



# *Why the Stork Loves Holland*

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Dutch

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*Intermediate*  
*15 min read*

Above all countries in Europe, this bird, wise in the head and long in the legs, loves Holland. Flying all the way from Africa, the stork is at home among dykes and windmills.

Storks are seen by the thousands in Holland and Friesland. Sometimes they strut in the streets, not in the least frightened or disturbed. They make their nests among the tiles and chimneys, on the red roofs of the houses, and they rear their young even on the church towers.

If a man sets an old cart wheel flat on a tree-top, the storks accept this, as an invitation to come and stay. At once they proceed, first of all, to arrange their toilet, after their long flight. They do this, even before they build their nest. You can see them, by the hour, preening their feathers and combing their plumage, with their long bills. Then, as solemnly as a boss mason, they set about gathering sticks and hay for their house. They never seem to be in a hurry.

A stork lays on a bit of wood, and then goes at his toilet again, looking around to see that other folks are busy. Year after year, a pair of storks will use the same nest, rebuilding, or repairing it, each spring time. The stork is a steady citizen and does not like to change. Once treated well in one place, by the landlord, Mr. and Mrs. Stork keep the same apartments and watch over the family cradle inside the house, to see that it is always occupied by a baby. The return of the stork is, in Holland, a household celebration.

Out in the fields, Mr. Stork is happy indeed, for Holland is the paradise of frogs; so the gentleman of the red legs finds plenty to eat. He takes his time for going to dinner, and rarely rushes for quick lunch. After business hours in the morning, he lays his long beak among his thick breast feathers, until it is quite hidden. Then, perched up in the air on one long leg, like a stilt, he takes a nap, often for hours.

With the other leg crossed, he seems to be resting on the figure four (4).

Towards evening he shakes out his wings, flaps them once or twice, and takes a walk, but he is never in haste. Beginning his hunt, he soon has enough frogs, mice, grubs, worms or insects to make a good meal. It is because this bird feels so much at home, in town and country, making part of the landscape, that we so associate together Holland and the stork, as we usually do.

The Dutch proverb pictures the scene, which is so common. "In the same field, the cow eats grass; the grayhound hunts the hare; and the stork helps himself to the frogs." Indeed, if it were not for the stork, Holland would, like old Egypt, in the time of Moses, be overrun with frogs.



Image from Wikipedia Commons.

The Dutch call the stork by the sweet name “Ooijevaar,” or the treasure-bringer. Every spring time, the boys and girls, fathers and mothers, shout welcome to the white bird from Egypt.

“What do you bring me?” is their question or thought.

If the bird deserts its old home on their roof, the family is in grief, thinking it has lost its luck; but if Daddy Stork, with Mrs. Stork’s approval, chooses a new place for their nest, there is more rejoicing in that house, than if money had been found. “Where there are nestlings on the roof, there will be babies in the house,” is what the Dutch say; for both are welcome.

To tell why the stork loves Holland, we must go back to the Africa of a million years ago. Then, we shall ask the Dutch fairies how they succeeded in making the new land, in the west, so popular in the stork world. For what reason did the wise birds emigrate to the cold country a thousand miles away? They were so regular and punctual, that a great prophet wrote:

“Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times.”

Ages ago, there were camels and caravans in Africa, but there was no Holland, for the land was still under the waves. In India, also, the stork was an old bird, that waded in the pools and kept the frogs from croaking in terms of the multiplication table. Sometimes the stork population increased too fast and some went hungry for food; for, the proverb tells us that a stork “died while waiting for the ocean to dry, hoping to get a supply of dried fish.”

When on the coast of the North Sea, the Land of a Million Islands was made, the frog emigrants were there first. They poured in so fast, that it seemed a question as to who should own the country-frogs or men. Some were very big, as if ambitious to be bulls. They croaked so loud, that they drowned out the fairy music, and made the night hideous with their noises. The snakes spoiled the country for the little birds, while the toads seemed to think that the salt ocean had been kept out, and the land made, especially for them.

