

South America

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES
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CATEGORY: ARGENTINA: GENERAL

CONCEPTS: FOLKLORE, Flora, and Fauna

ACTIVITY: ARGENTINE BIRDS IN MYTH AND SUPERSTITION, A READING.

These delightful tales of some common Argentine birds illustrate the universal appeal of animals in folklore. A culture's use of folklore to communicate basic common sense messages is also clear in these legends, which come from a variety of ethnic groups and historical periods.

OBJECTIVE: Students will learn some Argentine folktales and superstitions and compare these with their own "animal folklore."

MATERIALS: Copies of the following reading.

PROCEDURE: After the students have read the hand-out, discuss the following:

1. Do we have any superstitions about animals in the United States? (Black cat, rabbit's foot, ground hog, etc.?)
2. Name some birds and animals that appear in our own daily "folklore." (What about Woody Woodpecker, Yogie Bear and other cartoon characters? Or Smokey the Bear?) Describe the role they play, i.e., entertainment, teaching, symbols for people.
3. Some of these stories have "messages," particularly the magpie and hummingbird tales. Can you describe these messages? Are they old-fashioned or do they still apply today?
4. Can you think of any reasons why birds would be especially popular in folktales all over the world?

RELATED ACTIVITIES: The students might enjoy writing their own tales. The "why" and "how" tales are perhaps easiest and also quite universal. For example:

How the robin got its red breast.
Why ducks swim.
How the bluejay turned blue.

Magic Birds of the Pampas and Patagonia

On the Argentine pampa and in Patagonia, legends and superstitions about many of the common birds have become tradition. Here are several of these birds and the magic powers they are said to have. While people no longer believe in this magic, they still enjoy the stories.

The ostrich

This large, unusual looking bird is also called the "ñandú" in Argentina. It was said that an ostrich feather could help cure someone who had been cursed or bewitched. The ostrich's large egg was also thought to bring prosperity to a home and many families on the pampa used to keep an empty and beautifully decorated ostrich egg in the entry hall of their houses. Here is a short legend of how the ostrich was created. This story was told by the Puelche Indians.

The Sun and the Moon had a beautiful home in the marvelous meadows of the good god Gnechen. Every night a sea of celestial lights bloomed in the fields and during the day the immense meadows were like an infinite pampa covered with blue flowers. Pichiantú, son of the Sun and the Moon always played happily, riding and soaring on his golden heron. His parents had told him not to wander too far from their heavenly home because near the earth there were eagles with murderous beaks. But one day Pichiantú, who knew nothing of evil, rode his golden heron down towards earth until he could see the trees, rivers and "rucas" (huts) of the Indians.

He was so fascinated by these visions of earth that he didn't notice the three enormous crows that quickly surrounded him. Too late he remembered his parents' wise warnings and tried to flee. The enormous crows, helpers of the evil god Huecuvú, attacked him and pecked him to death.

Sun and Moon, grief-stricken, cried and swore they would have revenge. The good god Gnechen awarded them the power to transform themselves in order to hunt and destroy the evil crows of Huecuvú. From that day until this, the Sun, after his daily crossing of the heavens, comes down to earth in the form of a lovely guanaco, and the Moon does the same during the Sun's voyage, in the form of a speedy ostrich who races over the pampas of Casahutí, anxiously searching for her son's murderers.

The screech owl

In many different countries the screech owl is traditionally seen as an ally of witches and ghosts. The Araucanian Indians of Argentina thought that on hearing the screech of this bird at night they should quickly begin to hit the roofs of their houses with long sticks in order to frighten the devil, who must be nearby. In general, the cry of the screech owl is supposed to mean tragedy and death.

The magpie

The magpie is a noisy and feisty bird which uses other birds' nests. This has given rise to several legends that involve the Virgin Mary and which were popular among the pampa settlers.

According to one legend the Virgin Mary was building an altar and asked the magpie to help. The bird made up many excuses and refused to help. So, the Virgin Mary condemned the magpie to never having her own nest.

Another legend says that the magpie was a woman who never stopped talking even when she was asleep. One day, there was an Indian attack on the frontier outpost where she lived. All the people fled, but first they hid an image of the Virgin so that it wouldn't be destroyed. As the Indians arrived and the woman sped off on her horse, she jokingly shouted, "Let's see if they're clever enough to find the Virgin we buried in the corral!"

The Indians, of course, found and burned the image. The Virgin turned the woman into a magpie, saying, "Now you will chatter forever."

The hummingbird

Both the Ona and the Araucana Indians, of Southern Argentina and Chile, told this tale of the hummingbird. It is a tale of freedom:

One fine summer day a group of men and women were hunting guanacos when they suddenly became lost in the region of the evil giant Sinulu. Much to their dismay, they were captured by this cruel monster who made them his slaves. Sinulu was indeed the most wicked of tyrants. He forced them to do nearly impossible tasks and punished them severely.

One afternoon, a slave woman sat weeping bitterly at the foot of an enormous tree. Suddenly she heard a tiny voice which said, "What is causing you such great sorrow, dear friend?"

The woman looked up and saw a small hummingbird. As the bird fluttered around her, she answered, "Alas! the evil giant Sinulu has ordered me to bring him this tree, but I can't even make it budge. If I fail, as I certainly will, he will come and whip me to death."

"My friends, the duck and the seagull, have often told me about this wicked monster. Don't worry, I will save you!" said the hummingbird.

Even in her great sorrow the woman could not help smiling.

"Those are very big words from a bird as small and fragile as a snowflake. If your strength were as great as your determination, I have no doubt you could destroy Sinulu, but I can easily see that your tiny wings are no match for such a giant."

"Oh, simple woman, don't you know that intelligence and courage have destroyed even the strongest and cruelest of tyrants?"

"That may be, but I also know that the giant's body is made of stone and even arrows can't harm him," replied the woman.

The hummingbird laughed: "Ah, but his feet are of skin and bone, just like yours and mine, and that is the key to your freedom. Now, do as I tell you. Go down to the valley and find your sisters. Together, pick up many sharp thorns and scatter them over the road.

The woman did exactly what the hummingbird had suggested, and then she and her sisters sat by the road. Soon the giant appeared. He was furious with the women when he saw them resting. He roared and the sound was louder and more frightening than the frozen winds of the winter sea. He lashed out with his twelve-pointed whip. Then, suddenly, he fell to the ground howling in pain.

"Remove this thorn from my foot, now!" he cried in agony.

The hummingbird, who was flying around the women, said to them: "Go and remove the thorn. But in its place put a very sharp knife."

The women did just that, and Sinulu rolled and twisted in the dirt, crazy with pain. The hummingbird then shot two tiny but perfect arrows into the giant's eyes, blinding him.

The small bird asked the women to prepare a large bonfire. They covered the evil monster with wood and dry leaves. High flames surrounded Sinulu and his body exploded in hundreds of small pieces.

The women danced around the bonfire singing. "The tyrant is dead! Sinulu is gone forever!"

"Not yet," warned the hummingbird. "You must burn all the pieces and especially the heart, or else another, even worse Sinulu will grow from it."

The women immediately did what the bird said.

"Victory, victory! We are free!" they sang.

One of the women said to the hummingbird: "You are our savior. We owe you our freedom. Please be our king!"

To which the hummingbird replied: "Fools! Don't even think of such an insult. Liberty is a precious gift which no one can steal from you. If I helped you to get your freedom back, it was only to fulfill my duty to all living things. If you want to do something to please me, go home and care for your gardens so that there will be many lovely flowers. Their sweet nectar will remind me that you are my friends.