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## Swallow's Nest: Birdwatching Poems

Karissa Wehri

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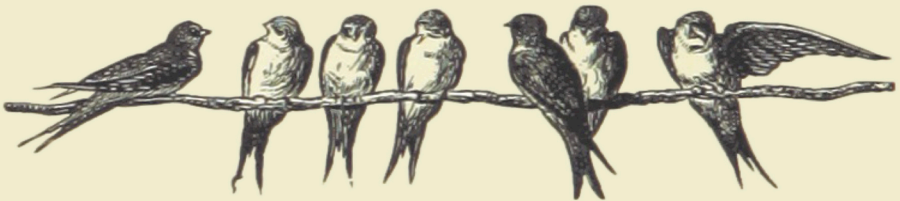
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SWALLOW'S  
NEST

*Karissa Webri*



# SWALLOW'S NEST

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*Birdwatching Poetry by Karissa Wehri*

A collection of poems about American birds, including how to find them, identify them, and interesting facts



Photo by Seth Owens

For Bonnie and Charles Staples,

My favorite birdwatchers

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## Cardinal

One winter stroll within the wood  
I chanced upon a bird  
Whose vivid red on wintry white  
Looked very much absurd!

The Cardinal upon his bough  
Appeared enjoy his feathers  
The shocking way they smoldered forth  
Amidst the snowy weather

He quite surpassed the muted birds  
With pale and greyish plumage  
Contrasted with that lordly one  
They seemed somehow so foolish!

I often think of that Cardinal  
So different from grey throngs  
And why this bird more than the rest  
So utterly belonged

### Cultural Significance

The belief exists in many cultures that cardinals are messengers from our loved ones who have passed away. Due to their wonderfully eccentric red color, their tendency to remain in one place, and the fact that they mate for life, cardinals are strongly tied with the feelings of love and home.

### Appearance

The most salient aspect of a cardinal is its bright red plumage, which deepens in color during the winter. The sizes of cardinals vary from eight to nine inches, and they only weigh about an ounce. They have small, stubby beaks which are highlighted by a black strip, and crests that flare to a point atop their heads. The females are distinguished from the males in that they are browner with reddish undertones.

### Habitat

Cardinals are found throughout the Americas. They prefer more inhabited areas like parks, forest edges, and even your own backyard.

### **Snowy Owl**

Snow lands soft upon the ground  
Leaving such a noiseless sound  
Fallen from the clouds above  
To land in dirt and mix with mud -

Nature must have sensed the shame  
In leaving such a perfect waste  
And from the snowfall drifting down  
She spread the wings to Earth unbound  
Eyes to pierce the thickest storm  
Downy to defy the cold -

Thus was Snowy Owl made  
To dignify the winter's dregs  
And take her flight beneath the clouds  
Leaving such a noiseless sound



### Cultural Significance

While owls are symbols of wisdom and truth in the West, their symbolisms vary widely throughout the world's cultures. In Asia, owls are seen as bringers of luck and charm, whereas in both African and Native American cultures they are frightful omens of death.

### Appearance

Snowy owls have wingspans of 4 to 5 feet and can weigh anywhere from 4 to 7 pounds; they have feathers of white that accentuate their piercing yellow eyes, yet whereas the males are mostly white, females and their young have dark speckled spots.

### Habitat

Most typically found in Russia and the northernmost regions of North America, Snowy Owls prefer cold, snowy climates. Though they are very nomadic, they are attracted to open spaces and prairies that are most similar to the tundra.

## Loon

There is the strangest empathy  
    Found in the eerie cry  
That traveled on the lonely wake  
    One happens to preside

    A forlorn satisfaction  
Only known when you're alone  
    To hear a foreign sadness  
Of the likes oneself has known

The Loon will give one company  
    As though a grim ally  
And ride with you along the bay  
    Beneath the darkening skies

    At times, in but a fraction,  
He will dive and appear gone  
But with downcast allegiance  
    Shall return to you, ere long

### Cultural Significance

The mournful, haunting call of the loon is a popular fascination. The loon's cry has made its way into many more movies and works of literature than the actual bird itself, yet there are Native American myths in which the loon plays a greater role than its song: in one creation myth, it is the loon that dives to the bottom of the eternal lake, collecting the mud that created the continents.

