

# Grus, the Crane

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*From the earliest of times man has been fascinated by the sky above him and has spent many long hours studying the stars. Sometimes people imagined that they saw shapes formed by a number of stars grouped together. These constellations included such figures as Gemini the Twins, Orion the Hunter, and so on. Most of them were discovered in the centuries B.C., but others have been found more recently. One of these is in the shape of a crane, a bird which has very long legs and a long neck, and which moves in such a way that one can almost say it is dancing. The following tale is an attempt to explain, in Canadian terms, the origin of this modern constellation.*

Not too long ago, Alberta was inhabited only by Indians, among them a tribe called the Blackfoot. Their native name is "siksika" which means "black feet". Some people think that they used to colour their moccasins black, and others think that they got this name because their moccasins were often dark with the ashes of prairie fires. They lived in Canada, just east of the Rocky Mountains in the high plains where Edmonton and Calgary now are. The Blackfoot counted many fierce, brave warriors amongst their numbers and were known as one of the strongest and most aggressive of all the prairie tribes. From a very early age every young Blackfoot was trained to hunt the buffalo which provided in large part their food, their clothing, their dwellings and their tools. There was seldom any long lack of food or water on the prairies—the buffalo roamed the plains in almost countless thousands, and the rivers were usually overflowing. If ever there was a lack of rain and the buffalo strayed away from the plains in search of water and the rivers ran dry, the Blackfoot had only to don their feathers and paint and after the first few steps of their raindance the rains would pour forth from the heavens, bringing the buffalo back and filling the rivers once again. Their drums could be heard far and wide and their cries and chanting made the other prairie tribes listen in awe. Never had this dance failed to bring the rains.

Now it so happened that one particularly hot and dry summer, when they were badly in need of rain, their splendid raindance failed to work. Never had they made such an effort to please the heavens. Each dancer's body was painted with designs in colour. Their long hair was carefully braided and had ornaments placed in it. These ornaments were thought to have magical charms which would please the spirits. In their right hands they carried a bunch of poplar twigs, and in the other rattles. Feathers were tucked in the armbands they wore above their elbows, in their moccasins, and in the sashes about their waists. The ornaments and the many strings of beads rattled and jingled as they danced. Forty of the strongest and most able of the tribe took part in the dance which lasted

from morning until sundown, but still the rains did not come. Three days in a row they danced until the third night, weak from exhaustion, they collapsed in front of their chief's tepee.

"What more can we do?" asked a young Indian brave. "We have danced three days and our bodies can stand no more. The buffalo have gone from the plains, our crops are ruined, and the rivers are dry. Our children cry out for food and water, our dogs lie curled up in the shade of the willow tree with their tongues hanging out, and even our horses are so weak that they no longer have the strength to carry us upon their backs."

"Let us go and ask the medicine man," the chief replied, "Surely he, with all his magic charms, will know what to do!"

And so the chief and several of the young braves presented themselves to the wise old medicine man. He sat there in his tepee, his skin brown and wrinkled with age, and after listening to the chief and the young braves he slowly replied.

"It is obvious," he said, "that our dancing does not please the Great Spirit in the sky. We must find one who can dance better than we. Go in search of this being and when you have found him ask him if he will come and dance so that our children will stop crying and our dogs and horses will once again be able to drink."

So it was that the most mighty warriors set off the next morning in search of a great dancer. Far and wide they searched. They passed the once overflowing rivers which had now become quite dry and they passed through many fields which were now yellow and withered from lack of rain, until they came at last to a place where they had never been before. There the grass was lush and green and the rivers overflowed onto the fields. The Indians wondered why the rains should choose to fall upon this place and not upon the place where they lived. As they had no horses with which to carry food or water back to their tribe they decided to seek out the source of good luck in this place. They searched far and wide and could see no sign of animal or man when finally they came upon a strange sight. There, in the midst of a deep dark wood, they saw an old crane who was engaged in the most spectacular dance they had ever seen. He was an elegant bird with long legs and a long neck, and as he danced he held his wings out on either side of him, bowing and stretching all the while and parading around in a large circle. His steps grew quicker and quicker, and every once in a while he would leap into the air, flying up a short distance and then drifting down in a sort of slow-motion ballet. It was a magnificent dance and, as the Indians watched in awe, it came to them that this must surely be the great dancer for whom they searched. By the time they grew near to the crane he had finished his dance and was standing quietly beneath the shade of a great tree cooling himself. The crane had never before seen a man, much less one with paint all over his face, and so it is not surprising that he drew back in fright when the mighty warriors approached.

"Do not be afraid," they said, "for we have been watching you for a time and come only to tell you how well you dance."

Now the crane was much pleased at hearing these words for never had anyone praised his dancing, of which he too was quite proud, and he

immediately liked these strange-looking animals. He drew close to them, and it was not long before the Indians and the crane were engaged in a lengthy chat. The Indians came to learn that his name was Grus and he was the last of the birds known as the whooping cranes in that area. His species had grown small in number, and those which remained had chosen to live further south. He had decided to stay in the place where he was born as he was very old and had made many trips to the south during his lifetime. The Indians on their part told Grus of their troubles and asked him if he might not consider returning with them to their land. They felt sure that if only they could persuade him to go and dance for them the rains would come and their people would surely be saved. Now Grus was fairly lonely and besides they gave him so many compliments on his dancing that it was not long before he had agreed to accompany them on the return journey.

