



Cuentos Folklóricos: Folklore and nature!

Why the owls are truly the eagles of the night...

Transcript of Cuento Folklórico on screech owls

Introduction: About the Puerto Rican Screech Owl (the múcaro)

This is the story of the Puerto Rican Screech Owl, a type of screech owl unique to the island of Puerto Rico. This special bird has an explanation for its secretive, and nocturnal, behavior. But to understand this story, we must understand where it comes from: the Taíno peoples. This is the people who gave the Puerto Rican screech owl the name “múcaro,” which means “eagle of the night” in their language.

The Taínos were a subgroup of the Arawakan peoples, an indigenous group from the area now known as Venezuela. This group were experts in sailing, hunting, fishing and navigation. Their skills were owed largely to their careful observation of nature and its patterns.

The Taínos knew a lot about birds, in particular, and what these birds had to tell them. They would use bird behavior to decide when to sail and orient themselves in high seas. For example, the fork-tailed flycatcher, *tijereta* in Spanish, is known to drift on currents of warm air near the coastline. Rising, warm air is also how a tropical storm develops. When the Taínos saw this behavior, they knew a storm or a hurricane was coming. This same bird also stays close to the shore; seeing them let Taíno sailors know when they were close to land. The coming and goings of migratory birds were used for understanding an annual calendar as well!

Throughout time, the Awawaken Taínos spread across the Caribbean, colonizing and building trade routes for the products they grew, hunted and made. Their stronghold was in Puerto Rico, and they had *yukayeques*, or townships, in the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, the Virgin Islands, los Turk and Caico Islands, and Jamaica. This spread also gave way to a universal language.

The *yukayeques* had leaders called caciques and were run democratically. How much status a leader had was linked to the size of the village they managed. Some *yukayeques* had as many

as 10,000 people—this was much bigger than cities like London and Paris at the time! Unlike many other civilizations in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia, leaders were not royals or champions of war. Any status that did come from lineage was traced on the mother's side. Women and men alike served as caciques.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus sailed the sea...and instead of the Indies, he accidentally landed in the Caribbean. The Taínos were the first people that he encountered. Columbus and the Spanish settlers that followed were fascinated with the Taínos and their impressive society. Unfortunately, violent skirmishes with the Caribs, another indigenous group in the Caribbean, led the Spanish to act violently toward the Taínos as well. The Caribs had also weakened the Taínos with a war that is said to have happened just before the Spanish came. Within the next 50 years, their weakened defenses, diseases brought by settlers, unfair treatment from the Spanish, and the Spanish's use of guns and horses led to a sharp and quick fall of the Taíno villages.

Some will say that the Taíno vanished during this time. However, recent studies suggest that many people in the Caribbean, and possibly well beyond, have a lot of Taíno heritage. The Taíno also live on in their lasting impact on culture in the Americas.

We can thank them for maracas, the güiro—the instrument that makes salsa and cumbia so fun to dance to—for domesticating and refining growth of sweet potatoes, potatoes, cassava, garlic, and guava; for words of animals and plants, like manatee, iguana, the ceiba tree, and *guaraguao* (the word for red-tailed hawk in Spanish); words of objects like hammocks; and the word hurricane comes from the Taíno language, too!

The Taíno gave us much of their folklore and legends as well, many of which are still told and believed. To them, the múcaro is a symbol of a god called *Maquetaurie Guayaba*, the god of death and the divine world. In modern culture, the owl continues to be a harbinger of death. In fact, if an owl hoots near a household in the Dominican Republic, it is believed that death will touch one of the family members in the home.

Not all of the legends about the múcaro have such ominous tones, though. One, especially, may offer us an explanation for the reason why múcaros and other owls are the “eagles of the night...”

Táino Folklore: Why the múcaro is the eagle of the night...

In this large, blue planet that we live on there are many owls. One of the more curious types of owls is the múcaro, which lives only in the forest of Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican screech owl has a behavior that's very peculiar: during the day, it hides, and it only comes out at night. Do you want to know why?

There's an old legend on this Caribbean island that explains that In the forest, there used to be many parties. The animals would get together, they would dance, they would sing, and they would just have the greatest time.

Each time they organized the party at the different groups of animals rotated who would be the organizers. In this occasion, it just happened to be the birds. All the birds in the forest--the biggest ones all the way to the smallest one--got together in an assembly with the goal of distributing tasks for the party.

Since the most important thing was that the invites got out in a timely manner they, decided to send the fastest bird in the forest: the red-tailed hawk or the guaraguao. She was elated to be selected. She went all around the forest flying from house to house inviting each of the birds.

Eventually, she made it to the house of the múcaro, or the Puerto Rican screech owl. To her surprise she found the poor animal completely naked. The red-tailed hawk was kind of weirded out, and she actually felt kind of bad but to try to hide it. She pecked on the tree of his home and she called out, "Hello, my friend! I'm here to give you an invitation to the next party!"

The múcaro reacted with little enthusiasm and he didn't even bother to read the invitation, "Oh, I see."

"I'm sorry but I noticed that you're naked! Do you have any clothes to put on?" asked the red-tailed hawk.

The múcaro looked really embarrassed and he lowered his head, "No...the truth is I don't have anything, not even a jersey! I'm sorry but in this condition, I can't go to the party."

