

February 2009: Meditations on NFL Mascots

It's Super Bowl time again, and for those of us who watch football, our primal instincts rise to the surface once more as we align ourselves with a particular tribe. This totemic allegiance has ancient roots from when we lived closer to nature, which explains why many National Football League teams have animal mascots: the Lions, tigers (Bengals), and Bears of Detroit, Cincinnati, and Chicago, for example.

Despite being a diehard New England Patriots fan, I envy teams with cool animal mascots. For a tribal symbol, the Patriots' mascot is kind of dorky looking—on the field, he looks like an oversized Jay Leno in colonial costume. He doesn't really connote the presence of power and fierceness that you want in your football team. (Having grown up with the unique but non-intimidating high school mascot of the windjammer, I was thrilled to become a Panther when I went off to college.)

Besides enjoying the game for itself, I derive added pleasure—especially during playoff season—in imagining the various team mascots actually engaging one another in gladiatorial combat. Not the human, costumed mascots—the real things. Indeed, the images that come to mind probably weren't far from some of the exotic spectacles staged in the Colosseum for the amusement of the sadistic Roman masses—men fighting lions, panthers fighting ostriches, elephants fighting tigers, etc.

Thinking about the game in this way can add an unusual element of natural history, as well as providing a whole new dimension of entertainment. For instance, in the second round of playoff games, the Arizona Cardinals trounced the Carolina Panthers. But any self-respecting panther could easily swat down a cardinal. There wouldn't even be a fight, just pounce, snap, and the little red songbird would be a bite-sized snack for the lean, mean wild cat. And indeed, the Panthers were strongly favored to win. So it stretches the imagination to visualize a battle in which a cardinal would defeat a panther, and yet such wild imaginings are validated in a funny way when it actually happens on the field.

The NFL is divided into the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC). Since I look at almost everything through the lens of a birder (so to speak), it didn't escape my notice that three of the four teams in the Conference divisional championships last month were birds: the Philadelphia Eagles, the Cardinals, and the Baltimore Ravens. The other team was the Pittsburgh Steelers, represented by the blue collar-looking mascot named Steely McBeam. (It's a toss-up who is sillier: the Patriot or Steely McBeam.) So I couldn't resist looking at the two divisional championship match-ups and how they might play out with the real, live mascots going at it.



Cardinal. Photo by Karl Gerstenberger

The NFC championship features the Eagles and the Cardinals. I don't care who the Cardinals are up against, in the real world they're toast. Pitch any of the animal mascots of the NFL against a cardinal, and that cardinal is either eaten for lunch or squashed. (It might stand a fleeting chance against a Seahawk, if only because a sea hawk, an osprey, is adapted to eat fish.)

The cardinal is a favored mascot—the St. Louis major league baseball team are also the Cardinals—and more states (seven) have chosen it as their state bird than any other. He's a backyard favorite, the perky red songster whose whistle brightens up even a winter day in New England. But up against an eagle, there's no contest. Peter Vickery, avian ecologist and co-author of *A Birder's Guide to Maine*, stated unequivocally before the game, "Bright red is going to bite the dust to our national symbol. The Eagle is a powerful bird." Interestingly, he was wrong, and the Cardinals surprised both naturalists and football fans alike in winning the division championship to make it to the Super Bowl.

Steelers faced Ravens in the AFC championship. Although the raven is one of the most intelligent birds, it's understandable that even such a wily trickster had trouble facing down the Steelers. The pairing was an apt metaphor for the

destruction of our natural landscape and its wildlife: steel mill-generated pollution long made Pittsburgh's rivers uninhabitable. The city's industries continue to be a source of poor air quality and acid rain affecting the raven's forest habitat here in the Northeast—in 2008 the American Lung Association ranked Pittsburgh the #1 most polluted city in the United States.

I was hoping for a Ravens-Eagles Super Bowl, and so was Vickery. His erroneous prediction for the Super Bowl show-down reflected his confidence in the Raven's talents as both football player and bird: "For the Super Bowl, the Raven will again appear in a different form, disguising itself to confuse the mighty Eagle... In the end, the mighty Eagle will chatter in dismay with its high-pitched, whiny 'Kee-kee-kee!'" (Our national bird does have a very wimpy call. When a bald eagle is shown on television or in a movie, a red-tailed hawk's cry is usually dubbed into the soundtrack.)

I have witnessed ravens taunting eagles, seeming to play fearlessly with the much larger birds. Ravens have been widely observed stealing food from bald eagles. In native Haida stories in the Pacific Northwest, it was, after all, Raven the trickster who stole sun and brought people light. So while the eagle is a much larger bird, the raven is more sly. In fact, a recent study showed that peregrine falcons choose to nest on cliffs near raven nests, with the assumption being that the ravens afford some protection and act as a front-line guard against possible eagle attack. In football, as in the wild, the raven's skills are a surprising match against the bald eagle's.

Alas, a big bird Super Bowl was not to be. Because I love seeing a red cardinal bright against the snow this time of year, I'm going to root for the underdog Cardinals versus the Steelers purely for that reason alone. Look for the red bird in the red zone (the area right before the goal line). When it gets to the final game of the season, it seems like anything goes. So my basis for picking a winner is as valid as any other, and much more fun than analyzing game stats, play patterns, and quarter back ratings—but don't go placing any bets!