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Omens in the Sky: A Historical and Comparative Examination of the Mothman and Other Winged Legends

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Abstract

The infamous Mothman is a prominent creature of American monster lore, perhaps only surpassed in recognition by the lumbering forest giant Bigfoot, said to be sighted all over the United States. Although the Mothman is a relatively new entity in the seemingly ever-growing menagerie of American monsters, similar entities, such as Thunderbirds, the Snallygaster, and the Jersey Devil, have been reported and discussed for centuries prior to the Mothman's emergence. This essay argues that these winged monster legends serve as cultural touchstones, reflecting and evolving in response to societal fears, ranging from spiritual beliefs and natural dangers in Indigenous traditions to postwar trauma, racial oppression, and Cold War anxieties in settler and modern American contexts.

Mankind has long been haunted by monsters lurking in the shadows. From the prehistoric villages of ages past to the metropolises of modern times, these 'things in the shadows' have kept pace with us, evolving as we have evolved. The Appalachian Mountains are no exception. Steeped in mystery and folklore, these forested slopes have long been haunted by tales of strange beings and terrifying monsters. Native American tribes from across North America have spoken of beings and monsters such as the Moon-Eyed People and the Raven Mocker from the Cherokee, or the Wendigo from Algonquin lore. All the while, settlers from the Old World brought over or created their own legends of creatures such as the Goatman, the Rougarou, and the Snallygaster. Over time, these monsters and the fears they embodied changed, their forms shifting to reflect new nightmares. These creatures not only mirrored the anxieties of their eras, but also reflect an enduring fascination with the unknown and the things that go bump in the night. By the mid-20th century, as the fear of nuclear annihilation cast its lengthening shadow, one such monster stepped out of the shadows: the infamous Mothman.

Mothman and several of the beings described throughout this essay are considered *cryptids*; 'hidden animals' said to exist but yet to have been confirmed by science. This modern designation lends a certain air of plausibility to those creatures given the title of cryptid, one that is reinforced by animals that were considered to be fictional beasts, but have since been revealed to be true flesh-and-blood organisms. Notable cases of this transformation include the rediscovery of the coelacanth,[1] a 'living fossil,' and the documentation of the giant squid, a tentacled nightmare long considered a sailor's tall tale. However, until tangible proof emerges, cryptids like Mothman remain in the realm of folklore and tall tales, waiting to be proven… or disproven.

The unique entity that is Mothman, though still a monster of folklore, did not begin in ancient myths or frontier tales. Mothman instead emerged, along with other contemporary cryptids, in the glow of the modern world. The first recorded sighting of the Mothman occurred on November 15, 1966. Two married couples were out at the old "TNT area" near Point Pleasant, West Virginia, when they sighted the creature that would eventually be dubbed Mothman.[2] Upon seeing the six to seven-foot-tall, red-eyed, winged monster, the group raced away toward Point Pleasant while the creature gave chase, peeling off as the group made it to the safety of the city lights.[3] For the next thirteen months, Mothman terrorized Point Pleasant and its inhabitants, with it all coming to an end in late 1967.

Mothman's story has remained largely unchanged since its initial appearance, and John Keel's subsequent influential contributions to the legend.[4] While unique in its striking appearance and contemporary setting, the idea of monstrous birds and winged beings is not a new phenomenon. Stories and tales of these creatures have appeared continually in North American societies and cultures, reflecting the fears and beliefs of the societies that

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[1] A fish that was thought to have gone extinct nearly 400 million years ago, but still roams the oceans today.

[2] "Couples See Man-Sized Bird…Creature…Something!," *Point Pleasant Register*, November 16, 1966.

[3] "Couples See Man-Sized Bird…," *Point Pleasant Register*.

[4] John Keel was a paranormal and UFO investigator who investigated the Mothman sightings.

created them. Often, these beings serve in distinct roles, acting as omens, spiritual entities, reflections of racial anxieties, and representations of wartime fears. These legends, then, are significant because they serve as cultural touchstones, whose forms and meanings were created and adapted over time in response to shifting societal fears, reflecting the anxieties, identities, and social tensions of the communities that created and sustained them.

The study of Mothman has largely focused on the paranormal aspects of the legend and its connections to other supernatural and seemingly unrelated phenomena. Much of this scholarship, intentionally or not, follows a similar path to that of John Keel and the foundational framework he established in *The Mothman Prophecies: A True Story*.[5] Keel blends eyewitness accounts of the Mothman with reports of UFOs, men in black,[6] and other paranormal entities, presenting the creature as part of a larger pattern of paranormal activity. While his work is foundational for the study of these ideas, it does not explore Mothman's connection to other creatures in folklore, nor does it consider the social and cultural factors that may have contributed to its emergence. Instead, Mothman is treated as another piece of overarching paranormal phenomena, rather than a legend rooted in the fears and anxieties of its time.

Although Keel focused on the Mothman sightings and how they were connected with other paranormal phenomena, literature on monsters has typically been shaped by attempts to categorize and compare these legends of strange creatures, tracing their origins, sightings, and cultural impact. Some works focus on specific legends, while others take a broader approach, creating bestiaries of regional and sometimes national monsters. The works of Rosemary Guiley, Linda S. Godfrey, and J.W. Ocker contributes to this approach; exploring these monster legends, how they are interpreted in their surrounding communities, and how they are related to each other.[7] The research of Guiley, Godfrey, and Ocker specifically highlight the recurring presence of winged monsters in American folklore and the continued persistence of these creatures acting as omens. Their works also examine the continued relevance of these creatures in local communities, particularly how beings like Mothman have become embedded in their regions, especially through tourism. Understanding how these legends fit together and how communities and people interact with them can provide a basis for interpreting the cultural and social reasons for why these legends are created in the first place.

While the monsters themselves are integral aspects of these legends, their symbolic meanings are arguably more significant. These beings often represent various cultural and social niches, occupying a number of roles to embody uncertainties, fears,

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[5] John Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies: A True Story* 1st ed. (New York: Tor Books, 1975).

[6] Found primarily in popular culture and conspiracy theories, men in black are reportedly mysterious government agents in dark suits who are said to intimidate or silence UFO witnesses to keep them from revealing what they have seen. The term can also refer to a wide range of mysterious individuals working for unknown organizations.

