

# Birds and American Indians

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**Ethno-Ornithology:** Humans have long held deep spiritual connections with birds. “Ethno-ornithology encompasses traditional ecological knowledge of bird distribution, abundance, and behaviour, as well as knowledge of the cultural and social importance of birds to humans. One goal of ethno-ornithology, and of the broader field of ethno-biology, is to establish linkages between traditional knowledge about the natural world and knowledge provided by western science.” (*Ornithological Masterclass 25: Ethno-ornithology*)

“**Most Native American languages** have names for plants, animals, places, and other things that translate into very descriptive words. Knowing one of these indigenous languages is like looking at everything through a different lens, giving you a different perspective on life around you.” *Dr. Andrew Cowell Professor of Linguistics and Faculty Director of Center for Native American Indigenous Studies .Below is from: Arapaho Language Project Animal Index by Dr. Cowell and Arapaho elders.*

## From the Arapaho Language Project:

### **American Crow** - Arapaho: hóuu

This term is also an old word for “god” or “man-above,” which dates from prior to White contact. The Crow is the messenger from and guide to the world beyond, in some accounts (*Kroeber, The Arapaho*). The Crow was and is extremely important in Arapaho ceremony. The Crow Dance, which was a later derivation of the Ghost Dance, featured the Crow as the central emblem, and Crow feathers were widely used in both the Ghost and Crow Dances for making ceremonial items. The Crow, like the Meadowlark, is said to speak Arapaho (*Hilger, p. 41*). They say: grandma, bread! = ‘neiwoo, co’ocoo’

### **American Dipper** - Arapaho.1. seskóoutówuu’éihii ; 2. séskouutíinii’éihii ; 3. \*hinówukóóhut

Translation: 1. ‘streamside bird’ ; 2. ‘streamside bird’ ; 3. ‘it goes under the water’

### **Bald Eagle** - Arapaho: 1. héétese’éit ; 2. bihtese’eit ; 3. nooke’eibeh’ei

Translation: 1. ‘it has a bald head’ ; 2. ‘it has a bare head’ ; 3. ‘the white headed old man’

### **Belted Kingfisher** - Arapaho: 1. níínebeh’eeét ; 2. noyéihii

Translation: 1. ‘it is a fish killer’ ; 2. ‘fisher’

The Kingfisher was one of the birds that dived unsuccessfully for land at the time of the creation of the Dry Land (*Dorsey, p. 194*). The Kingfisher was admired as a powerful bird because of the way it swoops and strikes at its prey. Kingfisher hides, feathers or dried flesh were carried into battle for this reason (*Kroeber, The Arapaho, p. 440*). The Kingfisher also played an important role in the Crow Dance (the later version of the Ghost Dance). Part of this ceremony was called the Kingfisher Dance. (*The second name was provided by Mark Soldierwolf.*)

**Golden Eagle** - Arapaho: 1. hiinookó3onit ; 2. wo'teenii'eihii

Translation: 1. 'it has a white rump' (adult) ; 2. 'black eagle' (young)

The feathers were widely used decoratively and ceremonially. This is probably the single most important and powerful bird for the Arapaho. Because the Eagle flies highest in the sky of any bird, it is seen as most powerful. The Eagle often secondarily represents the Thunderbird. When fasters are fasting and praying, either as part of individual vision quests or as part of larger group ceremonies, such as during the Sun Dance or formerly at the Medicine Wheel in the Bighorn Mts, they call out to the Eagle with their prayers and wishes. Bone whistles, made of the hollow wing bone of the Eagle, are blown, in imitation of the bird's call, as a way of communicating with it. The bird then calls back its response to the fasters. Such whistles are never blown in non-ceremonial contexts, such as at a Pow-wow. According to Paul Moss, the Medicine Wheel in the Bighorn Mountains belonged specifically to the Eagles, and the ceremony performed there - which was similar to that of the Sun Dance in many ways - was likewise considered as belonging to the Eagles. Fasters would remain for seven days high on the mountain. The eagles would soar in around them, then dive at them in rapid attacks, to "test their strength." If the fasters could stand up to this final test, after seven days of fasting, and continue calling back to the Eagles with their whistles, then they would receive the things they had asked for during the fast (*Paul Moss, "The Buffalo Wheel"*).

