

**The Great Thunderbird:  
Source of the American Indian Symbol  
by Timothy J. Stephany**  
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**Abstract:**

The American Indian thunderbird is an anthropological and ethnic icon although its origins have remained unknown. The evidence consisting of interpretation of orally-transmitted myth and visual depictions reveals that the source is a constellation of stars in the southern sky. This is supported by the visual arrangement of stars that meets the requirements of ancient and traditional depictions, while it is also verified by the presence of details in the mythology of the Moon as a “clashing rock”, revealing a crushed Indian warrior, while one pictograph also associates the thunderbird with an unknown stellar feature which could be a supernova. The most likely candidate for this supernova is SN 1006, which could be viewed in North America close to the horizon.

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## **Introduction**

The American Indian thunderbird has been a significant ethnic and mythical symbol of the past and a popular artistic icon and motif through the present day. Portrayed as a giant bird whose giant flapping wings make the thunder, while lightning comes from its opening and closing eyes, and sometimes with a lake on its back from which the rains come. There are several myths about the thunderbird that vary across the American continent, but still much speculation remains as to the origin of the story.

The origin of myth is to explain something that already exists that humans merely observe and experience. The thunderstorm is viewed as being especially powerful, creating the chief and most powerful god of the Mediterranean Zeus or Ju(piter), as well as the Norse gods Tyr and Thor and the Hindu Dyaus, all traceable back to a common origin among the Indo-European speakers. While natural phenomena are most important, matters of the human mind (beyond conscious control) also play a role, but perhaps most meaningful are the theories of interaction between the two.

People have looked to the heavens, especially the night sky, to search for divine indications or omens, some of which were eventually systematized into astrologies. The night sky reveals wayward planets, spontaneous meteors, semi-regular comets, the aurora borealis, and various unique phenomena that only rarely occur such as supernovae and meteoric collisions. Early European sorcery incorporated appeals to the powers of the universe, partaking the magnificence of black space, stars, planets, and the Moon, all which held its own explanation and meaning, only modestly understood today.

## **Background**

Modern popular explanations for the thunderbird appear to center around a paranormal large species of bird as of yet unidentified by science. Sightings are said to be rare but refer to birds with a giant wingspan, greater than a condor. These are then linked to an original prehistoric giant bird that may have given rise to the myth when the first human arrivals were impressed by the sound of their giant wings that reminded them of the thunder. The mega fauna of the Americas, all but extinct today, did have its share of giant birds. (Flightless birds were easy prey to the Neolithic hunter but flying birds known as teratorns were also about.) No real evidence has yet arisen of a present-day remnant population of prehistoric birds and there are just a couple unsubstantiated pictures. Also, like the Loch Ness Monster, it has even been linked to the age of dinosaurs, suggesting it was from a remnant population of pterosaurs.

Of primary interest here is to attempt to identify the source of other thunderbird stories, identifying the one that actually comes closest to a source naturalistic myth as well as to try to understand this in relation to ancient or traditional artistic representations of the thunderbird in America.

## **Thunderbird Myth**

The mythology of the thunderbird is wide and various across America and Canada, and it could be collected and studied without it providing anything more than a vivid study of ethnographic variety. Perhaps the most reliable telling of interest is that of the Passamaquoddy Indians around

what is now Maine and New Brunswick. This myth is from Fewkes, "The Origin of the Thunderbird":

This is a legend of long, long ago times. Two Indians desired to find the origin of thunder. They traveled north and came to a high mountain. These mountains performed magically. They drew apart, back and forth, then closed together very quickly.

One Indian said, "I will leap through the cleft before it closes. If I am caught, you continue to find the origin of thunder." The first one succeeded in going through the cleft before it closed, but the second one was caught and squashed.

On the other side, the first Indian saw a large plain with a group of wigwams, and a number of Indians playing a ball game. After a little while, these players said to each other, "It is time to go." They disappeared into their wigwams to put on wings, and came out with their bows and arrows and flew away over the mountains to the south. This was how the Passamaquoddy Indian discovered the homes of the thunderbirds.

The remaining old men of that tribe asked the Passamaquoddy Indian, "What do you want? Who are you?" He replied with the story of his mission. The old men deliberated how they could help him.

They decided to put the lone Indian into a large mortar, and they pounded him until all of his bones were broken. They molded him into a new body with wings like thunderbird, and gave him a bow and some arrows and sent him away in flight. They warned him not to fly close to trees, as he would fly so fast he could not stop in time to avoid them, and he would be killed.