The red-tailed hawk was so impacted by his words that she didn't know what to say. She politely say goodbye and quickly went back and called for an emergency meeting with the birds. She

cried out to them, "We need to do something immediately! We can't let our friend miss the party just because he doesn't have clothes to put on!"

A parrot with beautiful emerald feathers was the first to speak up. "Of course, of course! We have to help. I have an idea: how each of us pull one feather from our bodies, we put it all together, and we give it to the owl so he can make himself suits to wear. The one condition will be that he has to return the feather to each of their owners at the end of the party."

If something characterizes birds, it's their generosity, so the parent didn't really have to insist. In no time, every bird agreed and they all plucked one feather from their chest. When they got at least 50 feathers, the red-tailed hawk put it all into a bag and quickly flew to the owl's house.

"Friend! This is for you! Between all of my friends in the forest, we got together a bunch of feathers so that you can make yourself a suit to wear!"

The múcaro was blown away and didn't know what to say.

"Really?" He asked, "But they're so pretty!"

The red-tailed hawk replied, "Please, use them if you wish. The only condition is that you have to return the feathers at the end of the party."

"Of course, of course!" The owl agreed, "Thank you so much! I can't wait to make something out of this."

Quickly, the owl got to work. He got a needle and string and in little time he had himself a beautiful jacket to wear. And it was well worth the effort! He put it on before the party and looked at himself in the mirror and thought, "Is it just me? Or do I look incredibly handsome?"

And in fact, it wasn't just him! When he made it to the party everyone was amazed at how beautiful his suit was. All of the animals are very impressed and it was the talk of the party. He was so proud and felt so attractive, that he strutted around the entire party showing off the whole night. Honestly, it was the owl's best night ever! He spent the night dancing and talking and he was the light of the party.

As the party came to a close and the music was starting to wind down, he realized, "Oh no! I'm going to have to return all the feathers at the end of this party."

...And that he didn't want to.

So slyly, the múcaro looked over his shoulders, noticed no one was watching him at that moment, and as soon as he could make an exit, he flew out the door of the party and went deep into the forest.

A few songs later the party finally came to an end. At which point the birds all looked at each other and realized the owl was gone. They thought, "Surely the owl just went to go get something; he'll be back so you can give us all back our feathers."

But, time went on and the múcaro was not coming back. Some of the birds even went into the forest and went from tree to tree looking for him. Alas, he was nowhere to be found.

The legend says that even today--many, many years later--the thief of the owl is still hiding in the forest and refusing to give the feathers back to their legitimate owners. And during the day, all the birds continue to look for him, but the owl hides so well that they'll never find him. This is why the owl only comes out during the night when the other birds are asleep.

Conclusion: About Western Screech Owl

If you listen just after dusk here in Utah, you, too, might hear of a screech owl. This sound, what might sound like a ping pong ball bouncing to a stop, is of the cousin of the múcaro, the Western Screech Owl!

Like the múcaro, the Western Screech Owl is nocturnal. After the sun sets, this stealthy hunter will set off to hunt and won't stop until an hour before sunrise. They are crafty hunters and use many techniques to catch food. Sometimes, they will play a waiting game; much like a fisherman who sits on the boat for a fish to bite their line, the Western screech owl patiently perches on a tree branch over a river until a fish comes along that they can dive and catch!

Bet you didn't know screech owls eat insects? They are so agile and sneaky that they can snatch insects right out of the sky! Though sometimes they just glean, or pluck, insects off of leaves in the tree they are perched in. They can also catch bats. Can you imagine? Those things are fast! Some other surprising prey that Western Screech Owls eat are frogs, crayfish. And of course, they will dive for mice!

Like the múcaro, Western Screech Owls likes forest. They can live in urban parks, too, as long as there is open forest and ideally a river. In fact, in Salt Lake, we see Western Screech Owls in the cottonwood trees in Liberty Park and on the Jordan River Parkway Trail!

They like the cottonwoods in Liberty Park because these trees have soft wood that give way to holes. Owls are cavity-nesters, which means they like to build their nests in holes in the tree. These holes are made by woodpeckers, who nest in there first, and then the owl is happy to move into the hole once the woodpecker is out. Sometimes, the owl is lucky to find a hole that is made naturally, maybe from a branch dying and off of the tree.

Like the múcaro, Western Screech Owls are shy. They don't mind visitors, but a party can be stressful. Think about the múcaro, who is hiding in its beautiful coat of feathers, the screech owls that live aside us don't like being seen by many people. If you see one, we invite you to admire it from a respectful distance and maybe with just a friend or two. Then, to respect the bird's wishes...to be left at peace and in silence. Don't bring a party with you! You heard how the commotion of a party affected the múcaro...

Now, unlike the múcaro, which seems to be doing very well in Puerto Rico, we don't know if the Western Screech Owl is doing well. There might be fewer out there than what your parents, or grandparents, used to see or hear. They live next to us only if we leave them the types of trees they need to make nests in and enough of these trees for them to move about in.

We are working on finding owls, like Western Screech Owls, to answer questions like...are they here? How many are here? What kinds of homes are they living in? And when we see homes, or habitats, that could be nice for owls, but don't see them there, what else is going on that keeps them away? Each week, we walk park trails, visit parks and go into the canyons to look for the owls that live in Salt Lake County to help answer these questions. The more we can learn about them, the better we can make decisions that will help them!

Join us on our owl adventures on Facebook! We will update you with videos to join in the fun, until we can invite you in person once it is safe to do so!

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