

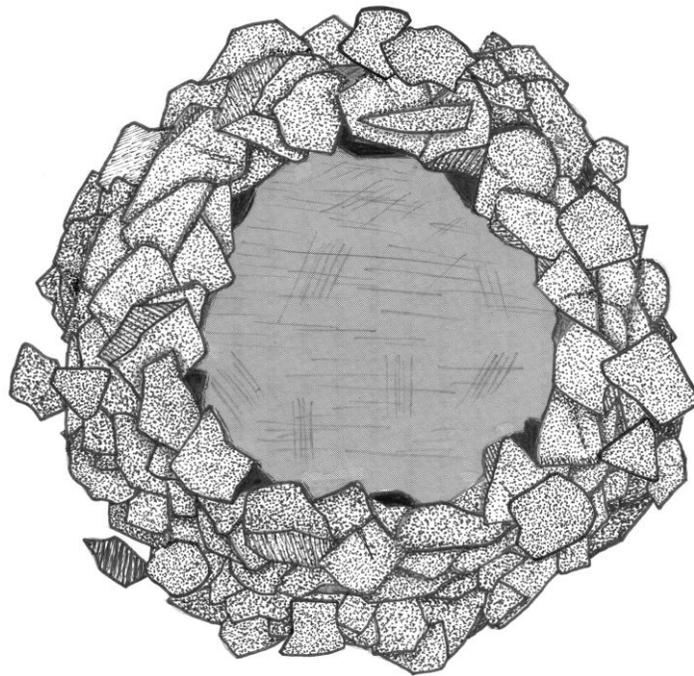
Thunderbird Nests

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Introduction

To the casual observer, it's not much to look at — just a jumbled heap of rocks and boulders that might have been dumped there long ago by the Ice Age glacier. But to the trained eye, it's clear that the rocks had at one time been intentionally and purposefully piled atop one another in a doughnut shape. The stones that comprise these sorts of formations can number in the hundreds, with the largest weighing upwards of 50 kilograms. One such feature was found to measure almost seven metres across; the central depression itself was a metre deep and 1.5 metres in diameter. Since these structures don't appear to be natural, there has to be a human, and in particular, an Aboriginal story behind them one way or another.

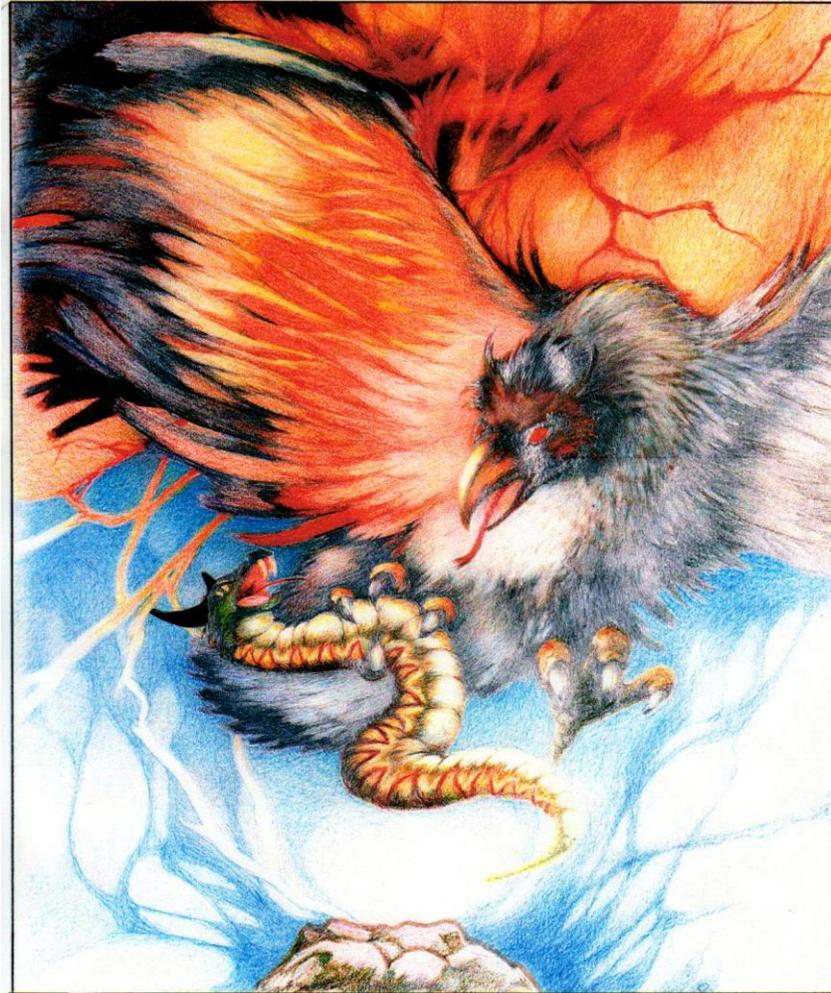


Schematic top-view of a Thunderbird nest.

Thunderbird Beliefs

Belief in the Thunderbird, or Thunderer, is widespread among many Aboriginal peoples across North America. According to tradition, it's a huge spirit being that's related to the hawk family. The sound of thunder is created by the flapping of its massive wings, and lightning bolts are considered to be great jagged spears that project from the blinking of its eyes. Serpents are the favoured food of the Thunderers, and like many other kinds of birds, it arrives in the North Country in the spring and departs for the south in the fall. That's why thunder and lightning are almost always experienced during the warmer months of the year.