The lone Indian could not reach his home because the huge enemy bird, Wochowsen, at that time made such a damaging wind. Thunderbird is an Indian and he or his lightning would never harm another Indian. But Wochowsen, great bird from the south, tried hard to rival Thunderbird. So Passamaquoddies feared Wochowsen, whose wings Glooscap once had broken, because he used too much power.

A result was that for a long time air became stagnant, the sea was full of slime, and all of the fish died. But Glooscap saw what was happening to his people and repaired the wings of Wochowsen to the extent of controlling and alternating strong winds with calm.

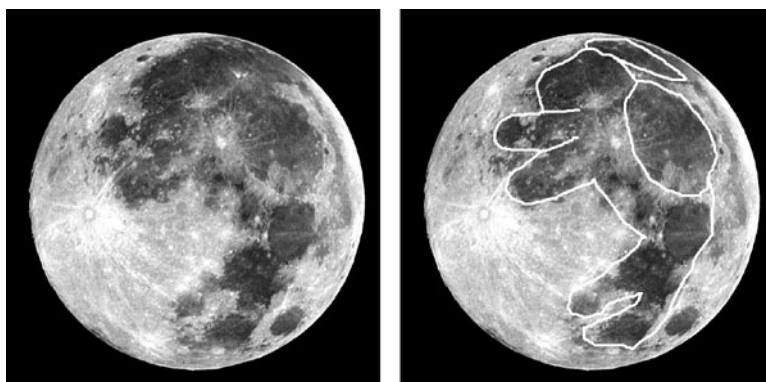
Legend tells us this is how the new Passamaquoddy thunderbird, the lone Indian who passed through the cleft, in time became the great and powerful Thunderbird, who always has kept a watchful eye upon the good Indians. (Clark 2003: 317-318)

This one is particularly interesting because it provides the actual origin of the thunderbird, and contains other relevant information about its identification. This is specifically in the episode relating to the clashing mountain.

The clashing mountain has also been a relevant feature of mythology elsewhere, specifically in Norse myth concerning the story of the Mead of Poetry.<sup>1</sup> In this myth a mountain called Hnitbiorg is where the Mead is held and Hnitbiorg means “clashing rock”. It is relevant because it relates to the changing phases of the Moon. In reference to the Mead of Poetry myth an image on the Moon’s face corresponds to details described within the myth. In the Passamaquoddy myth it also suggests what one might see on the Moon: in this case, the traveler who did not make it through but was crushed between the rocks. This is shown in *Figure 1*.

**Figure 1.**

**Moon showing Passamaquoddy warrior crushed by rocks**



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<sup>1</sup> This is equivalent to the Hindu “Theft of Soma” myth.

While this implies that the myth was naturalistic, it also reveals how the myth itself was intended to explain what was apparent to people when they were already questioning what the Moon was. In this case it was then part of an overall explanation for the night sky.

### **Thunderbird Iconography**

There are a number of anthropological and ethnic artistic designs that reveal a bird of some kind. Often if the picture is large or commanding it is assigned the designation of “thunderbird”. Traditional artistic representations of this ancient motif appear frequently in modern Native artwork (see *Figure 2*).

**Figure 2.**

#### **Modern Thunderbird art**



There are other representations that appear as rock paintings or rock carvings (petroglyphs), a couple from Saskatchewan are shown in *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*.

**Figure 3.**

**Thunderbird pictograph from Saskatchewan**

(source: [scaa.usask.ca/gallery/saskatchewan/gallerypage.php?load=thosehowere](http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/saskatchewan/gallerypage.php?load=thosehowere))



**Figure 4.**

**Thunderbird pictograph from Saskatchewan**

(source: [scaa.usask.ca/gallery/saskatchewan/gallerypage.php?load=thosehowere](http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/saskatchewan/gallerypage.php?load=thosehowere))



