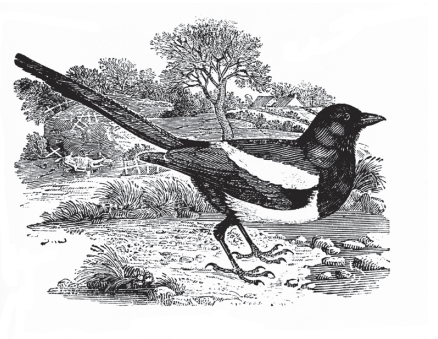
CONTENTS



ONE FOR SORROW, TWO FOR JOY

One for sorrow
Two for joy
Three for a girl
Four for a boy
Five for silver
Six for gold
Seven for a secret never to be told.

This well-known rhyme has been around since the mid-nineteenth century when the number of magpies seen foraging together was regarded as forecaster of future events. Interestingly, everybody knows what bird is meant (usually the magpie, but in some parts of the world where magpies are rarely if ever seen, crows or other corvids) – though no kind of bird at all is mentioned in the rhyme.

As with many proverbs passed down in the oral tradition there are numerous regional variations; in Ireland and the US the most commonly recited version goes:

One for sorrow
Two for mirth

Three for a funeral
Four for a birth
Five for heaven
Six for hell
Seven's the Devil his own self.

In Manchester the rhyme has additional lines: 'Eight for a wish, Nine for a kiss, Ten for a surprise you should be careful not to miss, Eleven for health, Twelve for wealth, Thirteen beware it's the devil himself.'

Common to all the versions is the notion that a lone magpie is a harbinger of sorrow and therefore unlucky. The bird's bad reputation may stem from its behaviour; it is known for stealing shiny objects and for killing other birds' chicks to feed its own, but it seems more likely that the superstitions that surround it have their roots in folklore. British legend has it that the magpie was the only bird not to sing to comfort Jesus as he suffered on the cross, while in Scotland the bird was believed to hold a drop of the devil's blood under its tongue. If you do see a solitary magpie though you can ward off bad luck by saluting, spitting over your shoulder three times, doffing your hat or saying, 'Morning, Mr Magpie, how are you this fine day?' Alternatively, you could say 'Good morning, Mr Magpie, how's your wife?' (in the hope that the bird's mate is hiding somewhere near by to turn your sorrow into joy).

Somewhat sounder is the proverb 'A single magpie in spring foul weather will bring', from the birds' habit of feeding together only in fine weather.

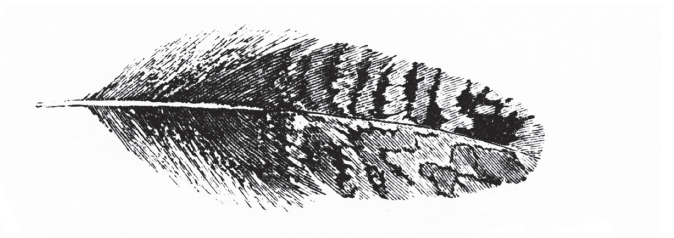
BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

This sixteenth-century proverb first appeared in a 1599 dictionary compiled by the English lexicographer and linguist John Minsheu. It is thought to have been in use for at least fifty years by the time it made it into print and a slightly different version of the phrase can be found in the naturalist, physician and nonconformist churchman William Turner's *The Rescuynge of the Romishe Fox,* published in 1545:

> *Byrdes of on kynde and*
> *color flok and flye*
> *allwayes together.*

Like many sayings from folklore it comes from observation of the natural world. Birds of the same species will often form a flock, flying in the same direction instinctively to avoid being singled out by a bird of prey. The phrase is used to imply that people will gravitate towards others who share their tastes or beliefs. By the seventeenth century it was being used in reference to the influence of bad behaviour; in William Secker's handbook for Christian living *The Consistent Christian,* published in 1660, he quotes the proverb and explains: 'To be too *intimate* with

sinners – is to *intimate* that you are a sinner.' These days it's sometimes used with a knowing wink to suggest that someone who associates with criminals is likely to be one themselves, though it applies equally to friends or couples who are well matched because they have views or characteristics in common.



RED SKY AT NIGHT

Red sky at night, shepherd's delight
Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning.

This ancient proverb is one of our best-known weather-lore rhymes and dates back to at least the fourteenth century. The earliest known printed example of the saying appears in Middle English in John Wycliffe's Bible, published in 1395, and by the time the Authorized King