

David the Duck

Once upon a time there was a duck named David. He was a wild duck and belonged to the Terpsichore flock, which migrated each year between the Arctic lands of northern Alaska and the subtropics.

You must realize that every species of wild duck prides itself on its distinctive plumage and considers itself superior to all other kinds of ducks. And within each species, each flock considers that it alone represents the highest rung on the ladder of duckdom.

In order to emphasize its distinct and superior identity, each such flock of ducks has developed its own art form or distinctive and artistic way of doing some things that all ducks do, more or less--but that the particular flock in question does best of all.

This phenomenon is known as duck culture.

The cultural superiority of the Terpsichore flock was based on a particular ritual that all the ducks in the flock did together whenever they had a suitable pond or lake to swim in and the food supply was sufficient so that they could spare the time. Whenever these conditions could be met the entire flock would swim around in tight circles with heads under water. The exact pattern in which the ducks swam was quite intricate, so much so in fact that no ducks outside the flock, let alone other creatures, could understand it. It was this complexity that gave the flock the assurance that they indeed were the most advanced and progressive creatures under the sun.

Our story takes place in late spring, when the Terpsichore flock had just finished its annual migration to the far northland. This year they settled in a river that cut through a chain of mountains in a big horseshoe formation, at a point where they knew there would be an adequate food supply throughout the season. Indeed, this was one of the few spots in the world where the mountain slopes witnessed the annual emergence of the Arctic Wichity Grub from under the caribou moss. And it is well known throughout duckdom that the Arctic Wichity Grub is just about the most delectable form of food ever provided anywhere by a bountiful nature.

Ducks have a strong sense of protocol, and since David was the youngest in the whole flock, he was expected to wait until his elders had had their fill of Wichity grubs before digging in himself. However, there just were not that many grubs on the lower slopes near the stream, and David feared that by the time his turn came they would all be gone. So he slipped off by himself and waddled higher and higher up the slope in the hope of finding a supply of his own that he could eat without any of the other ducks being the wiser. However, he soon discovered that the natural habitat of the blessed grub was severely limited by altitude, so that as he got high enough and far enough to be out of sight of the rest of the flock, there were no longer any grubs to be had at all.

David was a resourceful young duck and not easily discouraged once he had set his mind on something. In a burst of inspired creative thinking, remarkable even for a Terpsichore, he reasoned that if he could get over the ridge and descend on the other side to the right altitude, he might find more grubs there. So over he flew, taking care to follow the terrain in such a way that he could not be seen by the other members of the flock.

Et voila! As soon as he reached the top of the ridge a vast panorama unfolded before him, with the upper bend of the Horseshoe River in the middle foreground before him. Gliding swiftly down to a point a bit above its bank, he started his search for the delicate Wichity Grub.

At first his search was unsuccessful; evidently the older ducks had known their terrain well, and picked the one spot on the river where the grubs appeared in relative abundance. But he persisted, and his efforts were finally rewarded by discovery of a medium sized patch of caribou moss on which a dozen grubs had appeared and were stretching themselves in the springtime Arctic sun.

Older and more experienced ducks are generally aware, from their own experience at least, that it is quite possible for a duck to have too many Wichity Grubs, just as it is possible for a human to have too many martinis. Unfortunately David was unaware of this fact, and if the truth must be known, at this point in our story he had a couple too many. Feeling enormously satisfied with himself, and quite drowsy, he fell asleep. And slept not just for an hour or two, which would have been all right, but right through until the late evening, when the sun was down close to the horizon and the shadows were long.

It would be hard to say how long David might have slept if left to his own devices, for the Wichity grubs have a particularly soporific effect on young ducks who have not previously experienced them. But he was rudely awakened by an increasingly insistent noise, that began with a sound like a small waterfall or rapid in a stream and soon developed into an enormous deafening roar. As he opened his eyes he stared straight into the jaws of catastrophe.

An avalanche a couple of days earlier had formed a natural dam across the river, just upstream from where David slept. Ever since, the water had been building up, higher and higher, accumulating thousands of tons of pressure against the shaky barrier--and at last the barrier was breaking!