## The Stellar Connection

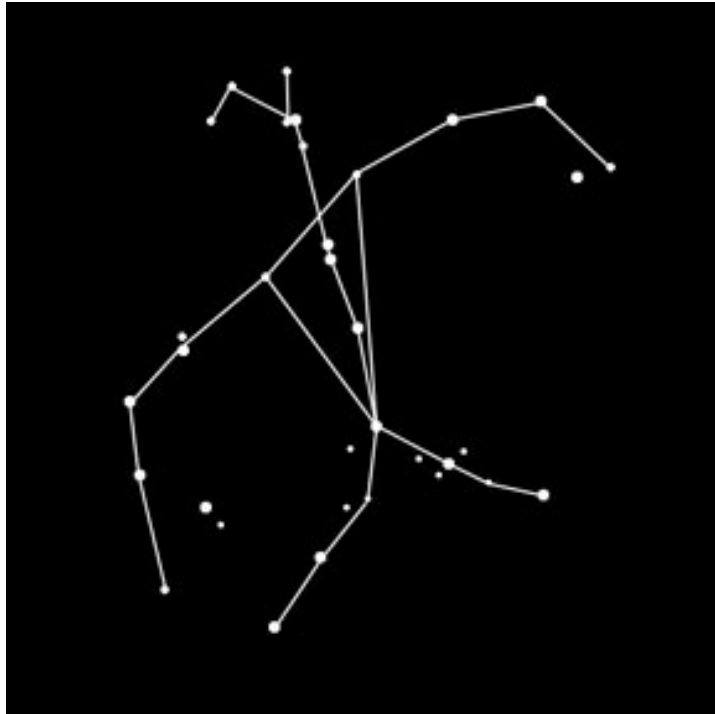
These artistic depictions are particularly relevant because they resemble most a constellation of stars that appears in the southern skies as viewed from North America, which will be referred to hereafter as the Great Thunderbird constellation. This is shown in *Figure 5*. It can be identified just above Scorpius, incorporating some of the constellations of Ophiuchus, Serpens Caput and Serpens Cauda.<sup>2</sup> Comparisons between the celestial formation and the individual rock representations do not reveal an identical representation of the star pattern, but the overall shape of the stars bears a striking resemblance to the overall image of thunderbird representations. Since none can reveal a clear true, general, or definitive image of the thunderbird, and as it is not even known if those who made the art were even aware that it derived from the constellation, the details may only have come through an artistic descent that encouraged largely faithful reproduction of characteristics.

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<sup>2</sup> The exact stars chosen for the constellation can vary a bit, but the large constellation itself is quite a visible collection of prominent stars.

**Figure 5.**

**“Great Thunderbird” constellation**  
(just above Scorpius in the Northern Hemisphere)



Thus considering that the star pattern represents the original representation, comparisons can be made to better reveal which more resemble it, and whether older ones are more true to it than later ones. Certainly later artistic iconography and stylistic license has persuaded a freer expression of the exact appearance of the bird.

As it is, the characteristics that define visual representations of the thunderbird are that it has a very long wing-span, with wings that often are broken down on the sides, while at the bottom is either a tail or two feet. The head is preferentially set looking to the left (its own right), which matches well with the constellation image. However, varying depictions do not negate the identification, since there is no way to know where the artists were getting their information.

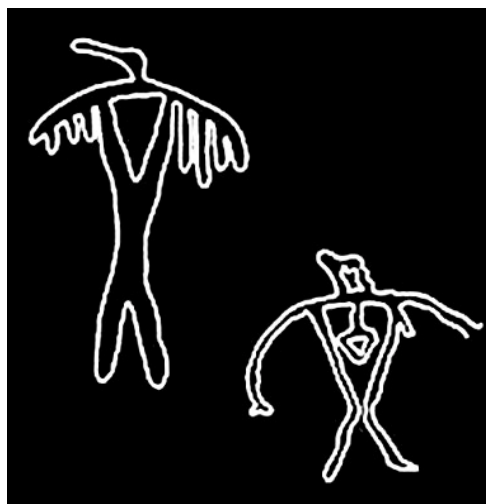
Even the ancient rock art could be millennia from the original identification of the constellation of stars.

It has been suggested that some depictions of the Thunderbird are equivalent to the constellation of Cygnus the swan or of Draco the dragon. There is no reason to think that there could only have been one Thunderbird constellation, in fact the myth suggests that the region of the night sky was filled with Thunderbirds. Different rock images might well represent different constellations. However, the specific shape of Cygnus does not correspond well to the traditional design of the thunderbird nor to depictions on rock. One artistic portrayal gives some clues as to the identification of the Great Thunderbird constellation, and is shown in *Figure 6*. This drawing also shows a secondary bird figure, which is also presumably a thunderbird, this constellation, the Long Thunderbird, can also be identified in the night sky, more often directly overhead, as shown in *Figure 7*.

