

The Wild Side

by Dave Gibson

THE THUNDERBIRD

Most often shown with spread wings, fanned-out tail, sharp beak, and profiled eye, the thunderbird is a common icon to Canadian and North American native peoples. A spirit combining intelligence, power, and wrath, the clouds are his shadow, the flap of his wings the wind and thunder. Lightning shoots from the blink of his eyes and is the harbinger of rain and crops.

In Algonquin mythology humans were created from the thunderbird's eggs thrown off a mountain by a giantess. Northwestern Indians thought the thunderbird capable of swallowing a whale whole representing sky and the ocean and therefore life and death. In another legend, upon the first snow the fairest virgin was offered in sacrificial appeasement. The maiden chosen this particular year was the one that the garter snake loved. No one had ever dared challenge the thunderbird but with his true love facing her grim fate the garter snake put on his war bonnet with plans of confronting the thunderbird. She



pled with him to turn back but he proceeded ahead and stood firmly in front of the thunderbird. The thunderbird spat fire and lightning toward the garter snake but he didn't flinch. Instead he returned fire at the thunderbird. Having

never been challenged before, this confused the thunderbird. Not knowing what else to do, he emitted an even larger stream of fire at the garter snake. Intrepidly standing his ground, the garter snake released a huge ball of fire into the thunderbird's face. Realizing that he had met his match, the thunderbird returned to his snowy home. The thunderbird never came back again and was relegated to the clouds in the sky spitting fire. For ridding his tribe of the thunderbird and saving his beloved, the garter snake was given a green blanket with white stripes which is how he got his colors.

Also known as a challenger and protector, Great Plains Indians were inspired by the thunderbird in their "ghost dances." A Paiute prophet named Wavoka from Nevada began "ghost dancing" in the 1880's. Following his purported resurrection after a total solar eclipse, it would become a movement that extended across the Great Plains. A hypnotic circular dance that can last hours and transform you into a trance-like state, it put them in touch with their ancestors in a world where white-men don't exist and there is no sickness and death. Now confined to reservations with little food and their way of life stripped from them, the buffalo would return and the white-man would be covered in a fresh layer of earth. The Lakota wore "ghost shirts and dresses" half covered in thunderbirds and impenetrable by weapons and bullets. For Sitting Bull and the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890 the outlawed "ghost dance" was tragically silenced. The last known performance of the "ghost dance" was in the 1950's by the Shoshoni.

Dave Gibson is a photographer & writer focusing on the natural world around us. His imagery can be found on his web site at www.davegibsonimages.com