**Hummingbirds** - Arapaho: 1. bé'ce3éinii'ehíhi' ; 2. hotéin3e'enéihii

Translation: 1. 'little metal bird' ; 2. noisy-wing-one

**Peregrine and Prairie Falcon** - Arapaho: 1.. hééyei ; 2. hééyei cówoo'oo

Translation: 'rapid hawk/falcon'

An Arapaho story tells about a man who was wondering who was the king of the birds. He was sitting on a hill, and he was thinking to himself about how to answer this question. The two choices were the eagle and the falcon. He finally decided that the eagle was the king, as it soared around high above him. As he sat thinking this, a falcon came diving down and struck the eagle on top of the head, killing it. The falcon is the king of the birds.

**Nighthawk** - Arapaho: cis

A widely known story tells how the nighthawk came to have such a big mouth. The trickster nih'oo3oo, as usual, had gotten himself into trouble: a rock had rolled on top of him and pinned him to the ground. He begged for help. The nighthawk (also called 'bull bird') came and flew down at the rock. Each time he swooped past the rock, he 'farted.' (Nighthawks make a low, thrumming sound as wind whistles through their wings, as part of their display behavior. The Arapahos call this 'farting'.) Gradually the farts chipped the rock away until nih'oo3oo could escape. He called the nighthawk over to thank him, but then grabbed the bird and pulled his mouth very wide open. No one seems to know why he did this, but this is why the nighthawk has such a big mouth. Nighthawks were also seen as indicative of rain, since they fly before thunderstorms (*Kroeber, The Arapaho, p. 434*).

**Swallow** (all species) - Arapaho: 1. bíteixoxóúhuu ; 2. hééyei bíitei

Translation of the Arapaho 1. 'the ghostly one who uses dirt [to build its nest]' ; 2. 'ghost hawk'

Swallows and the Arapaho: The terms refer especially to Cliff Swallows, who build their nests from mud and dirt. Other swallow species nest in tree holes or dirt banks, but the name is used for all types of swallows. The second name was provided by Mark Soldierwolf. He said they are called 'ghosts' because of the strange sound they make at night after they enter their nests.

**From *A Dictionary of Everyday Crow*, compiled by Ishtaléeschia Báachiia Héeleetaalawe\* "Squirrel That Walks Among The Pines" \*Mary Helen Medicine Horse.  
A Bilingual Materials Development Center Project, Crow Agency:**

Lake Desmitt	baachiiiashe koon bilichkeesh	“the lake at Pine River”
Chicken	baaschuliilisdakaake	“white man’s bird”
Duck, mallard	biaxaake	“woman with a rash”
Hummingbird	suualakáake	“thunder bird”
Kingfisher	akbualútche	“one that catches fish”
Meadowlark	baaúuwatshiile	“gold one”
Robin	chihchaxiiisée	“big wren”
Sage hen	chiichkisée	“big prairie chicken”
Sapsucker	akbishkaaluushé	“one who eats gum”
Woodpecker	akbannakkoopé	“one who punches holes in wood”

***The Indian Sign Language*** by William P. Clark, 1885 - “This work is based upon my own observations, made among the Indians themselves during a period of more than six years, supplemented by a careful study of the principal authorities on Indian habits and customs.” W. P. CLARK, Captain Second Cavalry. July 7th, 1884.

Among thousands of signs described in this book is that of a bird:

Bird. Conception : Wings. the hands, palm outwards, fingers extended and touching above, to right and left in front of shoulders, hands same height ; move them simultaneously to front and downwards, repeating motion, imitating the motion of wings ; care must be taken to imitate closely. The wings of small birds move rapidly; those of large ones slowly. Some peculiarity may have to be noted,-the manner of flying or soaring, its habits, and even its tone of voice. A goose would be known by indicating the long, slow motion of its wings and the triangular figure taken by these birds in their flight to the South or distant North, and perhaps indicating the noise made by them.

**Please note the Northern Cheyenne will be included in this compilation.**

