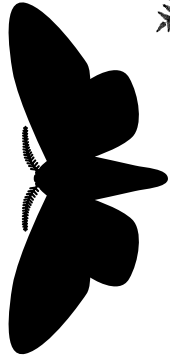
- As you researched these bird species at risk did you recognize any/many of the names?
- Have you ever seen any/many of these bird species at risk?
- If you didn't, why not?



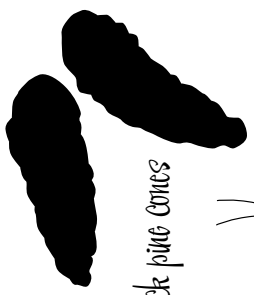
Renfrew County Bird Habitat Elements



ash leaves



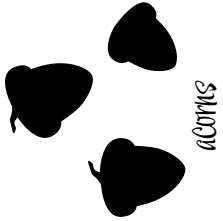
moth



jack pine cones



ferns



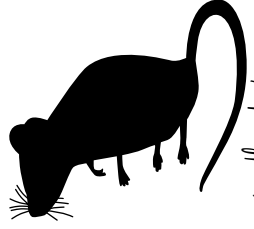
acorns



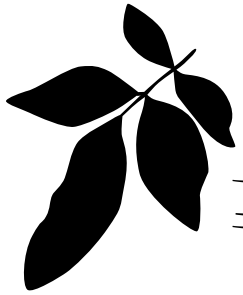
insects



insects



small rodents



alder leaves



maple leaves



frogs



caterpillar



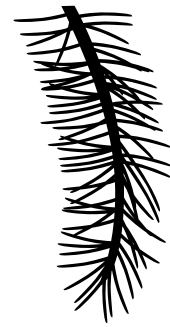
white pine needles



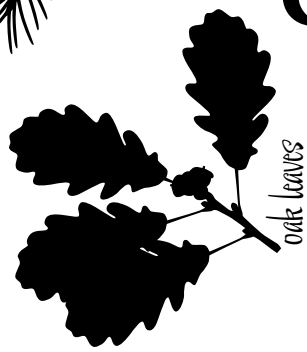
frogs



berries



jack pine needles



oak leaves



rodents

snakes



dead branches



hantornie



cattails



white pine cone



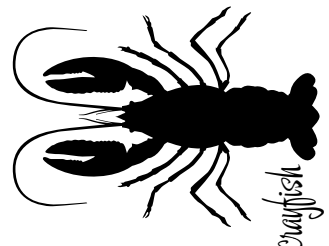
lichen



vole

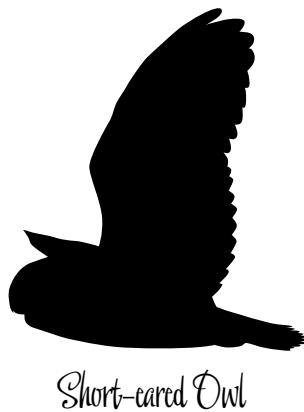


muskrats



crayfish

Renfrew County Bird Species at Risk



Outdoor Activity: Presenting a Creation Myth

1. *Reader's Theatre* is a style of theatre in which the actors do not memorize their lines. Rather, they either go through their blocking holding scripts and reading off their lines, or else sit/stand together on a stage and read through the script together. In Reader's Theatre, actors use vocal expression to help the audience understand the story rather than visual storytelling such as sets, costumes, and intricate blocking.
2. In this activity the class will be mounting a reader's theatre presentation of a creation myth that illustrates the interdependence of Earth's tree of life – or ecosystem.
3. Assign the following roles to cast members:
 - Narrator
 - Nanaboozhoo (Human)
 - Mahng (Loon)
 - Zhing-gi-biss, (Helldiver bird)
 - Wazhushk (Muskrat)
 - Mi-zhee-kay (Turtle)
 - Crowd

To involve more students expand the story to include more birds and animals. Use oral sound effects to represent bird calls and thunder, and props to signify rain (rice in a plastic container) or thunder (sheets of tinfoil). Traditional drumming and songs can be integrated to further enhance the presentation. For a traditional Anishinabe songbook go to: www.thealgonquinway.ca

4. Mount the presentation for other classes and family members. This could be used as a fundraiser for a local bird conservation group.

The Creation Story – Turtle Island

For the Anishinabe people, the legend is as follows.

Long ago, after the Great Mystery, or Kitchi-Manitou, first peopled the earth, the Anishinabe, or Original People, strayed from their harmonious ways and began to argue and fight with one another. Brother turned against brother and soon the Anishinabe were killing one another over hunting grounds and others disagreements. Seeing that harmony, brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect for all living things no longer prevailed on Earth, Kitchi-Manitou decided to purify the Earth. He did this with water.

