



Chapter 1

Animal Antics

The living world has had an enormous influence on superstition throughout the centuries. Newcomers to Atlantic Canada brought their beliefs with them and by so doing have enriched the mental landscape that is still with us today. They carved new lives out of what was virgin land. They joined an already rich heritage of myth and mythology that were and are part of First Nations living.

The role animals have played and continue to play form an important function in the mythology of Atlantic Canada and the world beyond. Animal myths are common elements in our literature, film and storytelling. Passed down from generation to generation, they have gained a foothold in the landscape of our minds.

Let's take a look at the burrowing groundhog, an animal largely forgotten, except on February 2nd. Groundhog Day is when the world checks in to see if the furry little rodent might show his face. If you are anything like me, you, too, tune in to see whether there will be six more weeks of winter if he should see his shadow, or whether there will be an early spring. The legend of the groundhog actually dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany and first came to North America via Pennsylvania. Today, Groundhog Day has practically become a national holiday with festivals, marching bands, banners and a full day of celebrations in many places.

Nova Scotians have anointed Shubenacadie Sam as its chief weather prognosticator. Other famous groundhog meteorologists include Wiarton Willie and Gary the Groundhog in Ontario, Brandon Bob in Manitoba and Balzac Billy in Alberta. The granddaddy of them all is Punxsutawney Phil from Pennsylvania.

Growing up in Liverpool, I was surrounded by superstition - and it wasn't just groundhog forecasters that played a part in my upbringing. I have an uncle who believes that dogs are among the most astute weather forecasters. He believes that if a dog sleeps facing north, it means there is a bad winter storm brewing. His old mongrel,

more than just his faithful companion, has never gainsaid his belief. I was and still am mesmerized by my uncle's predictions and his ability to talk about them.

My grandmother, who ran a small hobby farm with her husband in Queens County, was one of those who believed that a solitary crow was a harbinger of doom and gloom. My grandfather maintained that if the spring's first calf is breached, then it is a bad omen for the rest of the year.

When I hear these beliefs dismissed off-handedly as merely nothing more than "superstitions" or "old wives' tales," I am reminded how close our forebears lived with nature and just how much of that we've lost in the modern age. Perhaps the current state of the environment stems from that lost connection. The following may reawaken your ability to look at animals in a new light.

A MOUSE IN THE HOUSE

We're not talking Mickey here. We're talking omens of misfortune.

- If a mouse was discovered in the house, it was thought that someone in that house would soon die.
- In another version of this belief, a mouse in the house could foretell a terrible tragedy such as an accident or fire.
- It is bad luck to bury a dead mouse in your yard because nothing will ever grow there again.

The exception here is:

- You should allow your cat to kill as many mice as it can, because with every mouse it kills, it also kills one of your enemies.
- If a cat brings a mouse to your house, then it means no one in your house will go hungry.



DOWN ON THE FARM

Find out what certain things mean when they occur down on the farm.

- If a calf is still-born, someone on the farm will die.
- A white calf born in the winter? Prepare for a harsh weather.
- A cow that doesn't give milk for a week is a sign of a harsh winter.
- If a cow is milked outside the barn while it is standing on the ground, the animal will dry up.
- If you sing inside the barn, the cows will not give milk.
- It is good luck to have a cat in your farm to say nothing about keeping the mice population under control.

THE SKY IS FALLING

This may be something to cluck about

- If the hens don't lay eggs for three consecutive days, it's a sign that a tragedy is about to befall the farm.
- If the hens nest in the morning, it's a sign of impending death, usually that of the farmer or someone in the family.
- A hen or rooster getting inside the farmhouse predicts a visitor that day.

Did you know...

that a horseshoe hung in the bedroom will keep nightmares away?

HORSING AROUND

Sorry to nag you, but these four-legged creatures have a lot to say about what's going on in your life.

- Horse brasses were used to protect horses from witches.
- Changing a horse's name is bad luck.
- Inhaling a horse's breath is said to be a cure for whooping cough.
- If a horse stands with its back to the barn door, it is going to rain.
- A horse that neighs at the door of a house is a sign of sickness for the inhabitants.
- If you break a mirror, the misfortune can be averted if you lead a horse through the house.
- If you walk under a ladder it is considered bad luck but you can avoid the bad luck if you keep your fingers crossed until you have seen three horses.
- The tail of a horse is adorned with ribbons to keep the animal safe from witches.
- Dreaming of a white horse is considered a death omen.
- Gray horses or horses with four white feet are considered unlucky.

Did you know...

that if a mouse is discovered in your house, someone is thinking bad thoughts about someone who lives there and may wish them harm?

- If you wear a hair from the tail of a black stallion on your wrist you will be protected from witches.
- It was thought that warts could be cured by circling them in horsehair.
- If you lead a white horse through your house, it will banish all evil.

HORSESHOES KEEP YOUR GOOD LUCK UP

Remember to hold the good luck in.

- A horseshoe nail is frequently used as a good luck charm if it is bent into a circle by a blacksmith.
- A horseshoe, hung above the doorway, will bring good luck to a home.
- Witches fear horses. They avoid a door with a horseshoe mounted on it. The horseshoe must be hung with the points up to keep the luck from spilling out.

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

Does your dog have a sixth sense?

