

Feathers of Forgiveness



By Darren Landgren



In a valley along a snowy mountainside sat a beautiful lake. Water trickled down the mountains and emptied into the basin, supplying it with endless amounts of fresh water for all the animals and plants to use. Because of this, the flora grew strong, and there were many fish.



Above the lake flew a solitary black bird. He was on the hunt for new fishing grounds and soon discovered the inlet to the river, which was bursting with fish trying to spawn upstream. The black bird tried a couple of minnows and decided they were the tastiest fish he'd ever eaten. Being very cautious, he hid in a pine tree for a whole day, on the lookout for the Eagle. Surely the Eagle would know about this lake - but he never showed up.



The black bird flew back to his family in the woods and told them about the lake. He told his neighbors, he told his friends, and he even told the grumpy black bird who lived in a rotten stump. They all listened in excitement as their bellies grumbled!



When the black bird families arrived, they feasted upon the bounty. The Elders warned the young birds not to be greedy or gluttonous with the fish, for the fish were for all to enjoy and, if not properly used, could vanish. So, the black bird families shared the catch, making sure no one ate too much and that they kept the shores clean of bones.



Many years passed. As the black birds got their fill of fish, some moved away while others stayed. Those who moved away met other bird families and told them about the lake, yet they decided to stay in their homelands across the mountains. Over time, some of the black birds forgot where they came from. All was happy as the birds found new homes; some stayed at the lake, while others lived in the peaks.



Then came a winter when the snow seemed to never stop. The wind drove the cold air from the mountains and spread it all across the lands. Most of the birds' food was covered in deep snow, and soon, they grew hungry.



One black bird from the mountains, who loved telling stories, reminded everyone of the lake with the delicious fish. He decided that they must find this lake or perish. After many months of searching, they finally found it. It was frozen solid except for one spot: the inlet of the river, which, because of its flow, never froze.



"Hello," said the black birds who lived at the lake to the black birds who had just arrived. "Who are you?"

"We are the black birds from across the mountain," the travelers replied. "We are starving. The winter has covered our food, but we remember the tale of this lake and how our relatives live here."

The black birds who lived at the lake laughed. "We have no relatives across the mountains! Look at you—you are small, your beaks are misshapen, and you don't sound like us! Go away, this is *our* fish."

The black birds from the mountains frowned. How could the lake birds say this? Despite very subtle differences, the birds were almost the same and carried the same stories.

"FINE!" yelled the mountain birds. "Do as you wish, but we also remember the stories our elders told us of greed and gluttony."



The mountain birds retreated to the woods, where they watched as the lake birds ate their fill. The lake birds, too consumed with their fish and worrying that the mountain birds would steal from them, began eating as much as they could every day. The mountain birds survived off the scraps of the lake birds, while the lake birds became incredibly fat.

However, a few of the mountain birds and lake birds ignored the feud; they had families together and began their own journeys, remaining humble.



When the winter finally ended and the first greens emerged from the snow, the lake opened up—but there were no fish left. The fat lake birds looked and looked, but they could find nothing.

Soon, Wolf, Coyote, and Cougar arrived. They were excited to see all the fat birds that couldn't fly, and they helped themselves to an easy dinner, as the winter had been long and harsh for them, too.



The mountain birds, scrawny but strong, flew to the highest branches of the trees. They watched as their relatives—the ones who hadn't acknowledged them—fell prey to the predators.

The mountain birds sat for a long time, thinking of how they could help. One small mountain bird chirped, "We must bring fish from the mountain ponds! Maybe the fish would satisfy the Wolf, Coyote, and Cougar."

One by one, the mountain birds dropped fish near the predators and urged the lake birds to flee into the pines. It worked! The Wolf, Coyote, and Cougar were too busy eating the fresh fish to continue hunting the birds.



Finally safe, the mountain birds and lake birds sat in the pines, looking at each other in shame. They had forgotten who they were, and they had forgotten the words of their elders: *do not be greedy*.

Amongst the sobs of the birds, they heard a booming laughter echo from the peaks. They looked up and saw Nanaboozho rolling on the ground, high upon the mountain.



"What is so funny?" yelled the birds.

Nanaboozho wiped a tear from his eye and replied, "You are!"

"Oh? How so?" asked the birds.

"Well," Nanaboozho said, "you had all the fish you could eat and all the land you could want. But because you couldn't treat each other with kindness—simply because of how you looked and where you came from—you suffered greatly, didn't you?"

The birds couldn't respond. They hung their heads.



"From now on," Nanaboozho declared, pointing to the scrawny group, "you, mountain birds, will be called the Crows, *Gaagaagi*."

He pointed to the heavy birds. "And you, chubby lake birds, will be called Ravens, *Aandeg*."

Nanaboozho then looked at the smaller group—the ones who had mixed together and remained helpful. "And what about you? You, the most humble of the birds. What would you like to be called?"

"We just want to be called Blackbirds, *Asiginaak*," they replied. "We are all the same family."



And it was so. The Blackbirds were given speed and agility by Nanaboozho for being humble and forgiving.

You can still watch them today, as the little Blackbird pecks at the Crow and the Raven, chasing them through the sky to remind them to behave and be grateful.

About the Author

Boozhoo, my name is Darren Landgren, or Waazakone Binesi (Flash of the Thunderbird). I am an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, an Ojibwe tribe in Northern Minnesota.

This story came to me one day when I was distraught over my tribe's unwillingness to allow our descendants who cannot be enrolled in the tribe to hunt and fish within our reservation boundaries. There is a special permit process for descendants to apply, but none are allowed. I thought this story could enlighten people on how we should treat each other, even though we may have differences. Hopefully, this story can inspire someone to treat others as they wish to be treated.

I believe some stories are not their owners and should be shared with all. This is one of them. Enjoy and don't forget to tell your stories, even if you think no one will listen.