The Dutch fairies were disgusted at the way these reptiles behaved, for they could not enjoy themselves, as in

the old days. If they went to dance in the meadow, on moonlight nights, they always found a big bullfrog sitting in their ring, mocking them with its bellowing. So when they heard about the storks in Africa, and what hearty appetites they had, for the various wrigglers, crawlers, jumpers and splashers in the waters, they resolved to invite them, in a body, to Holland.

The Dutch fairies knew nothing of the habits of the bird and scarcely imagined how such a creature might look, but they heard many pleasant things about the stork's good character. The wise bird had an excellent reputation, not only for being kind to its young, but also for attending to the wants of its parents, when they were old. It was even said that in some countries the stork was the symbol for filial piety.

So the fairies of all the Netherlands despatched a delegation to Egypt and a congress of storks was called to consider this invitation to go west. Messengers were at once sent to all the red-legged birds, among the bulrushes of the Nile, or that lived on the roofs of the temples, or that perched on the pyramids, or dwelt on the top of old columns, or that stood in rows along the eaves of the town houses. The town birds gained their living by acting as street cleaners, but the river birds made their meals chiefly on fish, frogs, and mice.

The invitation was discussed in stork meeting, and it was unanimously accepted; except by some old grannies and grandpops that feared in the strange land they would not be well fed. On a second motion, it was agreed that only the strongest birds should attempt the flight. Those afraid, or too weak to go, must stay behind and attend to the old folks. Such a rattle of mandibles was never heard in Egypt before, as when this stork meeting adjourned.

Now when storks travel, they go in flocks. Thousands of them left Egypt together. High in the air, with their broad wings spread and their long legs stretched out behind them, they covered Europe in a few hours. Then they scattered all over the marshy lands of the new country. It was agreed that each pair was to find its own home. When the cold autumn should come, they were to assemble again for flight to Egypt.

It was a new sight for the fairies, the frogs and the men, to look over the landscape and see these snow white strangers. They were so pretty to look at, while promenading over the meadows, wading in the ponds and ditches, or standing silently by the river banks. Soon, however, these foreign birds were very unpopular in bullfrog land, and as for the snakes, they thought that Holland would be ruined by these hungry strangers. On the other hand, it was good news, in fairy-land, that all fairies could dance safely on their meadow rings, for

the bullfrogs were now afraid to venture in the grass, lest they should be gobbled up, for the frogs could not hide from the storks. The new birds could poke their big bills so far into the mud-holes, that no frog, or snake, big or little, was safe. The stork's red legs were so long, and the birds could wade in such deep water, that hundreds of frogs were soon eaten up, and there were many widows and orphans in the ponds and puddles.

When the fairies got more acquainted with their new guests, and saw how they behaved, they nearly died of laughing. They were not surprised at their diet, or eating habits, but they soon discovered that the storks were not song birds. Instead of having voices, they seemed to talk to each other by clattering their long jaws, or snapping their mandibles together. Their snowy plumage—all being white but their wing feathers—was admired, was envied, and their long bright colored legs were a wonder. At first the fairies thought their guests wore red stockings and they thought how heavy must be the laundry work on wash days; for in Holland, everything must be clean.

Of all creatures on earth, as the fairies thought, the funniest was seen when Mr. Stork was in love. To attract and please his lady love, he made the most grotesque gestures. He would leap up from the ground and move with a hop, skip, and jump. Then he spread out his wings, as if to hug his beloved. Then he danced around her, as if he were filled with wine. All the time he made the best music he knew how, by clattering his mandibles together. He intended this performance for a sort of love ditty, or serenade. The whole program was more amusing than anything that an ape, goat, or donkey could get up. How the fairies did laugh!

Yet the fairies were very grateful to the storks for ridding their meadows of so much vermin. How these delicate looking, snow white and graceful creatures could put so many snails, snakes, tadpoles, and toads into their stomachs and turn them into snow white feathers, wonderful wings and long legs, as red as a rose, was a mystery to them. It seemed more wonderful than anything which they could do, but as fairies have no stomachs and do not eat, this whole matter of digestion was a mystery to them.