- It was once believed that if a dog howled for no obvious reason, something tragic was about to happen.
- If a dog passes gas, it's a sign that a bad storm is coming.
- When a dog buries its bone in your garden, it indicates a poor harvest that year.
- A dog barking at the door of your home, but there is no one there, means the spirit of the recently deceased has visited your house.

Mary Jane Lamond

Mary Jane Lamond is a sharer of songs, stories and spirit. This sharing has garnered Lamond numerous Juno and East Coast Music Award nominations as well as critical acclaim and a world-wide audience. Mary Jane's latest recording, "Storas" (Gaelic meaning "a treasure"), is a beautiful interpretation of some of the Scottish Gaelic songs that have become part of Nova Scotia's Gaelic tradition. On the North Shore of Cape Breton Island, the rich heritage of the region's Scottish settlers was kept alive through song. It was in Nova Scotia, visiting her grandparents throughout her youth, that Lamond fell in love with Scottish Gaelic traditions and song.

Living in the Gaelic community of Nova Scotia I have, of course, encountered lots of examples of superstitions and beliefs: An droch shuil (the Evil Eye), An Da-shealladh (second sight); traditionally in this culture, fairies, forerunners and ghosts abound. More than one storyteller has certainly convinced me that we share our world with many creatures we cannot always see.

I would say that my main fear in the superstition area is "the jinx," that is saying something will be good before it happens. I just about have a heart attack when someone in the band says something like "This is going to be a good show tonight." To me, that just about guarantees that absolutely everything that could go wrong now will. I think that by announcing a certain positive outcome somehow you just open the door for everything to be negative. It's not that I believe that the opposite is true. I don't think that making negative statement makes things better, just that you are really asking for it if you go around boasting.

I like to think of myself as a modern, rational human being but I still feel a slight sense of horror when I see someone put a pair of shoes on a table, even though I'm pretty sure that disaster really doesn't befall everyone who does. Actually I think I might be a bit like the old fellow who when asked if he believed in Fairies replied, "No, but they're there!"

- It is bad luck for a dog to run between a woman's legs.
- Many consider it a good omen if a dog eats grass.
- If a dog chases its tail, a ship will sink.

SOMETHING TO CROW ABOUT

These black birds may have something important to tell you.

The old saying goes:



*One crow sorrow
Two crows joy
Three crows letter (or girl)
Four crows a boy
Five crows silver
Six crows gold
Seven crows a secret, yet to be told.
Eight crows for a wish.
Nine crows for a kiss.
Ten crows for a time of joyous bliss.*

- Seeing one crow is believed to be bad luck. If you spit when you see that crow, however, you'll fend off the bad luck. Another version suggests you can erase the bad luck by making the sign of a cross.
- It was believed by First Nations people that crows were sent to Earth to escort the souls of the recently deceased to meet their Creator.
- A single crow in a cemetery is a sign that there will be a funeral within the week.

- Two crows flying over a house foretell a birth in that household.
- It is bad luck to see a single crow at a wedding, but good luck to see a pair.

Peter Coad

Peter Coad is an original Maritimer. He was born and brought up in the north end of Halifax, the Hydrostone. His wife is also from Halifax. His weather forecasts for various broadcasters have made him a local celebrity. He currently works for CBC Halifax.

Well, for the life of me I can't seem to come up with any "original" maritime weather folklore. In doing some digging around, however, I have discovered some tried and true old ones.

"Little snow, big snow, big snow, little snow." One often hears this statement at the start of a snowfall — looking at the size of the flakes as they fall. My explanation for this would be that the larger flakes are falling from the type of cloud that produces flurries; a convective type of cloud (summertime showers) and in passing any one spot would not necessarily produce a great snowfall.

The reason the flakes are larger is because of the upward and downward motion of air within this type of cloud, is great enough to cause the flakes to join together. These flakes are held in suspension within the cloud until they are too large for these "updrafts" and they fall to earth. This is not to say that you will not get a lot of snow from "flurries" — lines of these sometimes develop and can produce snow squalls. But generally, these flurries come and go and are of shorter duration.

Now the smaller flakes would then come from the type of cloud that does not have as great or as many updrafts and

If crows fly low, winds going to blow.

If crows fly high, winds going to die.

When sea birds fly to land there truly is a storm at hand.

downdrafts and therefore can fall as the water vapor develops them into snowflakes.

How about an explanation of “red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.” This saying can be found in Shakespeare and also in the Bible in slightly different forms, but in climatology it comes from the fact that in the northern hemisphere weather systems typically move from west to east.

If the sky is red at night (sunset) then what is producing the redness (dust, impurities in the atmosphere) is to the west. It will be an area of stable air, usually denoted by high pressure, which is a “fair-weather” producer. Therefore, that area of stable air, fair weather, will be moving towards you. If however the red sky is in the morning — the east — then the fair weather area of high pressure has passed by and is now to the east.

And one more oldie but goody: “Cold enough to freeze the balls of a brass monkey.” I actually did once explain this to a radio audience. Back in the days of wooden ships and iron men, cannon balls were made of iron. They sat in a cradle beside the gun. This cradle was made of brass and had indentations in it to hold the iron balls. It was called a “monkey.” Because iron and brass have different qualities, they will contract (or expand) at different rates at different temperatures. In cold temperatures, the brass contracts at a greater rate than the iron, so the balls would have a tendency to fall off the monkeys.