[7] Rosemary Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia: Mysterious Creatures in the Mountain State* 1st ed. (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2012); Linda Godfrey, *American Monsters: A History of Monster Lore, Legends, and Sightings in America* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2014); J.W. Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids: A Tour of American Myths and Monsters* (Philadelphia, Quirk Books, 2022).

and even attempts to explain the unknown. The creatures discussed throughout this essay serve in distinct roles, acting as omens, spiritual entities, reflections of racial anxieties, and representations of wartime fears. Scholars, such as David J. Puglia and Stephen T. Asma, have explored how monster legends function within society, analyzing what these creatures represent and how they shape cultural and social values.[8] How do these legends influence those who encounter them? What purpose do they serve within their communities? These are the kinds of questions examined in Puglia's folklorist-centric volume and Asma's historical and cultural study of monsters, both of which seek to uncover the deeper roles that monster folklore plays.

By examining how monster legends shape cultural and social values, scholars like Puglia and Asma reveal the broader functions these creatures serve in society and culture. Understanding the significance of these legends also requires an exploration of why people believe in them in the first place. Works like *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* by Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph O. Baker explore these questions, focusing on the factors that lead ordinary individuals to accept and engage with paranormal beliefs.[9] Their research, utilizing surveys and case studies, highlights the persistence of supernatural thinking in the United States and its intersection with religion, folklore, and personal experience. This foundation of belief sets the stage for a closer examination of how these legends function across different cultures and time periods.

The recurrence of winged monsters in folklore is significant not only for their persistence in folklore, but also for how they reflect the societies and cultures that created them. These reflections take shape through recurring themes that connect these creatures together. Among these, the role of omen stands out as the most prevalent, appearing in nearly every legend examined. Other themes are present as well, though they tend to be more specific to certain creatures or confined to particular historical periods. One of the first themes is the spiritual significance of these beings, a concept mostly isolated to the legends of Indigenous Americans.

The concept of winged monsters in America is neither a modern, nor a strictly European concept. These creatures, from the Piasa Bird to the Thunderbird, have existed in the stories of the many tribes and peoples of the Americas long before the arrival of European colonizers. To the modern American eye, these entities might seem like fearsome monsters, but within the cultural context of Indigenous traditions, they carry a far deeper, spiritual significance. Rather than mere flesh-and-blood creatures, these beings are more often regarded as powerful spirits or supernatural forces, embodying connections to the natural and spiritual worlds, and reflections of Indigenous societies' attempts to understand the world around them. Much like later legends, such as

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[8] David Puglia, *North American Monsters: A Contemporary Legend Casebook* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2022); Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[9] Christopher Bader, F. Mencken, and Joseph Baker, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

Mothman, reflected the anxieties, beliefs, and fears of its time, so too did the Thunderbirds, the Piasa Bird, and owls in their Indigenous contexts.

Among the many winged creatures of Indigenous legend, none are as widespread or awe-inspiring as the Thunderbird. Known by many names, such as the *Wakinyan* to the Sioux, or the thunderbeing and thunderer to others, the Thunderbirds were and are familiar spiritual beings to several Indigenous tribes across North America, including the Sioux, the Ojibwe, the Tlingit, the Pawnee, the Lakota, the Ho-Chunk, and many others.[10] Though modern depictions of Thunderbirds have been somewhat skewed by misrepresentation in popular media, i.e., taking on pterodactyl or reptilian-like features, Indigenous descriptions have continually shown the Thunderbirds as massive condor-like or eagle-like beings, with the ability to unleash destructive storms, and often acting as intermediaries between the spiritual world and the natural one. This spiritual nature is mainly due to their ability to fly, a symbol of their connection to the Upperworld. Their roles, however, hold some variation between Native American tribes.

To the Ojibwe of the Great Lakes or the Sioux of the Great Plains, the Thunderbirds are protectors, some provide good weather while others battle against spirits from the underworld.[11] The Lakota pray to the Thunderbirds for battlefield success and are seen as especially divine due to their ability to wield both life-giving power through spring and rain, and death-bringing power through their storms and talons.[12] The Hoh and the Quileute, on the other hand, believe Thunderbirds occupy a more neutral territory, acting more as solitary hunters, but still remaining extremely powerful and dangerous when provoked; evidenced by their creation of floods and storms or feasting on whales.[13]

The presence of the Thunderbird in Indigenous traditions reflects more than just reverence, it also reveals how Indigenous groups understand and interact with the natural world. As both spiritual entities and explanations for natural forces, Thunderbirds embody an attempt to understand the unpredictable elements of the environment. Why do storms sweep down from the north each year? Why do floods devastate the land? In answering these questions, Thunderbird legends reinforce the interconnectedness of the spiritual and natural worlds across Indigenous cultures. On the other hand, the variations in roles and powers in Thunderbird mythology reflect the various ways in which Indigenous cultures understood their relationship with the world. The Thunderbird, then, is not just a spiritual being, but a lens through which these societies expressed their unique values, fears, and spiritual beliefs. Although the Thunderbird is certainly connected to this theme of spiritual significance, it is one of the few beings that does not share the primary theme of being an omen within this research. However, other Indigenous legends do share this

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[10] Godfrey, *American Monsters*, 35-36; Alex, "Rulers of the Upper Realm."; Bridget Alex, "Rulers of the Upper Realm, Thunderbirds Are Powerful Native Spirits," *Audubon Magazine*, November 30, 2020, https://www.audubon.org/news/-rulers-upper-realm-thunderbirds-are-powerful-native-spirits.

[11] Alex, "Rulers of the Upper Realm."; Elle Andra-Warner, "Ojibwe Thunderbird Mythology: Powerful Spirits of the Sky," *Northern Wilds Magazine*, January 29, 2018. https://northernwilds.com/thunderbirds-powerful-spirits-sky/.

[12] Godfrey, *American Monsters*, 35-36.

[13] Albert B. Reagan and L. V. W. Walters, "Tales From the Hoh and Quileute," *Journal of American Folklore* 46, no. 182 (October-December, 1933): 320-322.

theme. While the mighty Thunderbirds soar through cloud-wreathed skies, other flying beings dwell closer to the earth, their legends tethered to the thresholds between worlds.

