

Native American Thunder Bird

In the legends of native North Americans, the thunderbird is a powerful spirit in the form of a bird. Lightning flashes from its beak, and the beating of its wings creates the thunder. It is often portrayed with an extra head on its abdomen. The majestic thunderbird is often accompanied by lesser bird spirits, frequently in the form of eagles or falcons. The thunderbird petroglyph symbol has been found across Canada and the United States.

The fact that Thunderbird sometimes appears as something that terrorizes and plagues Indians, and sometimes as their protector and liberator (in some myths, he was once an Indian himself) is said to reflect the way thunderstorms and violent weather are seen by Plains people. On the one hand, they bring life-giving rain (Thunderbird is said to be the creator of 'wild rice' and other Plains Indians crops); on the other hand, they bring hail, flood, and lightning and fire. It is not clear where with them worship and awe end, and fear and terror begin. Some Indians claim that there are good and bad Thunderbirds, and that these beings are at war with each other. They describe the Thunderbird as a spiritual, not just physical, being. It is not seen as just a large, fearsome predatory bird that people tell stories about. Rather, it's an integral part of Plains Indians religion and ritual.

The Nature of Thunderbird

In Plains tribes, the Thunderbird is sometimes known as Wakinyan, from the Dakota word kinyan meaning "winged." Others suggest the word links the Thunderbird to wakan, or sacred power. In many stories, the Thunderbird is thought of as a great Eagle, who produces thunder from the beating of his wings and flashes lightning from his eyes. (Descriptions are vague because it is thought Thunderbird is always surrounded by thick, rolling clouds which prevent him from being seen.) Further, there were a variety of beliefs about Thunderbird, which suggest a somewhat complicated picture. Usually, his role is to challenge some other great power and protect the Indians - such as White Owl Woman, the bringer of winter storms; the malevolent Unktehi, or water oxen who plague mankind; the horned serpents; Wochowsen, the enemy bird; or Waziya, the killing North Wind. But in some other legends (not so much in the Plains), Thunderbird is himself malevolent, carrying off people (or reindeer or whales) to their doom, or slaying people who seek to cross his sacred mountain. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984)

The fact that they are sometimes known as "grandfathers" suggest they are held in considerable reverence and awe. It is supposed to be very dangerous to approach a Thunderbird nest, and many are supposed to have died in the attempt, swept away by ferocious storms. The symbol of Thunderbird is the red zig-zag, lightning-bolt design, which some people mistakenly think represents a stairway. Most tribes feel he and the other Thunder beings were the first to appear in the Creation, and that they have an especially close connection to wakan tanka, the Great Mysterious. (Gill and Sullivan 1992)