

Thunderbirds over Texas... By Martin Hagne

Working in avian conservation gives me the opportunity to study, see, and enjoy birds almost every day! Not a bad perk. I also enjoy history, and learning about the past. Put the two together and you'll be learning about ancient birds, or at least the tales of such birds. These birds are no longer in existence. Or... are they?

There is one group of birds, and stories, which still intrigues me... the ancient tale of the thunderbirds, the rain birds, the storm drifters. These were giant birds that were told to soar the stormy skies in distant times. The First people have many stories about such birds of varying kinds.

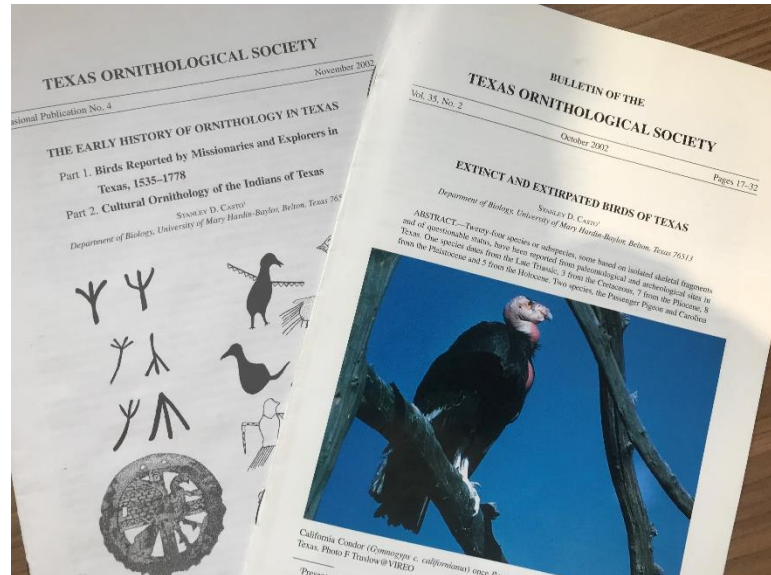
There are also many more recent claims that such birds still exist. I may have to place those more in the Bigfoot category, and there are probably some good scientific explanations for them, but more on that later.

Throughout history and many cultures there have been stories and legends of giant birds. American Indian lore is filled with stories of birds with enormous wingspans, some even told to carry away buffalo and human victims. The name "Thunderbirds" came from their flapping wings which made a sound like rolling thunder. The birds have been described as having wingspans of 20 to 40 feet or more, and most likely are referring to the pterodactyls of prehistoric times.

But there were other ancient giants found in North America. Fossils of skeletal remains of the giant Teratorn have been discovered in many places throughout the desert-southwest, including Nevada, Arizona, the Anza-Borrego Desert in California, and even in Oregon and as far east as Florida. With a wingspan somewhere between fourteen to sixteen feet, this was a huge flying "bird", even compared to the still-living California Condor with a wingspan of around nine feet.

There are fossilized giant birds in Latin America as well, some with wingspans of 24 feet or more. One of the legends in Texas is of giant birds sweeping up north from the south and central Americas on high storms carrying them for days. They would hunt the prairies swooping down from high above. The cloud dragons of Texas, if they ever existed, were maybe the fifty-foot wingspanned pterosaurs, or a similar ancient bird.

But we do have some real evidence of large birds in Texas. California Condor bones have been found in caves in west Texas. And proof has been found that they were breeding there about 12,000 years ago. Granted, condors only have about nine foot wingspans... but that brings us to another fact. We humans are good, actually great, at manufacturing things in our minds! I'm not making fun of folks, it's just a fact!



Over and over I have seen this happen with every kind of animal. Things as small as grackles have been turned into vultures. Two-foot rattle snakes are often told to be six feet or longer! Once a raccoon was even turned into an elk!! Our minds never cease to amaze me... we have high imaginations that sometimes run wild! Or... maybe... nah...

But nonetheless, California Condors once soared the Texas skies for sure! So who knows what else was lurking up there!