Compared to the Thunderbirds, the Piasa Bird is a relatively enigmatic creature in Native American mythology and later American monster lore. Although there are no reported sightings of such entities, there is evidence that the Piasa Bird left its impression on people native to the Mississippi area and European colonizers. This mysterious being first entered the known historical record in 1673, when Jesuit priest Jacques Marquette and explorer Louis Jolliet encountered two massive murals depicting the Piasa Bird during their expedition up the Mississippi.[14] Father Marquette described the paintings in his journals:

> They are as large as a calf; they have horns on their heads like those of a deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, a body covered with scales, and so long a tail that it winds all around the body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a fish's tail. Green, red, and black are the three colors composing the picture. Moreover, these two monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their author; for good painters in France would find it difficult to reach that place conveniently to paint them.[15]

Marquette also observed the expedition's Indigenous guides' reaction to the murals: "We saw upon one of them (referring to the cliff-face) two painted monsters which at first made us afraid, and upon which the boldest savages dare not long rest their eyes."[16] It is obvious from this reaction that these creatures were known to the Indigenous guides in some way, but there is next to no information on the Piasa Bird's significance to Indigenous peoples beyond Marquette's journal, only speculation.

While reminiscent of other Indigenous American beings, even those beyond the North American continent, such as the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl in Mesoamerican mythology, the Piasa Bird has a much less defined role than its southern cousin. Dr. Mark Wagner, director of the Center for Archaeological Investigations and a professor at Southern Illinois University, argues that the Piasa Bird served as a bridge between worlds in Indigenous mythology. Its serpentine tail connects it to the Underworld, its panther-like body and human face to this world, and its possible wings to the Upperworld.[17] Whether benevolent or malevolent, its connection to multiple realms of Indigenous mythology would have made it an immensely powerful being, explaining the guides' reactions to seeing the murals. Given the Piasa Bird mural's location near the convergence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers, and the reaction from the Indigenous guides, it appears likely that the Piasa Bird also served as an omen of the rapids and dangerous currents ahead, or potentially as a gatekeeper of some kind. This idea of being an omen is further

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[14] Mythic Mississippi Project, "Piasa Bird." Mythic Mississippi Project, Accessed December 14, 2024. https://mythicmississippi.illinois.edu/native-illinois/piasa-bird/.

[15] Jacques Marquette, *Father Marquette's Journal*, (Michigan: Michigan Historical Center, 1998) 17.

[16] Marquette, *Father Marquette's Journal*, 17.

[17] Mythic Mississippi Project, "Piasa Bird."

supported by subsequent European travelers in the region, whose guides left offerings to the murals in hopes of getting through the rapids.[18]

While most likely seen and interpreted as an omen, the Piasa Bird also reflects how Indigenous cultures understood their place in both the spiritual and physical world. Much like the Thunderbirds, the Piasa Bird is an explanation for how the natural world operates, answering questions such as "Why did some people survive the rapids, and others did not?" However, unlike the Thunderbirds, which could act as both protectors and destroyers, the Piasa Bird occupied a more ominous position, representing the dangers lurking in the natural world. This contrast reveals the diversity within Indigenous mythology, where different beings held different powers and roles. Because the Indigenous Underworld was often associated with water and caves, it was natural to link the river's treacherous rapids to that realm, reinforcing the belief that outside forces shaped the physical world. The use of the Piasa Bird as the reason for, or an omen of, these conditions clearly reinforces various Indigenous beliefs on the interconnectedness of different realms, whether that be spiritual or natural.

Regardless of its role in Indigenous myth, the Piasa Bird was not discussed again until 1836, when John Russell, a professor and minister, recounted a supposed indigenous legend about the beast. The main plot of the tale was that the Piasa Bird was terrorizing native villages in the region and was finally killed by Owatoga, an Illini chief, and a small band of other warriors by ambushing the creature with poison-tipped arrows.[19] Though Russell later admitted to fabricating this legend, the story stuck due to the rather large void of information or tales surrounding the Piasa Bird's mural.[20] While different in how these legends have evolved, this break with the original meaning of the myth, i.e., acting as an omen of the rapids ahead, is similar to the Mothman's later interpretation of the creature as an omen. This break is also an example of the appropriation of Indigenous myths to suit European colonizers' own narratives, underscoring how settler interpretations often overwrite or flatten Indigenous beliefs or understandings that are difficult to reconstruct from a post-invasion perspective. Nevertheless, the original Piasa mural and the cliff face it adorned have since been lost to quarrying, but in 1998, a new mural depicting a winged Piasa Bird was created in a better-protected location, where it is regularly repainted. While the Piasa Bird remains an intriguing yet enigmatic entity, gazing down from its cliff face, other more earthly creatures inhabit more well-defined mythological spaces.

Owls are incredibly varied and important beings in not only Indigenous American mythology but countless other mythologies and superstitions around the world. In Greek mythology, Athena is closely tied to owls, representing wisdom, while Ancient Egyptians associated them with death and mourning. Such ideas and more are expressed across Native American cultures as well. To the Ute and Navajo, the Né'éshjaa (Navajo for Owl) are not only seen as respected messengers but also as harbingers of change, good or

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[18] Mythic Mississippi Project, "Piasa Bird."

[19] *Political Beacon*, "Piasa or the Bird that Devours Men." *Political Beacon* (Lawrenceburg, IN), February 23, 1839, https://www.newspapers.com/image/821684381/?match=1&clipping_id=161735201.

[20] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 156.

bad.[21] Many groups, however, view owls in a darker light, seeing them as bad omens. One woman recalled her grandmother's story of an owl speaking her son's name; that same night, he died in a motorcycle accident.[22] A similar story involved a young Indigenous man who saw an owl while in the Navajo Nation and was later hit by a car, though he survived.[23] Such accounts encourage this reputation of owls as omens, leading to continued anxiety surrounding these nocturnal hunters.

Other groups, such as the various Algonquian peoples, specifically the Ojibwe, also have a similar interpretation of owls, though even within these individual groups, opinions are divided. Some interpret owls as messengers, guardians, and spiritual helpers, while others adopt the stance that owls are omens of death and should be feared.[24] The Mi'kmaw, on the other hand, believe the owl acts as a guide for the soul after death.[25] The Cherokee believe great horned owls are witches in disguise, but conversely view screech owls as diviners or messengers.[26] The Dakota and Hidatsa, along with the Lenape and Delaware, see owls as protective spirits.[27] Cheyenne warriors adorned their shield, armor, and body with owl feathers, believing they granted special abilities, such as night vision.[28] Whether they were omens, protectors of warriors, or messengers of future events, the owl holds an important and respected place in Native American traditions and superstitions.

