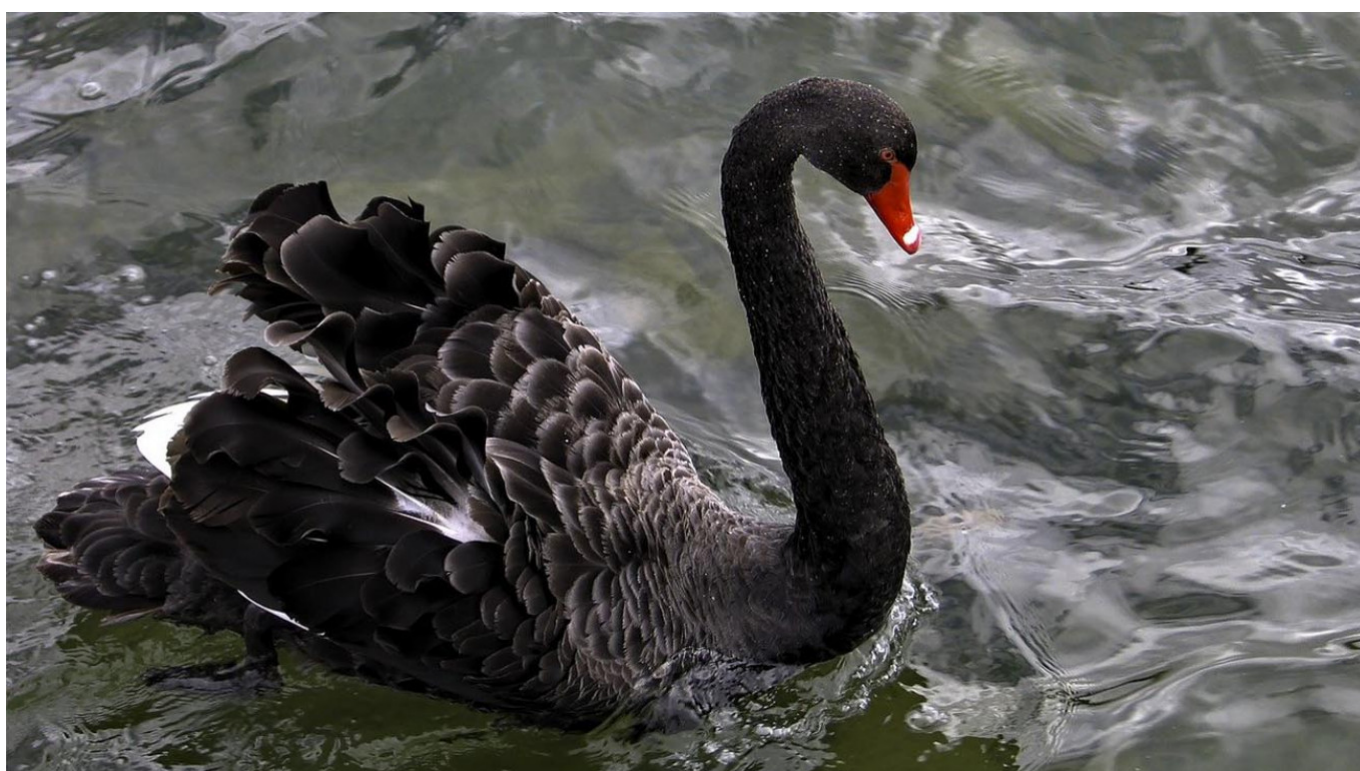


Black Swans and Russian Bird Lore

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Прыгать ласточкой: to do a swan dive

In Russia — and in other places, too, I suppose — the metaphor that you find for the coronavirus is often чёрный лебедь (black swan), which I, in my Russian-culture-centric way, thought was an odd allusion to the ballet Лебединое Озеро (Swan Lake). But I was wrong. It's from the book “Black Swan” by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, which has been translated into Russian and seems fairly well known. The black swan of the title is an unpredicted and indeed unpredictable event — usually catastrophic — that has massive repercussions. Sometimes you get a mix of metaphors with it, like here: Коронавирус — это колоссальный чёрный лебедь, который прилетел для всей мировой экономики. Это идеальный шторм. (Coronavirus is an enormous black swan that has landed on the entire world economy. It is a perfect storm.)

This, of course, got me thinking about birds and their meaning in the Russian imagination. Swans, for example, are quite nice when they are white. They are considered to be a symbol of grace and beauty, particularly renowned for their long necks. Having a long neck is a Good Thing in Russian culture: Она, не отрываясь, смотрит на высокую старуху с длинной лебединой шеей (She can't take her eyes off the tall older woman with her long, swanlike neck.)

Swans also mate for life and form a heart with their necks when cuddling — or whatever one calls displays of affection among swans. So, their image appears at weddings and anniversaries, or in gushing comments by relatives: О! Какие они лебеди! Тридцать лет счастливой супружеской жизни! (Oh, they're just like swans! Happily married for 30 years!)