### Appearance

Loons have an average wingspan length of 4 to 5 feet and weigh about 4 pounds; they have black backs with unique patterns of white, as well as white underbellies. Females are identical to males in plumage besides being a little smaller.

### Habitat

Being water birds, loons spend nearly their entire lives afloat upon the freshwater lakes, only coming ashore to breed and raise their chicks.

## **Killdeer**

I beg your pardon, Officer,  
For hunting out of season  
And though I do apologize  
I also have my reason -  
I truly love all wildlife  
But most of all the birds  
And listening to their songs, I heard  
One sing a hymn most queer  
And in my head it filled the words  
“Killdeer! Killdeer! Killdeer!”

### Fun Facts

'Killdeer' birds get their names from their piercing call which sounds eerily like the words 'kill deer.' They are also notorious tricksters who distract predators away from their nests by pretending to have a broken wing. They run from their nests while dragging their wings and making distress noises, leading the predators away from their chicks!

### Appearance

Killdeers have wingspans ranging from 23 and 25 inches and can weigh between 2 and 4 ounces. They have brown backs with white foreheads and black bars about their white breasts. The females are distinguishable in that their headband and breasts are typically browner than that of the males.

### Habitat

Killdeers will occupy anywhere from the beachside, the coastal wetlands, to fields a long standing water. Since they are ground-nesting birds they prefer areas with shorter vegetation, making them very populous in farms and grazing fields.

## Columbidae

She in some eyes is a Dove  
The courier of heaven's love  
Graced upon the race of man  
Our higher hope to understand

Yet to many, she is known  
A dirty Pigeon, crude and low  
With plumage smeared of streets' grime  
A winged rat, in many minds

And yet which seed as this has sown  
Has known her as she *should* be known?  
A goodly dove, for human peace  
Or pigeon stained with garbage grease?

We do not know, and yet the bird  
Has neither case seemed to have heard  
And with an oddly mortal flare  
She passes mankind without care  
Secured within a white-grey breast  
Her truth unknown, and yet unguessed

### Cultural Significance

Dating all the way back to ancient Mesopotamia, doves were associated with figures such as Inanna-Ishtar, the goddess of love. In ancient Greece, it was said that Aphrodite herself, the goddess of love and beauty, would purify her altars with the blood of the dove. According to Christianity, the Holy Spirit itself descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

### Appearance

The Columbidae vary greatly in terms of size and colors, being as big as turkeys to as small as sparrows, and wearing the colors of pink, green, and yellow, to a dull, plain grey. Most of the family are characterized by short legs, short bills, and small heads on large, sturdy bodies.

### Habitat

Doves and pigeons live nearly everywhere in the world, besides the very driest or coldest places. They do not seem to prefer any environment, but live crowded in the densest cities or scattered throughout the savannahs, being very adaptable creatures.

## Woodpecker

I'm quite perplexed by Woodpecker  
The strangest bird to spy  
Who whacks determined at firm trunks  
Without true reason why -

Why not scrounge through dirt or brush  
To find his precious insects?  
The other birds do just as fine  
Whilst keeping their skulls intact

And yet he seems just as content  
To test his strength to wood  
Withholding that queer confidence  
That dons his bright red hood



### Cultural Significance

The symbolism of woodpeckers is mainly confined to Native American cultures. Many Western tribes see woodpeckers as symbols of friendship and happiness. In California, woodpecker feathers are used in many medicinal and ceremonial objects.

### Appearance

Woodpeckers can be easily identified as they cling to the sides of trees, both standing and fallen. They vary greatly in size and color and range from 3 inches to 20 inches long. Their plumages range from brown, black, white, yellow, and red. They have strong, sturdy beaks built for drilling into wood and sticky tongues to lick out their food from the crevices.

### Habitat

Though grasslands and even deserts are occupied by the creatures, woodpeckers are typically found within more wooded areas. For those that live in the desert, they are often found nesting within the cacti.