Across these traditions, owls, much like the Piasa Bird and Thunderbirds, act as a link between worlds. Yet, while Thunderbirds embody storms, and the Piasa Bird signifies the danger of rapids, owls are tied to more intangible forces and ideas. The owl, among other symbols, primarily symbolizes fate, death, and omens. The owl's role as an omen extended beyond Indigenous traditions, it also bled into colonial and settler history and folklore as well. African American convicts building the Swannanoa Tunnel in the Blue Ridge Mountains sang of a "hoot owl squalling" that signaled the death of a worker in the

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[21] "Great-Horned Owl," Birds, Navajo Zoo, accessed March 11, 2025, https://navajozoo.org/horned-owl/; Isiah F. Cambridge, "Indigenous Owl Perspectives Part I: Né'éshjaa' – A Messenger," *Tracy Aviary*, accessed March 10, 2025, https://tracyaviary.org/blog/post/indigenous-owl-perspectives-part-i-ne%CA%BCeshjaa%CA%BC-a-messenger/.

[22] USC Digital Folklore Archives, "The Owl: A Native American Bad Omen," USC Digital Folklore Archives, May 1, 2019, https://folklore.usc.edu/the-owl-a-native-american-bad-omen/.

[23] Cambridge, "Indigenous Owl Perspectives Part I," *Tracy Aviary*, accessed March 10, 2025, https://tracyaviary.org/blog/post/indigenous-owl-perspectives-part-i-ne%CA%BCeshjaa%CA%BC-a-messenger/.

[24] Wendy Makoons Geniusz, "Gookooko'oog: Owls and Their Role in Anishinaabe Culture," *Papers of the Algonquian Conference* 40 (2008): 241-266.

[25] Crystal St. Pierre, "New children's book tackles the topic of death from the perspective of a Mi'kmaw artist," *Windspeaker.com*, October 31st, 2023, https://windspeaker.com/news/windspeaker-news/new-childrens-book-tackles-topic-death-perspective-mikmaw-artist.

[26] George Ellison, "Cherokee had high regard for owls," *Smoky Mountain News*, September 2002, https://smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/27697-cherokee-had-high-regard-for-owls.

[27] Anne Hay, "Owls in Native American Cultures," Buffalo Bill Center of the West, August 6, 2018, https://centerofthewest.org/2018/08/06/owls-native-american-culture/.

[28] Hay, "Owls in Native American Cultures."

tunnels.[29] This belief was undoubtedly shaped by the brutal labor conditions that post-Civil War African Americans often dealt with, but was also molded by European-American legends absorbing and reshaping these indigenous beliefs. Much like the Piasa Bird and Thunderbirds reflected Indigenous views on natural forces, and Mothman later embodied Cold War anxieties, owls in Indigenous cultures symbolized an attempt to understand forces and happenings fully beyond human control, that of fate, death, and the afterlife. While Native American traditions, legends, and superstitions endured, European colonizers introduced their own myths and monsters onto the American landscape.

As European settlers colonized the Americas, the monsters they brought over were adapted to the new, strange, and unforgiving lands of the New World. These legends syncretized with Indigenous myths and the symbolisms within to create wholly new and terrible specimens to stalk the forests, plains, and skies. An important distinction of these colonial and settler legends is their roles as tools of oppression, thus establishing the second sub-theme of my research: the oppression of marginalized groups. Another distinction is that these legends were spread differently from older myths. Rather than strictly by oral traditions, the use of newspapers and other mass media was an important disseminator of these tales, a commonality shared by a vast majority of these colonial/settler legends. It is important to note that these beings were deemed important enough to be included in the papers, showing not only the prevalence of these legends, but also how they impacted the communities and areas from which they originated. Regardless of how their stories were spread, the wilds of Appalachia became the perfect backdrop for these horrors, from the eerie ding-dong of the Belled Buzzard to the grotesque form of the Snallygaster.

The Belled Buzzard is a particularly interesting, unique, and somewhat humorous creature of Appalachian and Southern folklore. This 'buzzard,' commonly referred to as a vulture in the United States, was by all accounts described as a vulture with a bell tied around its neck. The earliest sightings of this scavenger can be traced back to at least 1854, less than a decade before the Civil War, when one was sighted in Halifax, NC.[30] Although the Belled Buzzard later became seen as a harbinger or messenger of death, early reports and sightings tended to treat the unusual vulture as an oddity rather than as an imminent sign of someone's demise. In another sighting reported by the *Concord Weekly Gazette*, the Buzzard was seen in Concord, NC.[31] It was reportedly shot at several times, but the "*phantom* Buzzard" fled without injury.[32] Although not always explicitly stated, this phantom or supernatural aspect is implied in subsequent sightings. While the Belled Buzzard's legend began as an odd spectacle, its omen-like role only developed later in the evolution of its tale.

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[29] "Swannanoa Tunnel: About the Song," Ballad of America, accessed March 5, 2025, https://balladofamerica.org/swannanoa-tunnel/.

[30] *Loudon Free Press*, "Who Belled the Buzzard," *Loudon Free Press*, February 21, 1854, https://www.newspapers.com/image/61369261/?match=1&clipping_id=161427654.

[31] *Concord Weekly Gazette*, "The Belled Buzzard Again," *Concord Weekly Gazette*, Mar. 29, 1856, https://www.newspapers.com/image/78372294/?match=1&clipping_id=161428006.

[32] *Concord Weekly Gazette*, "The Belled Buzzard Again." Italics are from original source.