**Figure 6.**

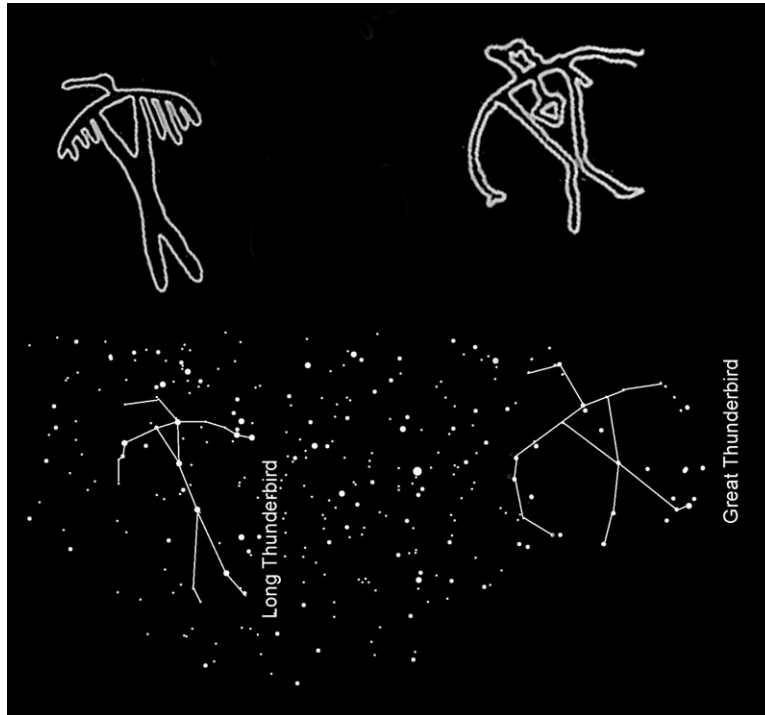
**Two rock depictions from Minnesota**

(from [www.mysteriousworld.com/Journal/1999/Autumn/Thunderbird](http://www.mysteriousworld.com/Journal/1999/Autumn/Thunderbird))



**Figure 7.**

**Rock painting from Figure 6 compared with constellations of Long Thunderbird and Great Thunderbird.**



There are some clues from this that they represent the constellations shown. The shape of each is clearly represented in the stars, although the freehand expression does not attempt to “connect the dots” so allowance can be made for some spatial variation. Also of interest are some features of the thunderbird on the right: it is given a heart, which matches a star position in the chest of the bird, and that the bird’s own left wing is chopped off, which corresponds well to its position below the horizon.

Further pertinent to its importance is that the arrival of the Great Thunderbird constellation is in the spring, perhaps seen first around the middle of March, while at midnight it gains its highest prominence around the first of June. Thus the thunderbird would have appeared in the night sky during the same time that the spring thunderstorms would arrive. The constellation

would have been pretty well gone by October. This appearance is especially relevant as to how this giant bird image was connected to thunderstorms.

One other piece of evidence is shown in the pictograph in Figure 3. The red paint used to produce the thunderbird was also used to create a star just below the tip of its right wing. This indicates that the Thunderbird was a celestial object, but there is still the matter of identifying its source. In relation to the wing there is no bright star at this location. This either means that it represented a planet, such as Jupiter (typically the fourth brightest object in the sky), but it is far more likely to have been the location of a supernova.

Supernovae have been known to outshine all but the Sun and the Moon in the sky but they are at their brightest only for a short duration, and are clearly identified within a single year. It is also known that supernovae have been commonly identified and pictured or written about by humans through time. That it shows a supernova could be proven through astronomical observations of the region. A supernova was seen in southwestern America in 1006 in the constellation Lupus (Than 2006) but this would have been placed near the tip of its *left* wing. Unless the entire image was reversed by the artist, shown in overlay in *Figure 8* in relation to the Great Thunderbird stars shows a close match.



## Conclusion

The thunderbird constellation, connected with the image of the Moon suggests that the American Indian (specifically Passamaquoddy) view of the world put the heavens beyond a clashing barrier, the Moon, and that by slipping through the Moon one arrived at another place, and this is where the thunderbirds were. That the warrior remains there is so because it is meant to be an origin myth. The details of precisely why he was unable to return to his tribe are not as relevant as the fact that something must have forced him to remain. This is also why this particular creation myth seems to have kept fairly close to an original knowledge: that it explained something of the heavens, the phases of and image on the Moon and the appearance of a giant bird during the summer season.

While the Great Thunderbird constellation was the most significant there also appears to have been thunderbirds anywhere they were seen in the night sky. The Long Thunderbird appears to be another as are Cygnus and Pegasus/Andromeda, and any given rock art needs to be carefully considered in regards to whether it is a representation of: a real bird they hunted or a heavenly constellation.

The depth of time here is vast, and so it is not easy or trivial to sort out the breadth of the entire thunderbird tradition. What this awareness does provide, however, is a basis point at some unknown time in prehistory that was one of the major influences in the forming of the thunderbird mythology and iconography. It does not extinguish the notion that extinct large birds known to early human hunters in the wild American continent played a role, but it is not necessary to assume avian mega fauna were at the heart of the origin, and it is not even the most plausible or defensible.

## Sources

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