## Heron

Moonlight glistens on the pond  
Whose waters give a shiver  
Deep within the reeds and fronds  
Lo! I see a quiver!

What could be there, in the night,  
When all else is asleep?  
Quick! Where it is safe, go hide,  
An eerie being creeps -

Watch the water's eddying  
From that specific spot  
Hark! The frogs are quieting  
Their croaking now has stopped

Oh, there it is! Now watch it raise  
Up high its twisted neck  
Its beady, fixed, and wary eyes  
Both seem stare straight to death!

Now it spreads its wings, and soars  
Just like a banshee might  
That heron is a ghostly bird  
To spy out in the night

### Cultural Significance

In Egypt the heron is honored as the creator of light, and a double-headed heron is symbolic of prosperity. As for the Chinese, the heron is a symbol of patience and strength. Some Native American cultures have made it symbolic of good fortune.

### Appearance

Hérons are long-necked birds that can be distinguished from cranes by the fact that they fly with their necks retracted rather than stretched out. Their sizes vary from 10 inches to 5 feet in length, and they have long bills that vary from thin to thick. Species have plumages of brown, black, blue, grey, or white, and there is little difference between the male and female herons.

### Habitat

There are herons on every continent, except Antarctica, and they can be found foraging along lakes, rivers, marshes, and on the seashore.

## Hawk

Tyrant Hawk, above his realm,  
Surveys his subjects of the ground  
While little mice, they hide away  
Yet fearful of this Bird of Prey

Acquitting them, he hurries on  
To execute his fearsome law  
And spot the rodent who may dare  
To be unwise & not take care

As does now that silly mole  
Who peers so heedless from his hole  
The talon's flash & turn of wing  
Meet mole to fury of the King

His law, albeit harsh & cruel  
Is founded on one higher rule:  
Be keen or killed, as all agree  
And thus is kept Democracy

### Cultural Significance

As with the Woodpecker, hawk mythology is mainly restricted to Native American cultures. They are seen as symbols of bravery and inner strength and are thought to protect men from their enemies.

### Appearance

Sizes of hawks vary greatly throughout the more than 200 species, ranging from 9 inches long to 2 feet; they are sturdy-bodied, broad-winged birds of prey, typically of brown or white plumages. The females are generally larger than the males.

### Habitat

Hawks are distributed throughout North America, Central America, Jamaica, and the West Indies; they are found in mountainous ranges, tropical areas, forests, plains, and deserts, though they mostly prefer open areas where it is easier to sight their prey.

## Finch

The Finch may be considered as  
    An unremarkable thing  
Whose songs are not too beautiful  
    And colors rather plain

    Neither big, nor all too small  
    It cannot catch the eye  
Nor is it quite lonesome enough  
    To make a kindred sigh

And yet, without extravagance,  
    Did God still love His Finch  
    And scatter His creation  
    Over many gentle winds

Perhaps He does not care so much  
    For grandest spectacle  
As He enjoys to see His Finch  
    Contented in itself

### Fun Facts

Finches are very social birds. If kept from others of their species they may develop behavioral issues. Even though they prefer to be with others of their kind, finches are popular apartment pets due to their gentle nature.

### Appearance

The smallest finches, the Andean siskin, are only about four inches long, whereas the largest species, the collared grosbeak, can grow up to nine inches. They usually have strong, stubby beaks, and their plumages vary from brown, yellow, red, green, and black.

### Habitat

Finches are found throughout all continents, except Antarctica. While there are certain species that occupy the mountainous regions and deserts, they are most common in wooded areas.

## Pheasant

Red, and green, and golden brown  
Adorn the pompous Pheasant  
He wears these colors like a gown  
Asserting his good lineage -

The females look on idly  
And share a private laugh  
For though their feathers lack beauty  
They supplement in tact

And when the hunter comes his way  
Those humdrums shan't be seen -  
But will be found a nobler prey  
In gold, and red, and green



### Fun Facts

There are around 50 species of pheasants. They originated from central Asia before being introduced to other continents around two thousand years ago; their average lifespan in the wild is less than a year, whereas in captivity they average eighteen years.

