

## African bird stories

### Short versions

**It used to be that the birds did not know how to fly.** Crow woke up one morning, and knew what wings were for, but all the birds laughed at him. Only his best friend, Tortoise, believed him. "Yes, birds can fly using their wings, and animals can fly by running very fast." Next morning the two friends climbed up the mountain, ready to jump off. All the birds and animals came to laugh. Crow went first, and flew. The birds jumped up and down in excitement, and waved their wings, and they flew too. Then Tortoise jumped, but he fell and smashed his shell. You can still see that his shell has been broken then stuck together.

**It was time to elect a new king of the birds,** but no-one could agree what the rules of the election should be. Small birds said it should be a small bird this time, sea birds said it was their turn to rule, the big forest birds who live alone got nervous with the crowding and noise and went off to sulk and say it should have been them, the geese wanted there to be a new ruler every twenty minutes. At last the hawks said quietly but fiercely it would be one of them, and chased the rest away. Some of them went up in the air to fight, but the vultures just watched and waited. So did the great fish eagle. The fighters came down for a rest and to mend their feathers. The fish eagle asked who had won, and they said it was a tie. The fish eagle said whoever won could fight him for the crown, but when they all looked at his terrible claws and beak - they made him king.

**A beautiful hen lived with her parents in the jungle.** A fine young hawk fell in love with her. She quite liked him, so he paid her parents a dowry of many corn cobs, and they became engaged to be married. But the hawk was away a lot, and a handsome cockerel came to live nearby. He and the hen became friendly, and then began to sing to her, till she fell in love with him. The hawk saw this, and got very angry. He asked for the dowry of corn cobs to be paid back, but her family had eaten them all. The hawk said 'I will get my food back somehow'. After that, any time he saw a chicken he would steal it and eat it, saying 'That will help pay back the dowry your family owes me'.

**A greedy boy was out in the forest, and heard the honeybird calling.** He followed it, and it showed him where the bee hive was. He made a small fire, climbed up to the hive and smoked the bees out, and took some of the honey. He should have shared the honey with the honeybird, but he kept and ate it all. The honeybird waited till it saw the boy in the forest again. The bird called him to follow, and showed him the tree. The boy made his fire, then carried it up on a stick into the tree. Instead of a beehive, he found a leopard dozing on a branch. The boy was so startled he touched the leopard on the nose with the fire stick. The leopard was so surprised the boy was able to escape, but he never went up a tree again.

**The Queen of Sheba sent word she was travelling** many many miles from her African home to come and visit King Solomon in Israel. He knew she would bring many presents for him. He asked his advisors what would be a way of marking her visit. They suggested he build her a palace to live in while she visited, and build it of birds' beaks. He liked this idea, and called all the birds together. He told them they must lend him their beaks for the Queen's visit. They asked how they could eat, or feed their young, if they lent him their beaks. He suggested they eat soft foods. They said they had to do what he said, so they would go away and have a meeting on how to organise it. The discussions and planning took a very long time, but they worked it out. When they went to tell King Solomon their plans, they found that the Queen of Sheba had finished her visit and gone home again.

**The Senkorfa bird and its family were the stupidest birds in the world**, and he was the stupidest in his family. The Senkorfa bird went off looking for the Egg of Knowledge, which held all the knowledge in the world. He found it, but it was so large he could only take it home by balancing it on his back, and keeping his beak on it, so he flew looking backwards. He got home safely, his family called up to him and he called back to them, but had to take his beak off the egg, and it fell down and broke. His family gathered round it, and they became very clever. By the time the Senkorfa bird landed lots of the knowledge had blown away, and went all round the world. He got quite a lot, but his family got more, so he was still the stupidest in his family.

**Some women went to gather firewood in the forest.** A beautiful bird sang to them so well they began to sing and dance, and stayed there for hours. When they went home the king asked why they had been so long. When he heard about the bird he sent his guards to catch it and bring it to him. But the bird was happy to come willingly. To keep it safe and protect it from the cats in the palace, it was put into a cage. It accepted this for a while, but then it sang to enchant the king's daughter so she would open the cage and free it. It flew back to the forest. The sad king followed it and begged it to come back to live with him again, but it said 'Palaces are all right for a while, but sticks and stones are dead and trees are alive. Come and visit me here now and then.'

**A strange old man was walking in the hot sun, and began to feel ill.** He met a vulture and asked would he spread his wings to shelter him from the glare. The vulture refused, and laughed at his bald head. The old man spoke something quietly, and the vulture got embarrassed and flew away. He met a friend who asked what had happened to his head. The vulture found he was now bald himself. Ever since then all his family have been bald. The strange old man walked on, feeling very ill, till he met some beautiful cranes. They spread their wings to protect him from the sun, and he soon felt better. To reward them he touched their heads and golden crowns grew on each one. But hunters began to kill them for their crowns. So they asked the old man to change the golden crowns into golden feathers instead. Now they are called Crowned Cranes.

**A wife had not had any children**, so her husband married a new wife as well, and she had children. The older wife was very unhappy. A guinea fowl offered to be her secret child, and she grew a crop to feed him, but the new wife laughed at her work. The guinea fowl called his friends to punish the new wife by eating the crops she had grown, but she caught the guinea fowl and put him to cook in a pot, to feed her husband. He took off the pot lid to smell the food, but the stew did not bubble, it sang sweetly 'The old is as good as the new'. He tipped the stew out, and the guinea fowl gathered itself together and flew to the older wife. The husband followed it, and told his older wife he was sorry, and would share his time between both.

**A man caught a large unusual bird and took it home.** His wife knew it was a bird that gave milk. They kept it in a secret hut and always had milk. Their son and daughter were puzzled, and put some of the milk in a bowl. They put the bowl outside to see what animal would drink from it. No animal would, but birds came to drink it. They followed their mother secretly, and when she left they went to look at the bird but it escaped from them. They went to try and catch another milk bird, and thought they had done so, but it gave water instead of milk. Their parents were very puzzled, but never knew why the bird had stopped giving milk.

Ewan McVicar, 2007