David took flight at the last possible moment. Had he continued to sleep only seconds longer, the wall of foaming stone-filled water would have burst over him and crushed him.

To David's eternal credit, almost his first thoughts as he gained altitude concerned the safety of the rest of the flock. They must be warned that a great wall of stones and water would soon be rushing down on them! And yet if he flew down the river he could barely keep up with the rushing flood...but perhaps, just perhaps, if he flew back over the ridge, the way he had come, he could gain a few precious minutes and bring the warning in time.....David flew as he had never flown before, up over the ridge and down to the Terpsichore northern base.

All the flock was swimming in concentric circles and every last duck head was firmly stuck down under the water. David's shrill quacks as he drew in for a landing would have raised the dead, but not the other ducks, who simply could not hear under the water. He splashed down next to an elderly and rather conservative duck named Wilberforce, creating such a commotion that that worthy angrily popped up his head.

"Disaster, disaster, we must fly!" said David.

"Bad, bad David", replied Wilberforce, "You were not here when you should have been and our ritual was less for your absence".

"But, but.." said David, "it is just terribly important that we fly from this place at once, a wall of water is coming..."

"Even though you are a young and very inexperienced duck", Wilberforce replied severely, "you should know that nothing, absolutely nothing, is as important, or even nearly as important, as what we are doing right now. Now stop quacking and get back with the rest of us!" And with a big harrumphing quack-snort, Wilberforce terminated the conversation by plunging his head back down in the water.

David was in despair. Just then three little duck-bottoms paddled past him and he gave each of them a sharp peck with his bill. Up popped Mary Duck, his sister, and his cousins Eliza and Elliott. Quickly he explained the dreadful fate that awaited the whole flock if he could not get their attention.

Eliza, being the oldest, thought of the answer first. "We must", she said, "get to Honkytonk, our leader, and explain the situation to him. I wonder which one of all these duckbottoms is his?"

Mary said, "I think Honkytonk usually swims right in the middle of the group".

Little Elliott Duck said, not very respectfully, but like David she was still quite young: "Old Honkytonk has mussed-up tailfeathers...there he is!"

And they all swam over as fast as they could and pecked and pecked until a very irate old Honkytonk surfaced.

"This is unconscionable, insupportable, intolerable, and a violation of all that is most sacred to our forefathers, ourselves, and our descendants" quacked Honkytonk in about the most forbidding tones ever quacked by anybody anytime anywhere.

"That's the point" said David, "We are just about to not have any descendants".

"Don't split your infinitives", said Honkytonk, "Remember you are no ordinary duck, you are a Terpsichore".

By this time the rip flood had come around the bend and its roaring rushing racket could be heard clearly in the middle distance. David was finally able to explain what was happening to Honkytonk, though the fact that Mary and Eliza and Elliott were all trying to do the same thing at the same time made for a rather confusing quackophany.

"Oh dear Oh dear" said Honkytonk, "I don't know what to do...there is only one way to break off the ceremony before it has finished, and that is to sound the duck hunter alarm. But in this case there is no hunter so the alarm is not authorized."

"How do you sound the duck hunter alarm? asked David. And Honkytonk told him. And David sounded it. And all the ducks popped their heads out of the water at once and started flapping their wings and getting into motion and lo and behold they were airborne just in time.

Afterwards the whole flock got together to assess the rights and wrongs and the pros and cons of what had transpired.

There was general agreement that David had saved the flock from sudden extinction.

But there was also general agreement that David had misbehaved by going off on his own to look for grubs, and had sinned by being absent from the Terpsichore's holiest ritual. There was also some criticism of David's less than respectful attitude towards the ritual at the time of the crisis. Finally, many members of the flock expressed serious misgivings over the fact that the duck hunter alarm had been used when in fact there had been no hunter there--although noone could think of any other way the flock could have been saved.

Some ducks thought David should be rewarded.

Others thought he should be punished, or at least chastized.

In the end they did neither but decided to forget the whole matter.

And that, dear grandchildren, is how the phrase originated:

TO DUCK AN ISSUE.