### Appearance

In most species of pheasants, males are gaudy birds with beautiful colors. The most well-known pheasant introduced to North America, the ring-necked pheasant, has a red face, green neck, a gold-brown body, and a long, striped tail. By contrast, the females of the species are much duller in color, usually a plain brown, with shorter tails than the males.

### Habitat

Pheasants are birds that are restricted to the ground, both foraging and nesting in the grasses. Because of this, pheasants prefer open spaces of tall grasses and vegetation.

## Magpie

Now don't you try to say to me  
My Magpie is a thief!  
That rids you of your jewelry  
And gives you so much grief

You are a moony lady  
And now this is merely truth  
But then to blame my birdie  
Why, I must give you reproof!

For Magpie is the nicest bird  
Who loves me as a friend  
And every day, she's always sure  
To bring me sweetest things

Hairpins of silver, rings of gold  
She gifts as if they're free  
And not a thief is one who shows  
Such generosity!

### Cultural Significance

In Eastern Asia the magpie is associated with good luck, though in the West it is viewed as a clever thief.

### Appearance

Magpies have wings and upper parts of black, and breasts and bellies of white. They are a bit on the large side, growing from 17 to 24 inches long, with typical wingspans of two feet.

### Habitat

Being highly intelligent and adaptable birds, magpies can be found throughout a host of different environments; they are found throughout Europe, Asia, and North America.

## Goose

Great must be the Goose's home  
When summer comes to end  
When bitter winds begin to blow  
And leas prove transient

For yet, he has this certainty  
That in his heart he holds  
That saves for him his worry  
After all that's here is sold -

After unimpeded warmth  
And snow begins to fall -  
After months of idle crop  
And harvest sweeps up all -

He must possess a truer home  
That causes him to rouse  
Away from this deceitful cold  
And fly to what is *South*

### Cultural Significance

The popularity of geese comes more from their bountiful sayings than from any symbolism itself; “your goose is cooked” means to be inevitably doomed to some punishment; to “have a goose to pluck” means to hold a grudge; and to “whistle like a goose amongst the swans” is, obviously, to be outside one’s expertise.

### Appearance

The term “goose” is associated with many birds that aren’t related to the “true geese” family. For example, swans are typically larger than geese and have longer necks whereas ducks are much smaller; true geese come in colors of white, grey, and brown. Though the females share the same plumages they are smaller than the males.

### Habitat

Geese are mainly found throughout North America. Being wetland fowl, they live mainly near lakes, ponds, rivers, and marshes.

## Crane

With ducking head and arching wings  
The Crane performs his dance  
Yet does he celebrate for Spring  
Or for budding romance?

What could cause his fragile limbs  
To dance such fierce ballet  
Without a formal lesson,  
And without music to play?

Maybe something in the air  
Intoxicates him so,  
And yet he doesn't seem to care  
Nor does he seem to know!

Perhaps the Crane but celebrates  
His freedom from true reason  
To toss his head and exultate  
The strange instinct within him

### Cultural Significance

The elegance of the crane's figure and their wonderful dances have made them ancient symbols in many cultures. In pre-Islamic Arabia the three chief goddesses of Mecca were said to take the form of cranes, while Greek and Roman myths depict the dances of cranes as a celebration of life itself.

### Appearance

Cranes are large-bodied, long-legged, long-necked waterbirds. They are the tallest flying birds in the world; the stature of cranes varies from 35 up to 70 inches tall. The males are only slightly bigger than the females. They have plumages that vary between white, black, grey, and brown.

### Habitat

Cranes can be found in most continents excluding Antarctica and South America. They prefer vastly open spaces to roam, most commonly nesting in the wetlands.