The Thunderbird controls the weather and brings rain; it's a shape-shifter that can change itself into human form and conduct itself in the manner of ordinary human beings. For the most part it's a benevolent entity that protects humanity from the malevolent beings of the Underworld, such as the Great Horned Serpent and the Underwater Panther. The crashing electrical storms of summer signify the engagement of these awesome beings in violent combat. Their tumultuous clashes have come to personify the struggle between good and evil in the world.



Thunderbird in mortal combat with horned serpent. Amended by Leo Pettipas from original drawing by Larry Jamieson and provided courtesy of the Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.

Like all birds, the Thunderers raise their young in nests. There are numerous traditional teachings about individuals who have discovered these nests with young Thunderbirds and taken to their rock-rimmed abodes.

Distribution

Constructions of this kind have been found in such far-flung parts of the country as Newfoundland, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. They've drawn the attention of archaeologists who have sought to determine their antiquity and their purpose. In Aboriginal and scientific communities alike they're referred to as "Thunderbird nests."

Some descriptions of the nests note that they occur in high mountainous areas where the thunder clouds gather, but quite a few have also been observed near lakes and rivers on the Canadian Shield. They are known to occur around Lake of the Woods in northwestern Ontario, at several sites east of Lake Winnipeg, at the Lake Manitoba Narrows, and in Cree country near Cross Lake and God's Lake in northern Manitoba. Thunderbird Nest Island on McTavish Lake in northern Saskatchewan needs no explanation as to how it got its name. In addition to the nests themselves, there are painted images on cliff faces throughout the north that have been interpreted as depictions of Thunderbirds.

Archaeological Studies of Thunderbird Nests

I should point out that the term "Thunderbird nest" is not of archaeological origin. It is a recurrent theme in readily accessible traditional Native teachings that have been translated into English, and it comes as no surprise that archaeologists have followed the Aboriginals' lead in calling Thunderbird nests. Probably the one archaeologist who has given this topic the most attention in Manitoba is Patrick Carmichael. It's uncommon to find anything inside of the nests besides bedrock, soil, natural plant growth, or boulders that have fallen in from the surrounding sides. Carmichael excavated in and around one of them and found Indigenous pottery and lithics. This association may be spurious, however, since the feature could have simply been recently constructed on top of earlier cultural deposits.

After a literature review, Carmichael initially suggested that the nests found around Wanipigow Lake east of Lake Winnipeg may have functioned as monuments or memorials to important personages or events; as places for seeking visions; as grave markers of important individuals; or as places for divining the future or expressing gratitude to, appeasing, or praising, supernatural powers. To these Ian Brace of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum has added the possibility that they were constructed as defensive structures or lookout shelters.

Vision-Quest Structures?

The notion that the nests were places for seeking visions has independent support from another researcher. Aboriginal residents of Norway House and Pukatawagan made mention to archaeologist Tim Jones of young boys fasting and dreaming in "nests" as part of traditional coming-of-age observances, and in fact three features on the above-mentioned Thunderbird Nest Island have been referred to as "vision pits." It was suggested to Mr. Jones that in some quarters it was customary for boys to isolate themselves in these places to seek a vision, and the powerful Thunderbird was a much-desired spirit guardian via the vision quest.

Storage Bins?

The above Indigenous pronouncements about the circular rock features are grounded in traditional spiritual beliefs and ritual. There is, however, a much more mundane explanation and this too is provided by George Barker in his 1979 book *Forty Years a Chief*. It reads as follows:

Every September we harvested the wild rice, filling many bags. It was dumped into a cache made of rocks placed in a circular shape like a big nest. Birchbark was placed on the bottom, then the rice poured in and covered with another layer of birchbark. A weight was placed on top so that animals could not destroy it.

Wanipigow was a highly productive ricing lake in historic times according to local Elders, and one should therefore expect to find tangible evidence of 20th Century wild ricing activity such as storage structures in the immediate area. This purpose clearly indicates an Ojibwa affiliation and hence a postcontact (early 20th Century) time period for these features.

Other informants have given very different interpretations of them, notwithstanding the fact that they were all Ojibwas. Pat noted that a local 80-year-old Elder told him that the nests were indeed made by the Thunderbird: “what man has the power to lift those great stones?” This response is interesting indeed, since it seems to negate both the idea that the features in question were necessarily built by the Ojibwas or that they functioned as storage facilities. A most intriguing statement was published by Anishinaabe historian and story-teller James Red Sky, a long-time resident of the Lake of the Woods area. Here’s what he said in his book *Great Leader of the Ojibway: Mis-quona-queb*:

There are three thunderbird nests near Shoal Lake. Great big rocks are piled up on each other, making a round place. My family used to live about four miles from one place and at night we could see the red lightning flashing around the nest. We went down there once and there was a big animal skull, great big bones, skeletons, and feathers lying in the nest. Where did they get those bones? Those animals cannot be found around here. Only the moose and deer are located around the Lake of the Woods and these were not moose or deer bones. They were bison or some other kind of animal (1972).

Concluding Remarks

It may be that many of the “Thunderbird nests” were built during the last (20th) Century by local Native people for storing food, especially in areas where wild rice was abundant. Perhaps the real nests are indeed to be found only on mountains and highlands, as many traditions indicate, and the others (the storage bins) are called Thunderbird nests simply because they conform to what people imagine a Thunderbird nest should look like. Either way, it’s clear that the circular features variously played important roles — some in the spiritual beliefs and customs, others in the food-collecting practices — in Aboriginal life of yesteryear.