

FOCUS

Wild Arizona

Key Words:

Adaptation: physical or behavioral characteristic that helps an animal survive

Culture: a group of people with a common set of beliefs

Diverse: having a variety of different animals and plants

Folktale: a short story that tries to explain something, often while teaching a lesson

When it comes to colors, nature is remarkably **diverse**. At one extreme, we have the bright feathers of the bluebird. At the other end, we have the dull, dirty coloration of the coyote. In between, we may not find all the colors of the rainbow, but we do see plenty of variety in color from one animal to the next. What can possibly explain these differences?

The explanation actually depends on who you ask and their **culture**. Often, when something is new and difficult to understand, we compare it to something more familiar to us. As a result, different cultures often have different explanations. Some cultures turn these explanations into interesting stories, or **folktales**, designed to teach lessons.

The Akimel O’Odham (Pima) are a group of American Indians. Their ancestors have lived in the area now known as Arizona for more than



COYOTE PHOTO COPYRIGHT JOE AND MARISA CERRETA; BIRD PHOTO BY GEORGE ANDREJKO

Why is the coyote brown and gray, while the Western bluebird is as blue as a high mountain lake?

2,000 years. They have a rich tradition of storytelling, with folktales describing floods, butterflies and more.

One of the most well-known Akimel O’Odham stories provides a unique explanation for how the bluebird and coyote got their colors.

How the Bluebird and the Coyote Got Their Colors

Adapted by the author from “Myths and Legends of California and the Old Southwest,” compiled and edited by Katharine Berry Judson, 1912.

It is believed that there is a very special lake hidden far away in the

mountains. This lake is clear and blue because no streams flow in or out. Any animal that bathes in the lake four times each day for five days while singing the magic song will turn as blue as the lake.

A long time ago, the bluebird was a very ugly color. He flew to the lake. Every morning, he would bathe in the lake and sing:

“There’s a blue water. It lies there. I went in. I am now blue.”

On the fourth morning, all of the bluebird’s feathers fell off. But when he came out of the lake on the fifth morning, he was covered with beautiful blue feathers.



By Eric Proctor

Each day while the bluebird bathed, the coyote, who was bright green, had been hiding in the grass. He wanted to jump in the lake and eat the bluebird but was very afraid of the water. When the bluebird came out of the lake on the fifth morning, the coyote said, "How is it that you have lost all of your ugly color and now are so blue? You are more beautiful than anything that flies in the air. I want to be blue, too."

So the bluebird told the coyote about bathing four times each day and taught him the magic song.

The coyote gathered his courage and jumped into the lake and sang: "There's a blue water. It lies there. I went in. I am now blue."

And on the fifth morning, the coyote had turned as blue as the little bird.

The coyote was very proud. He was so proud that he walked along the road, looking from side to side to see if anybody saw how beautiful and blue he was. Then, he looked back to see if his shadow was blue also. But he was not watching the road. He ran headfirst into a stump so hard that he fell into the dirt and was covered in dust.

And to this day coyotes are the color of dirt.

Think and Read Critically:

According to the folktale, what did an animal need to do to become blue?

What color was the coyote before it went into the water?

What lesson could be learned from this story?

Just for Fun:

Below are some more interesting facts about coyotes and bluebirds:

- Coyotes often howl at night, and this howl can be heard for miles.
- Male bluebirds are often more colorful than females.
- Coyotes can smell prey beneath snow.
- Bluebirds eat insects and have been used by farmers to control pests.
- Coyotes can run more than 30 miles per hour.
- Bluebirds are cavity nesters, building their nests inside hollow areas in trees and other objects.

Can you come up with an interesting story to explain one or more of these facts? Try writing your own folktale from your cultural perspective. Be creative! And remember to use your story to teach a lesson, as well. ✍

■ This feature is part of the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Focus Wild Arizona program, a free

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habitat. Visit our Web site, www.azgfd.gov/focuswild, to find exciting lessons and resources.