The water came in the form of a great flood, or *mush-ko'-be-wun'*, upon the Earth destroying the Anishinabe people and most of the animals as well. Only Nanaboozhoo, the central figure in many of the Anishinabe oral traditions, was able to survive the flood, along with a few animals and birds who managed to swim and fly. Nanaboozhoo floated on a huge log searching for land, but none was to be found as the Earth was now covered by the great flood. Nanaboozhoo allowed the remaining animals and birds to take turns resting on the log as well. Finally, Nanaboozhoo spoke.

"I am going to do something," he said. "I am going to swim to the bottom of this water and grab a handful of earth. With this small bit of Earth, I believe we can create a new land for us to live on with the help of the Four Winds and Kitchi-Manitou."



So Nanaboozhoo dived into the water and was gone for a long time. Finally he surfaced, and short of breath told the animals that the water is too deep for him to swim to the bottom. All were silent. Finally, Mahng, the Loon spoke up. "I can dive under the water for a long way, that is how I catch my food. I will try to make it to the bottom and return with some Earth in my beak."

The Loon disappeared and was gone for a very long time. Surely, thought the others, the Loon must have drowned. Then they saw him float to the surface, weak and nearly unconscious. "I couldn't make it, there must be no bottom to this water," he gasped. Then Zhing-gi-biss, the helldiver came forward and said "I will try next; everyone knows I can dive great distances." So the helldiver went under. Again, a very long time passed and the others thought he was surely drowned. At last he too floated to the surface. He was unconscious, and not until he came to could he relate to the others that he too was unable to fetch the Earth from the bottom.

Many more animals tried but failed, including Zhon-gwayzh', the mink, and even Mi-zhee-kay", the turtle. All failed and it seemed as though there was no way to get the much-needed Earth from the bottom. Then a soft muffled voice was heard. "I can do it," it spoke softly. At first no one could see who it was that spoke up. Then, the little Wa-zhushk", muskrat stepped forward. "I'll try," he repeated. Some of the other, bigger, more powerful animals laughed at muskrat. Nanaboozhoo spoke up. "Only Kitchi-Manitou can place judgment on others. If muskrat wants to try, he should be allowed to."

So, muskrat dove into the water. He was gone much longer than any of the others who tried to reach the bottom. After a while Nanaboozhoo and the other animals were certain that muskrat had given his life trying to reach the bottom. Far below the water's surface, muskrat, had in fact reached the bottom. Very weak from lack of air, he grabbed some Earth in his paw and with all the energy he could muster began to swim for the surface. One of the animals spotted muskrat as he floated to the surface. Nanaboozhoo pulled him up onto the log. "Brothers and sisters," Nanaboozhoo said, "muskrat went too long without air, he is dead." A song of mourning and praise was heard across the water as muskrat's spirit passed on to the spirit world. Suddenly Nanaboozhoo exclaimed, "Look, there is something in his paw!" Nanaboozhoo carefully opened the tiny paw. All the animals gathered close to see what was held so tightly there. Muskrat's paw opened and revealed a small ball of Earth. The animals all shouted with joy. Muskrat sacrificed his life so that life on Earth could begin anew.

Nanaboozhoo took the piece of Earth from Muskrat's paw. Just then, the turtle swam forward and said, "Use my back to bear the weight of this piece of Earth. With the help of Kitchi-Manitou, we can make a new Earth." Nanaboozhoo put the piece of Earth on the turtle's back. Suddenly, the wind blew from each of the Four Directions. The tiny piece of Earth on the turtle's back began to grow. It grew and grew and grew until it formed a mi-ni-si', or island in the water. The island grew larger and larger, but still the turtle bore the weight of the Earth on his back. Nanaboozhoo and the animals all sang and danced in a widening circle on the growing island. After a while, the Four Winds ceased to blow and the waters became still. A huge island sat in the middle of the water, and today that island is known as North America.



Traditional Indian people, including the Anishinabe, hold special reverence for the turtle who sacrificed his life and made life possible for the Earth's second people. To this day, the muskrat has been given a good life. No matter that marshes have been drained and their homes destroyed in the name of progress, the muskrat continues to survive and multiply. The muskrats do their part today in remembering the great flood; they build their homes in the shape of the little ball of Earth and the island that was formed from it.

Discussion

- How does this Anishinabe myth illustrate the interdependence of all species in Earth's ecosystem?
- How important are birds to Earth's ecosystem?
- What will happen to Earth's ecosystem if more and more birds become species at risk?