Besides sightings here and there throughout the years, the Belled Buzzard was first directly seen as a bad omen in Tennessee in 1878. Near the end of a yellow fever epidemic that had seized Brownsville, TN, the Belled Buzzard was reported to have circled the city for days.[33] While the *Pulaski Citizen* speculated that the incident was likely orchestrated by a "mischievous person" for amusement, it nevertheless disturbed the local African-American population, who believed it to be connected to the epidemic.[34] Though the Belled Buzzard had previously been a subject of scattered sightings, this particular event marked a shift in its perception. Now undoubtedly seen as an omen, why the sudden change? Given that this report was published nearly a decade after the Civil War, the growing association of the Belled Buzzard with death and disaster may reflect how the South was struggling to process its trauma. The loss of family, homes, and a way of life was at the forefront of daily life in the South, something that was reinforced by Reconstruction. Interestingly, while the White population of Brownsville seemed largely unaffected by the sighting, the city's Black community was deeply disturbed, interpreting it as a link to the yellow fever epidemic. The fears and interpretations of the creature from the African-American community could have been weaponized as a means of oppressing them, a pattern seen in later folklore, such as with the Snallygaster.

The Belled Buzzard's reputation as an omen continued beyond the aftermath of the Civil War. In one of its final appearances, the Belled Buzzard was seen once again in 1922 in southern West Virginia, where many of the locals feared "imminent disaster," citing previous tragedies linked to the creature.[35] The subtitle of this article is rather interesting, as it calls these residents of Marlinton, WV, "superstitious," which is possibly a form of prejudice against those that may be considered 'hillbillies' by the *Fairmont West Virginian*.[36] For reference, Fairmont, WV, is a city in northern West Virginia, while Marlinton is a smaller town located in the mountains of southern West Virginia. Regardless, the Belled Buzzard's reputation as an omen is further reinforced by the research of folklorists Gary Carden and Nina Anderson, who were also able to uncover further sightings of the creature.[37] As previously discussed, the theme of omens can be seen in all of these legends, but like other legends, the Belled Buzzard represents more than just an omen. The Belled Buzzard reflects a post-Civil War South struggling with loss, racial tension, and social upheaval. While the Belled Buzzard symbolized Southern fears, other monsters, much older than the bell-totting vulture, abounded further north.

Beginning its life in the seemingly endless Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, the Jersey Devil, originally known as the Leeds Devil, is a particularly grotesque yet infamous entity of American folklore. Often described as a monstrous amalgam of animal parts, the

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[33] *Pulaski Citizen*, "The Belled Buzzard," *Pulaski Citizen*, Dec. 5, 1878, https://www.newspapers.com/image/171589692/?match=1&clipping_id=161429436.

[34] *Pulaski Citizen*, "The Belled Buzzard."

[35] *Fairmont West Virginian*, "Disaster Feared With Coming of Belled Buzzard," *Fairmont West Virginian*, July 08, 1922, https://www.newspapers.com/image/378484088/?match=1&clipping_id=161430509.

[36] *Fairmont West Virginian*, "Disaster Feared With Coming of Belled Buzzard."

[37] Gary Carden and Nina Anderson, *Belled Buzzards, Hucksters & Grieving Spectres: Strange & True Tales of the Appalachian Mountains* 1st ed. (North Carolina: Down Home Press, 1994). 9-11.

Jersey Devil is said to typically consist of "the body of a kangaroo, the head of a dog, the face of a horse, large leathery wings, antlers like a deer, a forked reptilian tail, and intimidating claws."[38] One of the earliest recorded sightings of this monster dates back to 1790, when Vance Larner, a woodsman, recorded in his diary that he had seen the creature near a pond, "It was dashing its tail to and fro in the pond and rubbing its horns against a tree trunk," until "it yielded an awful scream as if it were a pained man, and then flew across the pond until I could see it no more."[39]

At the time of Larner's account, the Jersey Devil had no established origin story, however, as Larner shared his sighting, one eventually took shape.[40] Most versions of the story centered on Mother Leeds, the supposed progenitor of this horrific offspring and a suspect of witchcraft and communion with Satan, who, in the 1730s or possibly after the Revolutionary War, cursed her unborn thirteenth child for the strain it would place on her family.[41] Upon birth, the baby transformed into a monstrous creature, attacked its family, and fled into the woods. Whether a real Mother Leeds or Leeds family ever existed is unclear, but the tale persisted quietly in the region for at least a century. In 1900, an article by the *Daily Times-Index* provides an overview of the Jersey Devil's legend and the many activities the beast was said to engage in.[42] Of particular note was that the creature is described in this article as "no surer forerunner of disaster," or in other words, an omen.[43] Besides this 1900 article, the Jersey Devil remained relatively unknown to national audiences, with its legend mostly confined to the Pine Barrens. That was until 1909, when a wave of sightings across New Jersey propelled the legend into the spotlight.

The first sightings in 1909 of the Jersey Devil occurred at the start of the year, during the week of January 17th. Hoofprints in the snow, on both roof and lawn, were found across south New Jersey and even in Philadelphia.[44] Several members of the public came forward with their own sightings, including that of Nelson Evans and his wife, who said they saw the Jersey Devil on the roof of their shed in Gloucester City; describing it as a bipedal monster with the head of a dog, the face of a horse, a long neck, wings, and horse hooves.[45] Other witnesses saw it crossing rivers, flying alongside trolleys, or attacking animals, including Mary Sorbiski, who beat it with a broom as it attacked her dog.[46] A police

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[38] Godfrey, *American Monsters*, 87.

[39] Angus Gillespie, "The Jersey Devil," in *North American Monsters* ed. by David Puglia, 106.

[40] Gillespie, "The Jersey Devil," in *North American Monsters* ed. by David Puglia, 106.

[41] Gillespie, "The Jersey Devil," in *North American Monsters* ed. by David Puglia, 108; Godfrey, American Monsters, 87-88; Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 33.

[42] *Daily Times-Index*, "Jersey Sees a Devil," *Daily Times-Index* (San Bernardino, CA), Jan. 06, 1900, https://www.newspapers.com/image/698979094/?match=1&clipping_id=161425250.

[43] *Daily Times-Index*, "Jersey Sees a Devil."

[44] *Washington Herald*, "Strange Beast Seen," *Washington Herald,* January 21, 1909, https://www.newspapers.com/image/50074386/?match=1&clipping_id=161425945.

[45] *Washington Herald*, "Strange Beast Seen."