So it was that the Indians and Grus arrived back in Blackfoot territory. They had travelled many a mile and were quite weary by the time they arrived. Things were no better than when the Indian warriors had departed and, in fact, they were much worse. It had not rained for two months and the people could think of nothing else. All around them children cried and the tribe was in such a state of misery that they hardly noticed the braves and the crane approaching the camp. The warriors told the people of what they had seen, however, and, hardly daring to hope, the hungry people drew around Grus waiting to see what would happen. Slowly he began—but as the Indians' enthusiasm grew the tempo of his dance increased. Round and round he went, bowing and stretching, and every once in a while he caught a twig in his mouth, threw it into the air, and caught it as it fell downwards. His wings outstretched, he looked quite wild as he flew around, and all the while he made low trombone-like noises which carried for many miles. The Indians cheered and clapped and just at the height of the dance the heavens broke and the rains fell. Never was there such gaiety! Even the old medicine man came out of his tepee and joined in the rejoicing. It rained for many days and finally when it had stopped the people looked about them. The buffalo had returned, the crops were healthy, and the rivers once again overflowed. They thanked Grus over and over again, showering him with presents, so that he had only to speak and his wish was their command. He was so happy there with the Blackfoot that when they asked him to stay with them for the winter he had not the slightest hesitation in agreeing.

The winter passed and they kept him warm and comfortable in one of their tepees. They brought him food whenever he wished from the crops which they had saved from the fall harvest. When the spring came, however, the fields once again grew yellow and dry and the rivers became shallow. The Indians went to Grus and asked him to dance for them. He agreed and after he had danced the heavens opened and the rains fell. The Indian people rejoiced no less heartily than before, and once again Grus was the centre of attention for many months to come.

Each year the same pattern was followed—the Indians grew dependent on Grus for the rain and ceased to worry. At the first sign of spring they called upon the crane and he made the rains come (at least this is what the Indians believed). So great was their faith in the crane that gradually over

the years they forgot to thank the Great Spirit in the sky and looked only to Grus in gratitude.

One spring, however, the rains failed to come. Grus danced and danced, leaping in to the air with his wings outstretched and floating back softly to the ground. Round and round he danced but still the rains did not come. He finally grew so tired from dancing that he fell down on the ground exhausted and could dance no more. Again the next day he tried, but to no avail. The more he danced the brighter the sun seemed to shine. The buffalo left the plains in search of water, the crops withered, and the children cried out in thirst. After the seventh day of dancing Grus decided to go and see the old medicine man, whom he too had by this time grown to love and respect.

"What is wrong, old man?" Grus asked. "Is it that my dancing no longer pleases the Great Spirit in the sky?"

The old medicine man replied, "It is impossible to say, Grus. Perhaps it is our people who no longer please the Great Spirit. I can not say. Someone will have to go and ask him what it is we are doing wrong. Only then will we know what it is we should do to make the rains fall."

And with those words he turned and sadly walked into his tepee. He was sad because he knew that only Grus could fly and he loved him dearly and hated to see him go. Grus too knew that it was he who would have to make the trip. He was not sad though; he was old and felt that his stay on earth was almost over. If he could do one last thing for the people he loved so much it would make him very happy. He told the rest of the tribe what it was that the old medicine man had said to him, and although everyone was sad to see him go it was agreed that he was the only one who could make the trip. They decided that Grus should fly up into the heavens and ask the Great Spirit what it was they should do to make the rains come. Then Grus should return with the answer.

The next day was full of a mixture of excitement and sadness. The tribe was excited at the prospect of finding out what they could do to make the rain come, but they were also sad at the thought of Grus leaving them even if it was only for a short time. Grus assured them, however, that it was the only possible thing to do, and with wings outstretched off he flew into the sky. The tribe called out after him, wishing him good luck and saying they would see him soon. Only the old medicine man knew, as he was very wise, that Grus would not return.

Up and up he flew, past the great white clouds, until he was so high that the Indians standing on the ground looked just like ants, and still higher he went. Finally he reached the Great Spirit in the sky. Grus drew near and asked him why it was that he did not choose to let the rains fall upon the land of the Blackfoot Indians. This is the response the Great Spirit gave:

The Blackfoot have come to think that it is you, Grus, who chooses to bestow the rains upon their lands. This displeases me. For a long time I chose to accept this, but I find I can do so no longer. They praise you and thank you, forgetting to thank the real donor of the rain. Until they choose to remember me and thank me for this gift I shall send no rain.

Now Grus understood the words of the Great Spirit, and he agreed with what he had said. It was true; the Blackfoot had forgotten to thank the Great Spirit each time he had sent the rains. After the rains had come they had thanked Grus, showering him with presents and speaking only of the crane's great powers. Grus felt sure that they had not meant to do this, though. If only he could let them know their mistake, he was sure that they would be sorry for what they had done. How was this possible though? He was by this time so weary from the trip that the thought of another made his bones ache. He was old and had lived on earth a very long time. He was glad of a change and rather liked all he saw about him. Seeing a cluster of stars not far off, he decided to fly over and rest for a bit. Perhaps they could help him find a solution to his problem. This is exactly what happened. After explaining the problem, one very bright star suggested that he tell the Indians what it was he had learned in the form of a dream. As he could choose only one person to whom he could send the dream he chose the medicine man. That night the wise old man dreamt of all that had happened, and in the morning he shared his dream with the rest of the tribe. They immediately realized their mistake and asked the Great Spirit to forgive them for what they had done. The Great Spirit was so happy at hearing these words that he sent forth the rain that very day. It was not long before the buffalo returned, the crops revived, and—once again—the rivers overflowed. The Blackfoot learned their lesson and never again forgot who was responsible for the rain. They missed Grus, of course, but each time they felt lonely they just looked up into the sky where they could see him amongst the stars. He was so happy he decided to remain just where he was with his new friends whom he found appreciated his dancing just as much as the Blackfoot Indians had!

*Kathleen Plow is a writer of children's stories who lives in Toronto. This is one of a series of tales accounting for newly discovered constellations.*