## **Warbler**

Whistling merry as she goes  
The Warbler seeks her food  
She hops about from twig to twig  
In quite a cheerful mood

She searches through the thickets  
After foraging the trees  
Perhaps she'll find an insect  
After all that's there is gleaned

The Warbler minds her business  
Only giving others song  
She's very nice to other birds  
And lets them carry on

She only needs her whistle  
And to find enough to eat  
To know her life's good purpose  
With a calming certainty



### Fun Facts

Warblers are among the most common songbirds in North America and are found in all fifty states. They are very energetic and cheerful birds and may be heard singing in the nearby forest as they hunt for little bugs. Their songs range from happy whistles to strange buzzing noises.

### Appearance

Warblers are fairly small, only ranging between 4 and 7 inches in length, and they come in the colors of yellow, black, brown, and grey. They have small, delicate beaks, and plump, stout bodies. Though in some species the females are identical to the males, in others the females have the contrasting plumage of a pale brown, green, or yellow to the male's showier color.

### Habitat

Found only, yet extensively, throughout the Americas, warblers, as a group, are not restricted to specific environment, but species may be found in crowded cities, dense woodlands, open prairies, etc.

## Drake

Wading slow through waters quick  
And riding subtle wakes  
A placid little being drifts,  
The unassuming Drake -

Mindlessly this creature floats  
Upon a vastly sea  
He wonders not at grandest boats  
Nor waters stirred most deep

He makes one ponder on the thought  
To linger without knowing  
The depths for which one's life is wrought  
And be appeased with floating!

May we be unlike that Drake  
Yet idle on the surface  
But find the merit to forsake  
The emptiness of currents

### Cultural Significance

To the chagrin of the bird, ducks are typically regarded as objects of silliness and mirth, likely for their amusing behaviors and clueless demeanor. Many jabs are taken at ducks in the forms of children’s cartoons and age-old adages, such as, “They follow each other like ducks in the gutter,” and, “Looks like a duck in a thunderstorm!”

### Appearance

Ducks are typically around twenty inches in length, having plump, broad bodies, medium-sized necks, and bills that are typically broad and round-tipped. The drakes, the males, are often more colorful than their female counterparts.

### Habitat

Ducks are a species that are found worldwide, from the woodlands of North America and Europe to the tropics of South America, to even the sub-Antarctic regions of New Zealand. They are waterfowl and are nearly always close to a body of water.

## Blue Jay

Blue Jay leaves his wife and kids,  
And raises high his crest  
Preparing him his courage  
Puffing forth his ringed breast

He boldly flies into the world  
Defiance in him strong  
He is not shy, but greets all threat  
With loud and piercing song

He only aims to find a nut  
To bring home to his wife  
And yet remains defensive  
With a sharp and witty eye

As soon, however, as he has  
Delivered on his quest  
He greets his wife quite peacefully  
And settles down his crest

For though the world is dangerous  
And Blue Jay must be mean  
The nested bird is tender  
Being blessed with family!

### Cultural Significance

In Native American folklore the blue jay is often represented as a mean trickster due to the bird's aggressive yet clever behavior; however, it was also appreciated for its bold spirit. Likewise, in African American folklore the blue jay is typically seen as a servant to the Devil, yet one with courageous heart.

### Appearance

Blue jays have a length of nine to twelve inches with wingspans of thirteen to seventeen inches, and they have crests upon their heads. This crest presents itself whenever the bird is agitated or aggressive, but remains flat when they are calm. Hence their name, blue jays come in hues of bright blues, along with white faces that are collared with a strip of black and white underbellies.

### Habitat

Blue jays are found throughout North America and live both isolated in woodlands and among people in the cities, being well-adapted to human environments.

## Crow

“Caw!” says Crow with all his might  
To frighten meager birds  
“Caw!” He jeers, and joyful mocks  
All those he finds absurd

Those paltry little tweety birds  
Do much to make him glad  
He loves to be a noble bird  
So big and cloaked in black!

“Caw!” He shouts triumphantly  
But in his pride he spots  
His greatest, darndest enemy,  
The pompous, irksome hawk!

How tiresome it is to know  
That he is not the biggest!  
“Caw!” He gives his battle cry  
For he is yet the fiercest!

And with utmost aggression  
He attacks the poor old Hawk  
The Crow is all too valiant  
Defending but his “Caw!”