[46] *Washington Herald*, "Strange Beast Seen."; *Courier-Post*, "Policemen Fire Shots at Terrorizing Freak," *Courier-Pos*t (Camden, NJ), January 22, 1909, https://www.newspapers.com/image/447292244/?match=1&clipping_id=167308813; Godfrey, American Monsters, 88-89.

officer even fired at the beast as the creature was drinking from a water trough.[47] As more sightings of the creature were reported, panic spread, and armed hunting parties formed, but by January 22, the sightings had abruptly ceased, and the creature vanished once more into the pines.[48]

Much like the other creatures described throughout this essay, the Jersey Devil did not appear randomly. Its origins in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey reflect the anxieties of a society dealing with colonial and religious superstition and rigid gender roles. Originally known as the Leeds Devil, the creature may have been used to warn of the dangers of the wilderness or misbehavior, or even the influence of independent women. Mother Leeds, the supposed origin figure, was a suspect of witchcraft after all.[49] While accusations of witchcraft were a way of airing disputes between neighbors, friends, rivals, and family members (the Salem Witch Trials come to mind), they were also a way to oppress women, especially those who were independent or did not otherwise conform to societal norms.[50] The Jersey Devil, then, mirrors a broader historical tendency to use these sorts of supernatural accusations to control or punish those, especially women, who did not conform. Its legend quickly outgrew this initial reasoning, however, becoming more of a boogeyman with the 1909 sightings of the beast.

While the theme of oppression is clear in the Jersey Devil's legend in its early years, it also shares traits with other creatures in this study. Its mass sightings in 1909 parallel Mothman's rise during the Cold War, revealing how mass media (newspapers or otherwise) can spread legends far and wide. As with the Piasa Bird and Snallygaster, the Jersey Devil also takes on a similar hybrid appearance. And it shares with all of these creatures the theme of being an omen. In today's world, much like that of the Mothman, the Jersey Devil is a pop culture icon, whether it is appearing as the mascot for the New Jersey Devils hockey team, menacing the wastelands of the *Fallout 76* videogame, or frightening Mulder and Scully on an episode of *The X-Files*. While the Jersey Devil had captured public attention in the 20th century, it was not the only winged terror haunting the American imagination. Around the time of the 1909 sightings, another winged terror was casting its tentacled shadow over the Maryland countryside.

The particularly monstrous, reptilian creature known as the Snallygaster has haunted western Maryland for centuries. Brought over to America as the *Schneller Geist* or 'quick ghost' by German immigrants to the region, the Snallygaster was originally used by these settlers as a folkloric boogeyman that could be warded off with star-shaped hex signs.[51] While early German-American accounts of its appearance remain obscured, later versions of the legend describe the creature as a winged reptilian beast with sharp claws, a beak, multiple eyes, octopus-like tentacles, and a screech like that of a train whistle.[52]

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[47] *Courier-Post*, "Policemen Fire Shots at Terrorizing Freak."

[48] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 36.

[49] Gillespie, "The Jersey Devil," in *North American Monsters* ed. by David Puglia, 108.

[50]"Early Modern witch trials," The National Archives, Accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/early-modern-witch-trials/.

[51] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 49.

[52] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 49; Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 111.

While the Snallygaster remained relatively unknown beyond its home in the mountains and valleys of western Maryland for at least a century, its legend was eventually adapted by newspapers, gaining widespread recognition and infamy in 1909.[53]

Coincidentally sighted around the same time as the Jersey Devil, the Snallygaster similarly terrorized its local region. The Snallygaster was first reported circling throughout the South Mountain area within Frederick and Washington Counties, with reports describing the creature attacking people, including one case where it carried a man to a hilltop and drained his blood.[54] It was also sighted in West Virginia, where it attacked a woman before briefly roosting in a nearby barn, while reports of its eggs surfaced near Burkittsville and Gapland, MD, and Sharpsburg, WV, though their fate remains unknown.[55] Shortly after beginning its flight of terror, the Snallygaster was said to once again vanish. Guiley states that the Snallygaster's 1909 appearance was a confirmed hoax by reporters of the *Middletown Valley Register*, who were hoping to increase the sales of the newspaper and capitalize on the Jersey Devil's reign of terror in New Jersey.[56] Despite its fabricated 1909 venture, the Snallygaster legend persisted, but not because of journalistic opportunity, but because it adapted to reflect deeper cultural fears, particularly in the post-Civil War era.

More than any other creature in this study, the Snallygaster was overtly weaponized in the post-Civil War era to terrorize and oppress African American communities in the Old Line State. A 1909 headline states, "The Colored People are in Great Danger; Attacks Only Colored Men," in reference to the Snallygaster.[57] Later reports, like one from the *Montgomery County Sentinel*, reinforced this theme, claiming hunters found its lair on Sugar Loaf Mountain and warned Black residents of Dickerson that the creature fed "entirely on colored men," as they retreated down the mountain.[58] The article even suggested the beast would strike if Black voters supported Democrats in elections.[59] A rather obvious example of voter suppression. In this way, the Snallygaster became a literal monster of oppression. This oppressive behavior reflects a broader history of using monsters and 'monsterizing' marginalized and minority groups to justify segregation, violence, and oppression. From racist myths portraying Black Americans as rapists, kidnappers, or otherwise "Black monsters," to modern conflicts labeling whole Middle Eastern peoples and groups as "terrorists," these narratives have long served to support

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[53] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 49; Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 111.

[54] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 111; Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 49.

[55] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 111; Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 49.

[56] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 111.

[57] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 51.

[58] *Montgomery County Sentinel,* "Sleeping Snallygaster Snores Serenely in Sugar Loaf Sunday; Seven Snares Set," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, Dec. 2, 1932, https://www.newspapers.com/image/881528126/?match=1&clipping_id=161483601.

[59] *Montgomery County Sentinel,* "Sleeping Snallygaster Snores Serenely in Sugar Loaf Sunday."; The party platforms of the Democrats and Republicans had mostly switched by this point in time, i.e., the Democrats were no longer the party of enslavers, and instead the Republicans had taken on many of the Democrat party's ideals and vice versa.

these justifications.[60] The Snallygaster, then, is not just a folklore monster of the Maryland mountains; it is an old symbol of racism, oppression, and terror.

