



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#57

THE CHRISTMAS BIRD

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When the first snowflakes float down from wintry skies, the Norwegians start looking for the bird that has become closely associated with the Christmas season: the fluffy and cheerful bullfinch with its brilliant red or rosy feathers bringing a welcome burst of color to a bleak **Nordic winter** day. Flocks of bullfinches dot the naked branches of trees and bushes, swoop unexpectedly down into people's gardens, crowding the sheaves of grain that people put up for the birds, and in general bring joy and excitement to both young and old. In many areas of Norway it is referred to simply as "the Christmas bird."

In Norwegian the bird is called **dompap** (DOHM'pahp), and its name has a double meaning. The first syllable of its name, dom, is pronounced the same way as the Norwegian word for foolish, so one interpretation of dompap (DOHM'pahp) is that it means "fool." But don't think for a minute that the dompap is a dummy! Far from it. Its name is derived from the German Dompfaff (DOHM'pfaff), which means "canon" and refers to the brightly colored clothing worn by some of the clergy. Namewise, the closest American equivalent to the dompap would thus be the cardinal.

According to legend, the dompap, or bullfinch, got its red color when it tried to pull the thorns out from the crown that was placed on Christ's head. Blood streaming from Christ's wounds wet the bird's breast and the red color became its badge of honor.

The **Cherokee Indians** also have a beautiful explanation for the bullfinch's color. According to their tradition, the bullfinch helped a wolf gain its eyesight back. To show its gratitude, the wolf led the bullfinch to a cliff with a broad stripe of red running across it. The little bird flew up to the cliff and painted its breast the brightest red and was named "red bird" from then on.

In the old days, the bullfinch was a messenger of both good and bad tidings. If the first bird to feed in the sheaf of grain set out for Christmas was a **bullfinch**, it would be a good year. In some places people believed that if the bullfinch came out of the woodlands in the winter, this meant that the weather would be bad with lots of snow and cold days.

The bullfinch is not known as a songbird—its song is rather low and grating—but it is a very good imitator. In earlier days, young bullfinches were caught and trained to imitate short melodies. People kept caged bullfinches in their home and the training and exporting of the birds was at one time a full-blown business.

But the bullfinch was not well-suited for a life in captivity. Sudden excitement or agitation could be fatal. One of the many stories to illustrate this tells about a tame bullfinch living with an old woman. She used to let the bird fly around in her house, singing its songs and doing whatever it felt like doing. But one afternoon the bird was so active that she could not stand the constant fluttering around. She put the bird in its cage and covered it up. The bird sang a couple of notes and then grew silent. When she checked on it, it was dead.

Tame bullfinches were believed to have the ability to cure serious illnesses like jaundice and lung diseases. People believed that a caged bullfinch in the sick room would extract the disease from the affected person. Did it actually work? Well, the story does not tell and there is probably not a Norwegian around today who has tried the bullfinch cure, but the bird is beneficial to modern Norwegians in other ways. No other bird can create such a feeling of cheerfulness and good expectations. One of the most popular Norwegian paintings from the last century shows a bullfinch fluffing its rosy feathers against a background of virgin-white snow and the bullfinch motif is used over and over again on the **Christmas cards** Norwegians send to their family and friends.