

Western stories of birds

Short versions

A man went to bed. He was kept awake all night by a bird singing. In the morning he set a trap and caught the bird. "Now you will sing when I want."

"No, we only sicken and die if we are caged."

"Then I will put you into a pie and eat you."

"Please do not eat me. If you set me free I will tell you three great truths." The man set him free. The bird said, "First, never believe a prisoner's promise. Second, always keep a hold of what you have. Third, never sorrow over what is lost forever."

A shepherd was caught on a high hill by a storm at night. He heard the beating of heavy wings. A voice called out, "Are you down there?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then come up!" He found himself riding on the back of an eagle, among other eagles ridden by cats. They flew to the food cellar of the King of France, where the cats and the shepherd ate and drank all night. The shepherd fell asleep, and was found alone in the morning by the King's soldiers. They locked him up in a tower. An eagle flew in the window, said, "So you are awake at last," took him up on its back and carried him home.

Two men were weary, and sat down to rest. One fell asleep, and the other noticed a tiny bird was sitting on his friend's ear. He flapped his hand and the bird flew off and into a crack in a tree. The man took his shoe off and stuck it over the crack to trap the bird so he could show it to his friend. He tried without success to wake his friend. At last he took his shoe off the tree. The bird flew out of the crack, and straight into the sleeper's ear, and the sleeper awoke. "Oh," said the sleeper, "I dreamed that you shut me up in a dark cave, and I could not get out."

A crow had stolen a piece of cheese and flew up into a tree to eat it. Along came a hungry fox, saw the crow with the cheese in its mouth, and decided to get the cheese. "Oh, mistress crow," he said. "How well you look today, with your glossy black wings and your fine claws. I have not heard you sing, but I'm sure since you look so fine you must have a beautiful singing voice." The crow was very flattered, and opened her mouth to sing. When she did so the cheese dropped out, and the fox caught it and ate it. "Indeed, your mouth is full of sweetness," he said, and ran away.

When the cuckoo comes to Scotland early from Africa, there will be a good harvest. So the men of one village said "If we keep the cuckoo here, we will have more than one harvest a year." They found where a young cuckoo was being fed in a dunnock nest. They built a hedge round the nest to keep the cuckoo in. "Look how high the hedge is growing" they said, "we will have three harvests this year". But the cuckoo was growing too. The hedge grew nice and high. But the cuckoo grew nice and high too. Then he flew away, nice and high.

Mister Heron and Mrs Fox decided to get married. But in case they were not suited, they decided to make a meal for each other first, to test themselves. They agreed they both liked soup. Mrs Fox made the soup, but when Mr Heron went to her house for dinner she served the soup in a flat soup plate. She could lick it up, but Mr Heron with his long thin beak went hungry. Then Mr Heron made the soup, but when Mrs Fox went to his house for dinner, he served it in long thin bowls like flower vases. He could sip up the soup, but Mrs Fox got none. They decided not to get married.

Fox met Cockerel. "What tricks can you do?" asked Cockerel.

"I can close one eye and shout loud."

"I can do that with both eyes shut," said Cockerel.

"Show me" said Fox. When Cockerel did so, Fox gripped him by the neck and began to drag him away. Cockerel yelled for help. The Old Wife looked out, and cried "That's my cockerel". Fox opened his mouth to say "He was yours, but he's mine now". When he opened his mouth, he dropped Cockerel, who jumped up on top of the henhouse, closed one eye, and crowed loud and hard.

A wolf wanted to catch and eat all of a family of eighteen wrens who lived in a barn. He knew one of them would be the wise grandfather, who would warn the rest to escape. He wanted to catch the grandfather first, but which was he, they all looked alike? He watched till one of them began to chop wood for the fire, and said to that one, "Well struck, you know how to handle an axe." The wren answered "Oh, see my grandfather over there, he taught me how to do it." The wolf jumped on the grandfather first and ate him, then all the rest.

A wren and her family lived in a barn and looked after the farmer's crop, only eating a little at a time. A family of mice came to live there, and to eat the crop. The farmer never saw them, and blamed the wren and her children. She got angry with the mice, and told them to leave the barn. They would not, and she went to get her sisters to help her push them out. When she came back, the mouse mother had brought all her sisters too. They went out to the field, to begin the fight. Along came a cat, and saw them. She crept away to call her sisters to the feast, but the littlest mouse saw her and warned the mice and wrens. The cats came, and went to live in the barn, waiting for the wrens and mice to come back. They did not.

Robin did not always have a red breast. He and Jenny Wren were out one very cold day, and they found a little child who had wandered away, and was freezing to death. Jenny Wren fluffed out her feathers and spread herself on the child's breast. "Robin, you go get fire to warm the child properly." Robin went searching. At last he found a cottage, and squeezed in through a hole in the thatch. He reached into the fire and took out a red hot cinder. The fire scorched and burnt away all his breast feathers, but he carried the cinder in his beak back to the child. Jenny Wren piled up dry grass and Robin put the cinder in. The two of them fed the fire with twigs till the child warmed enough, and could toddle off home again. When Robin's breast feathers grew out again, they were as red as fire.

In the middle of summer, when the days are longest, the birds would always be flying about and forever singing. Big Angus, the god of spring, could get no sleep. He called all the birds together and asked who was the best singer. They argued about this, so he said there would be a competition the next morning to find out. Early next morning the cock woke the rest, and one and all began to sing. Big Angus listened and laughed, because not one of them could be heard alone. By evening time they were so tired they all slept, but next morning the contest began again. And it still goes on.

The wild swans are said to be the enchanted sons of a king who offended a witch. At night when no-one can see they go up to the wild lochans in the high mountains, take off their wings and feathers, and eat and drink, talk and laugh like men. But before the sun comes up they must put their feathers on again. They will be free when three times three hundred years are over.

A blackbird went travelling, and he came to a lonely farmhouse. He sang sweetly, till the guidwife came out and said, 'Blackbird, come and stay with me and I will feed you every morning on cream.' The blackbird liked cream, and decided to stay and sing for his supper. But when the guidman came home, he said 'What's that noise? Oh, there's a bird loose in the house, I'll fix it.' He took up his big crooked stick and swiped at the blackbird. The guidwife tried to stop him and to explain, but he would not listen. The blackbird hopped along the mantelpiece, and the guidman tried to hit it, but he smashed all the ornaments, and the clock, and the pictures. The blackbird flew out of the door, saying 'I don't really like cream all that much.'

A crow was thirsty on a hot day. He found a jug with a little water in it, but his short beak would not reach far enough. He thought and thought. He went and got a pebble, and dropped it into the jug. Then another and another, until the water rose up so high he could drink.

Three mothers lived with their families in the same tree. An eagle lived in her nest at the top, a wildcat in the hollow trunk, and a sow in a hole among the roots. They were all friends, but the wildcat was a troublemaker. She told the eagle that the sow was digging so much in the roots she would bring the tree down. She told the sow that the eagle was planning to have pork for dinner. The eagle and sow got so worried they would not leave their homes, and their families were starving. Then the wildcat was caught by a hunter. The eagle and sow were so worried about the motherless kittens in the trunk they talked, and became friends again.

A swallow and other birds watched a farmer sowing seed. The swallow said "We had better eat up every one of those seeds quickly or we will be sorry." The other birds laughed at him, and refused. The swallow did his best, but some of them started to grow, so he flew far away to the south. The seeds were hemp, and they grew into strong plants. The farmer harvested them, and made them into cords, and with the cords he made nets, and with the nets he caught the birds who had laughed at the swallow.