The Snallygaster vanished after 1909 but resurfaced in 1932, now more of a comic figure than a true horror. Having already haunted the "Middletown valley" for a week, more sightings included a charge at a vehicle on the National Highway and a bizarre account of the creature riding a bicycle into the mountains.[61] As previously mentioned, hunters found its lair on Sugar Loaf Mountain but retreated, warning local Black communities of the supposed threat as they did.[62] Soon after, the Snallygaster allegedly met its end, succumbing to toxic moonshine fumes near the Frog Hollow section of Washington County.[63] Authorities, already en route to destroy the illegal operation, found only its bones at the bottom of a liquor vat, but regardless of the creature, they demolished the site with 500 pounds of dynamite.[64] Rather fitting, given that this specific iteration of the Snallygaster cast its shadow during Prohibition and the Great Depression. Though the beast was dead, occasional sightings persisted into the 1940s, where the legend faded until its modern resurgence.[65]

As with the Thunderbird and Mothman, the Snallygaster served as a cultural touchstone for the fears and values of the time in which it appeared. In the post-Civil War period, it symbolized white supremacist anxieties over racial equality, while during the 1930s, it was adapted to suit the social changes and anxieties of Prohibition. Though its symbolism has evolved, the Snallygaster remained an omen, whether of racial violence, settler or immigrant worries, or social anxieties.

Although sightings nowadays are nonexistent, the Snallygaster legend has since gained some popularity in the modern day, particularly in Frederick, M.D., where it is celebrated through murals, a namesake whiskey, and the American Snallygaster Museum.[66] While the Snallygaster's legend faded for a time after its 1932 escapade, perhaps the most famous of all winged monsters would cast its shadow thirty years later.

Unlike its monstrous brethren discussed throughout this essay, the Mothman was not spawned from some long-lost settler tale, nor Indigenous legends of mighty sky-beings. Instead, around midnight on November 15, 1966, the Mothman made its debut on the modern stage. The first report of the creature came from two young couples, Roger and Linda Scarberry, and Steve and Mary Mallette, who were out near the old "TNT bunker area," near Point Pleasant.[67] Finishing up with their exploration and nearing the exit, they

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[60] Asma, *On Monsters.* 231-232, 235, 248.

[61] *Evening Sun*, "Bovalopus Snallygaster Swoops Down On Village," *Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD), November 25, 1932, https://www.newspapers.com/image/369630737/?clipping_id=161483145, https://www.newspapers.com/image/369630557/?match=1&clipping_id=161483297.

[62] *Montgomery County Sentinel,* "Sleeping Snallygaster Snores Serenely."

[63] *Evening Sun,* "John Barleycorn Ends Career of Snallygaster," *Evening Sun*, December 1, 1932, https://www.newspapers.com/image/369611380/?match=1&terms=snallygaster&clipping_id=72733481.

[64] *Evening Sun,* "John Barleycorn Ends Career of Snallygaster."

[65] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 112-113.

[66] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 50-51.

[67] "Couples See Man-Sized Bird...," *Point Pleasant Register*; Godfrey, *American Monsters*, 64.

spotted something in the middle of the road: a figure, which quickly shuffled into a nearby building.[68] Once the figure was clear of the road, the group sped away in terror, only to see the creature again moments later, perched on a small hill.[69] This time, it did not flee. Although Scarberry claimed to be exceeding 100 miles an hour as they raced away, the winged being pursued them, banging on their car's roof and emitting mouse-like squeaks.[70] Only when they neared the lights of Point Pleasant did the creature vanish into the night.

Once in Point Pleasant, the group rushed to the police. They described the creature as light gray, six to seven feet tall, with a ten-foot wingspan, large hands, a head set deep in its chest, and most strikingly, glowing red eyes.[71] Sightings continued in the Point Pleasant region, with the next occurring on November 16, not even twenty-four hours after the first sighting. Marcella Bennett, her daughter, and her brother, Raymond Wamsley, witnessed the creature while visiting family members living near the TNT area.[72] As they approached their car, the creature appeared, forcing them to flee inside the house, where it peered through windows, tried the door, and stepped onto the porch before vanishing.[73] More encounters were reported, with the next occurring on November 18, when two firefighters described a "large bird with red eyes," and on November 20, four teens saw it fly away from their car.[74] By November 22, at least ten additional reports had surfaced.[75] Over the next thirteen months, more than one hundred witnesses to the creature came forward, attracting the interest of major news outlets and writers such as John Keel, who documented the phenomenon.[76]

As the Mothman sightings continued, so did the debate over its origins, with theories ranging from the plausible to the exceedingly strange. Perhaps the most fantastical were the theories and ideas of Keel, who posited that the Mothman may be linked to various paranormal phenomena, such as UFOs and men in black; reportedly seen in the area and across the country at the time.[77] On the other hand, scientists and experts proposed more grounded explanations. The majority opinion was that the Mothman was some kind of misidentified large bird, with the most accepted theory coming from Dr. Robert L. Smith of West Virginia University, who proposed the creature was a sandhill crane, a man-sized bird with a matching wingspan.[78] Despite these attempts to dispel the

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[68] "Couples See Man-Sized Bird...," *Point Pleasant Register*; Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 35.

[69] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 88; Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 35.

[70] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 35. Godfrey, *American Monsters*, 64.

[71] "Couples See Man-Sized Bird...," *Point Pleasant Register*.

[72] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 37.

[73] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 38.

[74] Ralph Turner, "Mason Bird-Monster Presumed Gone Now," *Herald-Dispatch* (Huntington, WV), November 22, 1966, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/notewv/mothman2.jpg; *Associated Press*, "'Mothman' Said Still At Large," *Martinsville Bulletin*, November 30, 1966, https://www.newspapers.com/image/1070638275/?clipping_id=155362732.

[75] Ralph Turner, "Mason Bird-Monster Presumed Gone Now,"

[76] Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 88-89.

[77] John Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies: A True Story*, 18-21, 26, 83, 157-162, 291-292.

[78] *Associated Press*, "'Mothman' Said Still At Large."

mystery of the Mothman's true nature, they did little to banish the unease left in its wake or stop the continuing reports of the being.

Many Mothman witnesses reported unnerving and bizarre happenings after their brief and terrifying encounters. The Scarberrys were plagued by strange noises in their home at night, from beeping noises to something akin to a "tape recorder played at high speed," with the noises becoming so disruptive and disconcerting that the Scarberrys moved.[79] Marcella Bennett, overwhelmed by a sense of a connection to the creature, could no longer drive at night.[80] Alongside these personal disturbances, sightings of UFOs, animal mutilations, electrical failures, and men in black multiplied while the Mothman was said to be active in the region.[81] Yet despite the growing strangeness, these sightings and phenomena would soon come to an abrupt end.

