

How the Crow Came to be Black

Brule (Lakota)

In days long past, when the earth and the people on it were still young, all crows were white as snow. In those ancient times the people had neither horses nor firearms nor weapons of iron. Yet they depended upon the buffalo hunt to give them enough food to survive.

Hunting the big buffalo on foot with stone-tipped weapons was hard, uncertain, and dangerous. The crows made things even more difficult for the hunters, because they were friends of the buffalo. Soaring high above the prairie, they could see everything that was going on. Whenever they spied hunters approaching a buffalo herd, they flew to their friends and, perching between their horns, warned them:

"Caw, caw, caw, cousins, hunters are coming. They are creeping up through that gully over there. They are coming up behind that hill. Watch out! Caw, caw, caw!" Hearing this, the buffalo would stampede, and the people starved.

The people held a council to decide what to do. Now, among the crows was a huge one, twice as big as all the others. This crow was their leader. One wise old chief got up and made this suggestion:

"We must capture the big white crow," he said, "and teach him a lesson. It's either that or go hungry."

He brought out a large buffalo skin, with the head and horns still attached. He put it on the back of a young brave, saying:

"Nephew, sneak among the buffalo. They will think you are one of them, and you can capture the big white crow."

Disguised as a buffalo, the young man crept among the herd as if he were grazing. The big, shaggy beasts paid him no attention.

Then the hunters marched out from their camp after him, their bows at the ready. As they approached the herd, the crows came flying, as usual, warning the buffalo:

"Caw, caw, caw, cousins, the hunters are coming to kill you. Watch out for their arrows. Caw, caw, caw!" and as usual, all the buffalo stampeded off and away - all, that is, except the young hunter in disguise under his shaggy skin, who pretended to go on grazing as before.

Then the big white crow came gliding down, perched on the hunter's shoulders, and flapping his wings, said:

"Caw, caw, caw, brother, are you deaf? The hunters are close by, just over the hill. Save yourself!"

But the young brave reached out from under the buffalo skin and grabbed the crow by the legs.

With a rawhide string he tied the big bird's feet and fastened the other end to a stone. No matter how the crow struggled, he could not escape.

Again the people sat in council.

"What shall we do with this big, bad crow, who has made us go hungry again and again?"

"I'll burn him up!" answered one angry hunter, and before anybody could stop him, he yanked the crow from the hands of his captor and thrust it into the council fire, string, stone and all. "This will teach you," he said.

Of course, the string that held the stone burned through almost at once, and the big crow managed to fly out of the fire. But he was badly singed, and some of his feathers were charred. Though he was still big, he was no longer white. "Caw, caw, caw," he cried, flying away as quickly as he could, "I'll never do it again; I'll stop warning the buffalo, and so will the Crow nation. I promise! Caw, caw, caw."

Thus the crow escaped. But ever since, all crows have been black.