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# NOTES AND LETTERS

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## BEWARE THE WHISKEY JACK



*Whiskey jack (gray jay).*

*Theron Finley*

It was a bitterly cold morning, and I was tracking moose through the fresh powder snow covering a black spruce muskeg. The sense of loneliness and desolation was profound, making me appreciate that I didn't belong there, in the *maskek* country of the Swampy Cree, consummate hunters of the *moswa* (moose). Dejectedly, I realized I didn't have a hope of stalking a moose in the deep silence that cloaked the snow-muffled forest, and I paused at the edge of a beaver meadow, relieved by its openness. At once, I had the eerie sense that I was not alone, and as I nervously glanced back at my trail, a gray phantom floated gracefully and silently like an owl across the meadow,

and landed in a tamarack over my head. It uttered some soft whistles, a welcome respite from the solitude, and studied me with dispassionate eyes, assessing my potential as a hunter and provider, before dismissing me. In turn I studied its behaviour, recalling that it was once called the moose bird because it supposedly led hunters to their prey. Although it provided no clues that I could discern as it flew off, on the far side of the beaver meadow, I found fresh beds of three moose and signs of their hasty retreat.

*Perisoreus canadensis* was once known by several nicknames, including 'camp robber', 'moose bird', 'meat hawk', and 'whiskey jack', none of which can



*Theron Finley, unaware that Wisakedjak has landed on his backpack.*

*Graham Obee*

match for sheer utility and dullness the official name given by the American Ornithologists' Union. 'Gray jay' belies one of the most colourful characters of the boreal forest, with a complex and contradictory personality. Intelligent, deceitful, convivial, reclusive, ruthless, gentle, provident, larcenous... the anthropomorphisms abound in the early conservation literature, designed to connect people with nature. Personifying the Canada jay as a national icon, Percy Taverner, in *Birds of Western Canada*, unleashed an anthropomorphic ode:

"If the other Jays are clownish, one scarcely knows how to characterize the Canada Jay. It has all the family characteristics in an exaggerated form, but seems to lack the keen appreciation of its own humour that the others possess. Its entire lack of self-consciousness or poise is notable, and it does the most impudent things with an air of the most matter of fact innocence. No sooner is the camper's fire lighted than the Whiskey

Jack is on hand for any good thing that may come its way. Almost before the echo of the rifle has died on the hills, he is in at the death to share in the offal of the game."<sup>1</sup>

Excusing its camp robbery and fondness for eggs and nestlings of songbirds, Taverner noted that "(f)ew wild things have as many human friends in the woods as this bird."<sup>1</sup> Yet in spite of its friendliness and willingness to take handouts, Taverner thought it peculiar that the whiskey jack never habituated to civilization like other corvids, but shrank away to the most lonely, secluded haunts, while its brilliant blue cousin adapted and prospered. Although its sobriquet conjured images of lumber jacks, Tom Thompson, and Algonquin Park, had Taverner delved further into its etymology he would have discovered a principal character in Cree legends.

*Wi-sak-a-chak* or *Wisakedjak* derives from the Algonquian language, translated

as the “flatterer”<sup>2</sup> or the “hypocrite”,<sup>3</sup> a sort of trickster who disobeys his creator, *Kitche-manitou* or *Ki-sei-men’-to*, bringing his wrath to bear with a great flood like the biblical myth, but richer in detail and perhaps pre-dating it. The great explorer David Thompson recorded a version of it before the missionaries entered the scene. The story was told in many variations by gifted orators around the campfire.<sup>3</sup> Very briefly, Thompson’s story goes something like this:

After *Kitche-manitou* had made all the animals and the first people, he said to *Wisakedjak*, “Take good care of my people, and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots, all the roots that will hurt them and kill them. Do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other.”

But *Wisakedjak* did not obey, and he let the creatures do whatever they wished. Soon they were quarrelling and fighting and shedding much blood. *Kitche-manitou* warned *Wisakedjak* that if the bloodshed continued, he would unleash a flood to cleanse the earth. But *Wisakedjak* didn’t obey, and continued to trick the animals and the people, making them angry with each other. The earth turned red with blood.

*Kitche-manitou* became angry and fulfilled his promise. It rained and rained.

The rivers overflowed, cleansing the land. Only three inhabitants survived with *Wisakedjak*, an otter, a beaver, and a muskrat. It’s a long story, more engaging than that of the ark, but in the end, after much cajolery, the meek little muskrat saved their day, and *Kitche-manitou* started all over again, creating the people, the animals, and the trees. And he took away all *Wisakedjak*’s powers, except to deceive and flatter. After that, *Wisakedjak* played tricks upon the people and animals and led them into much mischief, providing endless stories for the amusement of generations.

So if you find yourself standing alone some day in the profound silence of a black spruce and tamarack forest, when it’s 30 below, and you suddenly have the sensation you are not alone, beware.

1. Taverner PA (1926) Birds of Western Canada. Museum Bulletin #41. Canada Department of Mines, Ottawa, ON.

2. Clark EE (1960) Indian legends of Canada. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, ON.

3. Dusenberry JV (1962) The Montana Cree: a study in religious persistence. (Originally published as number 3 in the Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion.) University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1998.

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... everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate,  
and comic in its existence.

- George Santayana