The Mothman's hold over Point Pleasant only lasted until December 15th, 1967, when the Silver Bridge spanning the Ohio River collapsed, plunging 46 victims into the cold waters below. Yet the legend did not fade with the disaster. In a world increasingly overshadowed by the threat of nuclear annihilation, strange phenomena like the Mothman reflected the growing sense of dread and uncertainty. Though sightings ceased after the collapse, speculation on what the Mothman was deepened. Many came to believe that the Mothman was not merely a strange visitor, but an omen of disaster, and thus an embodiment of the Cold War era's anxieties. This reinterpretation of the Mothman as an omen mirrored these broader Cold War fears, where catastrophe and nuclear annihilation seemed inevitable and often beyond human control. Thus, like the other winged monsters discussed in this essay, the Mothman legend adapted to the fears of its time, continuing to evolve long after its last appearance.

As fears of nuclear annihilation faded during the later years of the Cold War, America's interest in monsters shifted, and Mothman, much like many of the other creatures discussed in this essay, was swept into the growing cryptid craze. Keel's 1975 book, *The Mothman Prophecies*, and its 2002 film adaptation pushed the Mothman into the national pop culture sphere. Since then, Mothman has remained a pop culture icon, appearing in shows like *Monster Quest*, *Expedition Unknown*, and *Mountain Monsters,* keeping the Mothman in public view, and even reaching new generations through video games like *Fallout 76*. In 2003, Point Pleasant hosted the first-ever Mothman Festival; not only a testament to its popularity but also a celebration of the legend, with Mothman-themed food, merch, and activities that now draws thousands of visitors each September.[82]

Much like the other entities discussed throughout this essay, the Mothman legend was a product of the unique historical and cultural context of its time. Emerging in the mid-

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[79] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 37.

[80] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 38.

[81] Guiley, *Monsters of West Virginia*, 40-41; Ocker, *The United States of Cryptids*, 89; Godfrey, American Monsters, 66.

[82] Associated Press, "Point Pleasant, W. Va., celebrates its Mothman legend with tourism," *Chillicothe Gazette*, September 27, 2003, https://www.newspapers.com/image/293097247/?match=1&clipping_id=155381663.

1960s, the Mothman appeared during a particularly rough decade for the Cold War. Not only was America entrenched in the Vietnam War, but the Cold War itself had just nearly gone hot with the Cuban Missile Crisis occurring in 1962. The 1960s were firmly part of the nuclear age, and the fear of nuclear war loomed large in everyday life. While the atom was often promoted for its potential to benefit humanity, such as through clean energy and technological innovation, it had first been used for destruction. The dread of nuclear annihilation lingered in the public's mind, reinforced by government preparations like fallout shelters and civil defense drills.

These anxieties of war and nuclear annihilation were coupled with increasing mistrust of the government and a growing fascination with the strange and the unknown. The decade was plagued with sightings of UFOs and strange beings, while popular culture embraced the strange through television shows like *The Twilight Zone* and films such as *War of the Worlds* and the *Godzilla* franchise, exposing more and more people to the supernatural.[83] Even Bigfoot made a cultural debut with the infamous Patterson-Gimlin film. Thus, within this atmosphere, it was almost inevitable that the Mothman would not only be tied back to these themes of the paranormal, something to which Keel had explicitly linked the Mothman sightings, but to that of an omen that was tied to Cold War paranoia, government mistrust, and nuclear dread.[84]

The many legends of winged monsters that came before the Mothman are also important when it comes to contextualizing its legend. From the Piasa Bird of the Mississippi to the Jersey Devil of the Pine Barrens, these ideas of winged creatures are nothing new, and many aspects of their appearances and roles in their respective legends are shared with the Mothman. An imposing wingspan, a terrifying appearance, and, of course, a role as an omen are just some examples. Yet, unlike earlier legends rooted in natural or colonial anxieties, the Mothman was born from the atomic age's fear of uncontrollable catastrophe. Thus, the significance of these recurring winged monsters lies not only in their persistence, but in how they embody and reflect the fears and anxieties of the societies that created them, and how they continue to evolve alongside them.

Throughout this essay, it is clear that the majority of these monsters share a central role as omens. Creatures like the Belled Buzzard, the Snallygaster, and the Mothman illuminate this theme, but these beings are more than mere harbingers. They are embodiments of the fears, anxieties, values, and changes of their time. In Indigenous traditions, beings like Thunderbirds hold spiritual meaning, representing an attempt at understanding the natural world and the unseen forces that shape it. During the colonial and post-Civil War eras, the Snallygaster and the Belled Buzzard became symbols of oppression and social change, used to justify ideas of racial superiority or control in a time when anxieties about emancipation and changing social dynamics were at a peak. In the Cold War period, Mothman reflected the paranoia and existential dread of the nuclear age, surfacing at a time when trust in government was low and fascination with the paranormal

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[83] Bader et al, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture*, 45-46, 50-51, 65, 74, 230.

[84] David Clarke, "The Mothman of West Virginia: A Case in Legendary Storytelling," in *North American Monsters* ed. by David Puglia, 270-273.

was growing. But what binds all of these legends together is their eventual and sometimes retrospective perception as omens. As omens, they were signs of death, misfortune, and inevitable change, a defining part of the contexts for each of these beings. These legends, then, are not just strange tales, but cultural touchstones upon which societies can make sense of their surroundings in times of uncertainty, transformation, and change.

Winged entities like the Thunderbird, the Snallygaster, and the Mothman reveal not only humanity's fascination with the sky, but also with the things that go bump in the night. These stories, evolving across times and cultures, reflect our collective attempts to engage with fear, change, and uncertainty. They are also our attempt at maintaining a bit of mystery and the supernatural in our day-to-day lives. Even in the modern world, these monsters remain symbols of the unknown and the strange, their presence felt across much of popular culture; in books, movies, video games, and even festivals. Their lasting shadow is a reminder that even in an age of science and reason, we still turn to legends to give shape to our fears and to preserve just a piece of the monsters that continue to haunt the plains, rivers, and skies.

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