Happily, too, a swan song in Russian, like in English, is the last blast of creativity or effort before the end of something. Наступившее десятилетие может стать триумфом российской космонавтики ☒ и её лебединой песней (This decade might be the triumph of Russian space aeronautics — and its swan song.) And a homely little creature might grow up into a beautiful swan, only in Russian it's not an ugly duckling but a goose. Наша «сухарь в юбке» становится истинной леди, из гуся превращается в прекрасного лебедя (Our dried up old hag becomes a true lady, changing from a goose into a beautiful swan.)

What about a swan dive? In Russian, the diving is done by another bird: ласточка (swallow). Иван ласточкой кинулся в воду (Ivan did a swan dive into the water.) The swallow is a “good bird” in Russian culture, associated with sweetness and speed. Ласточка is a common term of affection — when your child shares her cookies with you, you sigh: Моя ласточка! Спасибо! (What a sweetheart! Thank you!) They are also considered the first harbingers of spring — English speakers: think swallows and Capistrano — and therefore the harbingers of anything, usually something good. Машина стала первой ласточкой среди автомобилей С-класса (The car was the harbinger of the C-Class line of automobiles). That's good, right?

As you see, Russians divide birds into “good” and “bad,” or rather чистая (pure) and нечистая (impure, vile). Another чистая птица (pure bird) is аист (stork), which brings good luck when it nests on your roof. In fact: аист на крыше — мир на земле (A stork on the roof means peace on earth.) В народе к аистам всегда было особое отношение: считается, что аисты приносят счастье (People have special feelings for storks: there is a belief that storks bring happiness.)

They might bring happiness and peace, but they do look a bit odd. They are best known for standing one leg, and that's how their images are applied to people. Учительница ругала Степана: “Что ты стоишь на одной ноге как аист? Упадёшь!” (The teacher scolded Stepan: “Why are you standing on one leg like a stork? You're going to fall over!”)

Another чистая птица is голубь, one word that covers both pigeons and doves — a distinction in English that is apparently not warranted: basically, it's just one bird. But what a loving, sweet, cooing, peaceful bird it is. Голубь мира (the dove of peace) is a universal symbol of peace and beauty. And of course, голубчик and голубушка (my little dove, male and female) are lovely, if rather standard, terms of affection. And they are also the standard words for a pair of lovers: Когда я проснулся среди ночи, они уже помирились,

ворковали, как голуби (When I woke up in the middle of the night, they had already made up and were billing and cooing like doves.)

On the dark side of the bird world is, oddly enough, воробей (sparrow), which is considered an unclean winged creature in Russian mythology. That said, it is not given dreadful characteristics. Воробей is described as being small, fussy, hopping about somewhat comically, and eating very little. People like that are said to be sparrow-like. Что ты прыгаешь как воробей? Постой спокойно хоть пять минут! (Why are you hopping around like sparrow? Can't you stand still for even five minutes?) And this is the classic way to describe someone who picks at his or her food. Мы не знаем, что с дочкой делать. Она ест как воробушек (We don't know what to do with our daughter. She picks at her food like a bird.)

The sparrow also figures in a common expression: стрелять из пушки по воробьям (literally, to shoot a cannon at sparrows). This is what English speakers call overkill. Его критика не соответствует масштабу проблемы — он стреляет из пушки по воробьям (His criticism isn't appropriate to the scale of the problem. It's overkill.)

And finally, there are the two confusing birds ворон (raven) and ворона (hooded crow, most of the time). The problem with the nomenclature is that we people doing the naming don't really know what we're talking about. There is a raven (*Corvus corax*), a carrion crow (*Corvus corone*), and a hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*), along with other birds like the rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) and even the grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*). Other than all being united by their totally cool Latin names — that frugal rook, the quizzical grackle! — they are all big and pushy, dark in color, smart, and dexterous.

Pushy, you ask? You clearly have never had a crow divebomb your head because you aren't sharing your dog treats with him.

In Russian, both ворон and ворона are нечистые, although the former is said to be from the land of the dead and is very impure, while the latter is more ridiculous and annoying than evil. It is no wonder that in the very dark years of Soviet power, the black car that took people off to prison or execution was called чёрный ворон (black raven): Ночью приезжает чёрный ворон ... Женщину, у которой маленькая девочка, арестовывают (At night the "black raven" comes ... they arrest a woman who has a little girl...)

Ворона can be associated with someone who is comically clumsy and somewhat silly. In English these people are often called a different animal: На грани чёрного юмора то, когда этот учёный-ворона пытается делать фейерверки, и в коробках они начинают стрелять (It's like black humor when that silly goose of a scientist tries to make fireworks and they start to go off in the boxes.)

More commonly you hear about белая ворона (literally a white crow), a weirdo who does not fit in. Sometimes they really don't fit in: Непьющий еврей в коллективе дровосеков ☒ это дважды белая ворона (A non-drinking Jew in a team of lumbermen is being the odd man out — twice over.)

To sum up: for perfect happiness, convince a stork to nest on your roof, don't pick at your food like a little sparrow, bill and coo like a dove, and mate for life like a swan.

And definitely avoid ravens.

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