### Cultural Significance

The crow was never favored too highly in any culture, being widely portrayed as vain and quarrelsome. In Celtic and Irish mythology, the crow is associated with Badb, the goddess of violence, while also being seen as a bridge between life and death; in both Swedish and Germanic legend, they represent the spirits of lost souls. Indeed, many cultures view the crow as a symbol of death.

### Appearance

American Crows are 16 to 20 inches in length, weighing about one pound, with wingspans ranging up to three feet long. They are large birds of completely black plumages, squared-off tails, and large, broad wings.

### Habitat

Crows are intelligent birds that thrive in human environments; though originating from the woodlands and prairies, they have learned to feed on the roadkill and the discarded food left behind by people and so are quite common to spot in cities.

## Wren

Darling Wren flicks through the trees  
As song spills from her throat  
The smallest bird I've ever seen  
Bring forth such trilling notes!

I think she's far too delicate  
And mustn't sing at all  
Though she cares not, and has a fit  
Of belting forth her call -

Perhaps I'd better leave sweet Wren  
To chirrup her desire  
How aching for a tiny thing  
To stifle birdsong's fire



### Cultural Significance

Wrens, though not very prominent in other cultures, are celebrated in Europe. Despite its humble appearance, it is considered the “king of birds” and killing or bothering one is said to bring bad luck; there is even a Wren Day in Ireland, where a fake version of the bird is paraded through the streets…though this is more in ridicule, since there is a legend of a noisy wren giving away a hiding Saint Stephen.

### Appearance

Wrens range from 4 to 9 inches long, and their weight varies between half an ounce to two ounces; their plumages are rather unassuming, usually tan, grey, or black, and they have small, straight beaks and round, plump bodies.

### Habitat

The Eurasian wren is found in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Otherwise wrens are confined to North America and are mainly found in sparsely wooded areas.

## Swallow's Nest

High against the perilous cliff  
Overlooking the tumultuous seas  
Was built the little Swallow's Nest  
Suspended in the breeze.

The small bird that had made his rest  
In such a place uncanny.  
Took his hold by meeting mold  
To jagged nook and cranny.

And from a land of lush, green grass,  
This bird took but a few  
Enough for him to make his bed  
Of restless solitude

For sky that soared far up ahead  
Seemed always much too crowded  
And waters churned beneath his flight  
Were just enough to drown in.

So settled down the swallow  
In the spot he thought was best;  
Nestled on the cliff face  
May be seen the Swallow's Nest

### Cultural Significance

Due to the long journeys that swallows are known to make, they are popular nautical symbols of safe return. It was the mariner's tradition to tattoo a swallow for every 5,000 kilometers he sailed. The barn swallow also represents the coming of spring.

### Appearance

Barn swallows have wingspans of 12-14 inches and can weigh between .5-.8 ounces; they have blue-steel backs and rusty-colored foreheads, and the females differ from males in that their colors are less glossy and have shorter tail streamers.

### Habitat

Barn swallows, note their name, love farms and open pasturelands. Swallows commonly nest in barns and stables, under bridges, and other human structures. Before man-made sites became so common, swallows nested on cliff faces and in caves.

## Notes

The information on the cultural significance and mythology of various birds came from The White Goddess, Maier Files, Green and CO., The Big Deer, KZN Crane Foundation, Maritime Museum of British Columbia, The Owl Pages, Cavendish Square, Biblical Archeology Society, Real Archeology, Continuum International Publishing Group, Native Languages of the Americas, Nations Online, Ancient Pages, Chinasage, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Timeless Myths, and Ericka Simon's *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary* from University of Wisconsin Press.

In addition to the sources referenced above, I drew from The Cornell Lab, Animal Corner, Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute, and Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., for details on the birds' habitats.

Additional Fun Facts of the birds came from The Spruce Pets, The Cornell Lab, and Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.

*Karissa Wehri was  
born and raised in  
Grand Forks, North  
Dakota. She also spent  
some time living the  
farm life in the  
country. Becoming  
accustomed to the quiet  
isolation and the  
pleasantry of nature,  
her poems often include  
a central, natural  
theme.*

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