Besides the terror and gloom in the frog world, every reptile winced and squirmed, when he heard of this new enemy. All crawlers, creepers, and jumpers had so long imagined that the land was theirs and had been made solely for their benefit! Nor did they know how to conquer the storks. The frog daddies could do nothing, and the frog mothers were every moment afraid to let either the tadpoles or froggies go out of their sight. They worried lest they should see their babies caught up in a pair of long, bony jaws, as sharp as scissors, there to

wriggle and crow, until their darlings disappeared within the monster.

One anecdote of the many that were long told in the old Dutch frog ponds was this: showing into what clangers curiosity may lead youngsters. We put it in quotation marks to show that it was told as a true story, and not printed in a book, or made up.

“A tadpole often teased its froggy mother to let it go and see a red pole, of which it had heard from a traveller. Mrs. Frog would not at first let her son go, but promised that as soon as the tadpole lost his tail, and his flippers had turned into fore legs, and his hind quarters had properly sprouted, so that he could hop out of danger, he might then venture on his travels. She warned him, however, not to go too near to that curious red pole, of which he had heard. Nobody as yet found out just what this red thing, standing in the water, was; but danger was suspected by old heads, and all little froggies were warned to be careful and keep away. In reality, the red stick was the leg of a stork, sound asleep, for it was taking its usual afternoon nap. The frogs on the bank, and those in the pool that held their noses above water, to get their breath, had never before seen anything like this red stilt, or its cross pole; for no bird of this sort had ever before flown into their neighborhood. They never suspected that it was a stork, with its legs shaped like the figure four (4). Indeed, they knew nothing of its long bill, that could open and shut like a trap, catching a frog or snake, and swallowing it in a moment.

“Unfortunately for this uneducated young frog, that had never travelled from home, it now went too near the red pole, and, to show how brave it was, rubbed its nose against the queer thing. Suddenly the horrible creature, that had only been asleep, woke up and snapped its jaws. In a moment, a wriggling froggy disappeared from sight into the stomach of a monster, that had two red legs, instead of one. At the sight of such gluttony, there was an awful splash, for a whole row of frogs had jumped from the bank into the pool. After this, it was evident that Holland was not to belong entirely to the frogs.”

As for the human beings, they were so happy over the war with the vermin and the victory of the storks, that they made this bird their pride and joy. They heaped honors upon the stork as the savior of their country. They placed boxes on the roofs of their houses for these birds to nest in. All the old cart wheels in the land were hunted up. They sawed off the willow trees a few feet above the ground, and set the wheels in flat, which the storks used as their parlors and dressing rooms.

As for the knights, they placed the figure of the stork on their shields, banners, and coats of arms, while citizens made this bird prominent on their city seals. The capital of the country, The Hague, was dedicated to this bird, and, for all time, a pond was dug within the city limits, where storks were fed and cared for at the public expense. Even to-day, many a good story, illustrating the tender affection of The Hague storks for their young, is told and enjoyed as an example to Dutch mothers to be the best in the world.

Out in the country at large, in any of the eleven provinces, whenever they drained a swamp, or pumped out a pond to make a village, it was not looked upon as a part of Holland, unless there were storks. Even in the new wild places they planted stakes on the pumped out dry land, called polders. On the top of these sticks were laid as invitations for the stork families to come and live with the people. Along the roads they stuck posts for storks' nests. It became a custom with farmers, when the storks came back, to kill the fatted calf, or lamb, and leave the refuse meat out in the fields for a feast to these bird visitors. A score of Dutch proverbs exist, all of them complimentary to the bird that loves babies and cradles.

Last of all, the Dutch children, even in the reign of Queen Wilhelmina, made letter carriers of their friends the treasure-bringers. Tying tiny slips of paper to their red legs, they sent messages, in autumn, to the boys and girls in the old land of the sphinx and pyramids, of Moses, and the children of Israel. In the spring time, the children's return messages were received in the country which bids eternal welcome to the bird named the Bringer of Blessings.

This is why the storks love Holland.

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