

Šarkela varnela The Magpie, the Crow

Lithuanian folk song

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Birds have always been part of our environment. Throughout history there have been varying assessments of bird behavior – because of their appearance, unusual voice, and unique mannerisms. Centuries of observation have allowed us to discover certain patterns in bird behavior and connect them with forecasting the future.

- In German folklore a screeching magpie foretold misfortune: a future disaster, illness, or death. A dream of such a magpie had the same significance.
- In Northern England it was an ominous portent if a magpie flew across the road from left to right. Conversely, it was a good sign if it flew from right to left.
- In Germany the appearance of a magpie was a positive indication if the bird was silent. An even better omen was to see two birds in front of you early in the morning.

“The Magpie, the Crow” is a popular Lithuanian children’s song describing the magpie’s offspring. “How many children do you have?” What strikes us immediately is the ever increasing number of little magpies, always grouped in pairs. It is plausible that this song had an educational purpose – to teach children to count (the simplest calculations consisted of counting by twos).

One other item deserves mention – the important bond between the magpie and its cousin, the crow. In the worldview of folklore one could say that the birds are twins, two sides of the same coin. For example, it was said “what’s good for the magpie is good for the crow” (when you give one child something, the second child also wants it). Frequently the magpie was referred to with a double name “magpie-crow”, just as in this song.