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Bird Songs in Gaelic There is a Gaelic poem which begins: "An uair a bha Gaidhlig aig ne h-eoin," which means "When the birds had Gaelic," Perhaps it is a fantasy but it is not so far fetched when you consider that the Gaels composed many rhymes that imitated bird songs. The purpose of these ditties was to entertain children, and at the same time teach them to appreciate their natural environment. They are not necessarily the Gaelic songs that birds of the same name would sing on Cape Breton. The robin on Cape Breton is called smeorach, which means thrush in Scotland. The Gaels named the North American robin smeorach because although the coloration is quite different the bird is actually related to the thrush (a relationship revealed by their speckled-breasted young). The bird called robin in Scotland (bru-dearg) is a small, brown-backed bird with an orange breast and is not related to our robin red-breast or the thrush. But these songs are evidence of a kind of relationship Gaelic speakers have had with the natural world. The Gaelic folk-loreist Alexander Carmichael wrote: "I have seen boys and girls who could sing and croon and whistle imitations of birds so effectively that the birds themselves stood still, turning their heads, this way and that, to ascertain whence the sound came, inquiringly, cautiously drawing near it." An lon-dubh (the blackbird) Bun a' ghuib, oir a' ghuib, barr a' ghuib; Eun dubh air a nead, Sheinn an lon-dubh, Eun dubh, ho ro, Grain air na feannagan. Am bru-dearg (the robin) Big, big, bigean, Co chreach mo neadan? Mas e gille beag e Cuiridh mi le creig e; Mas e gille mor e Cuiridh me le l'ne; Ach mas fear beag gun cheill e. Gun gleidheadh Dia d' a mhathair fhein An smeorach agus an t-isean (the thrush and its chick) Smeorach: 'Ille ruaidh bhig, 'ille ruaidh bhig, Trobhad dhachaigh, trobhad dhachaigh. Isean: Ciod a thig? Ciod a thig? Smeorach: Gu do bhiadh, gu do bhiadh. Isean: De am biadh? De am biadh? Smeorach: Bloigh boiteig*, bloigh boiteig', Bloigh blirnich, bloigh bairnich. A' Chearc (the hen) Tog, tog, tog, Tog an rud a dh'fhag mi; Ge beag an t-ugh, ge beag an t-ugh, Tha stath ann, tha stath ann. An fheannag ri a h-iseanan (The crow to her young) Is greannach sibh. Is greannach sibh, 'S cha b' annasach, 'S cha b' annasach. An columan (the pigeon) Tha mo chul riut, tha mo chul riut; Chan ann de m' chuideachd thu, Chan ann de m' chuideachd th'; Nam b* ann de m' chuideachd thu ' Chan itheadh tu siud gun mo chuid a thoirt dhomhsa, Gim mo chuid a thoirt dhomhsa. The blackbird: Base of the beak, edge of the beak, tip of the beak, /A black bird on its nest, /The black-bird sang, /Black bird, ho ro, /A loathing of crows. The thrush and its chick: Thrush: Little red fellow, little red fellow, /Come here, come here. / Chick: Why should I? Why should I? /Thrush: To your food, to your food /Chick: What food? what food? /Thrush: A piece of worm, a piece of worm. /A piece of limpet, a piece of limpet. The robin; Big, big, bigean. /Who robbed my nest? /If he's a small fellow, /I'll throw him over a cliff. /if he's a big fellow /I'll throw him in a pond. / But if he's a small senseless fellow, /May God protect him for his mother. The pigeon: My back to you, my back to you, /You're not of my kin, /You're not of my kin / You wouldn't eat that without giving me my share, /Without giving me my share, The crow to her young; You are miserable, /You



are miserable,/No wonder,/No wonder. The hen: Lift, lift, lift,/Lift what I left;/Though the egg is small, though the egg as small,/it has substance, it has substance. Our thanks to John A. MacPherson of Sydney who made these songs available to us, and provided us with literal translations. Cape Breton's Magazine/12