

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
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NB: This is not a word for word transcript

Rob: Hello, I'm Rob.

Alice: And I'm Alice.

Rob: And this is 6 Minute English from the BBC. Today we're talking about superstitions. **Superstition** is the belief that certain events can bring good luck or bad luck. For example, a lot of people think that the number 13 is unlucky, or that you can avoid bad luck if you touch wood.

Alice: Mm, in fact people even say '**touch wood**' if they're hoping for something good to happen.

Rob: That's right. So Alice, are you superstitious?

Alice: Well I am, a bit. I don't like walking under ladders for example.

Rob: Me too. Well, today we're talking about superstitions involving birds and animals, and I've got today's question for you. According to British folklore, eggs from which bird are meant to improve your eyesight?

Is it:

a) ducks

b) owls

c) swans

Alice: I'm not sure. I'll guess swans.

Rob: OK, we'll see if you're right at the end of the programme.

Now animals, birds and nature feature a lot in British superstitions. We've already mentioned that people **touch wood** or **knock on wood** for luck. So could you tell us a few more British superstitions involving nature Alice?

Alice: Well one that I can think of off the top of my head is a lucky rabbit's foot. Apparently if you carry a rabbit's foot around it will bring you good luck. It's what we call a **lucky charm**. A charm is an object that brings good luck. So a rabbit's foot is a charm that brings good luck to the person carrying it.

Rob: But not to the rabbit! You used an interesting phrase there Alice: '**off the top of my head**'.

Alice: Yeah, **off the top of my head**. It's a helpful phrase that means something you think of quickly, without much research.

Rob: OK, well let's hear a few more British superstitions involving nature. Dr Paul Walton, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, spoke to the BBC about some superstitions surrounding birds in Scotland. Here he is talking about seagulls and the traditions associated with them.

Alice: **Seagulls** or **gulls** – they're the large grey and white birds that you find near the seaside.

Rob: So, according to Dr Walton, what superstitions are associated with gulls in Scotland?

Partly it must be because Scotland's such a fantastic place for birds, I think over the years these superstitions have developed because these are the living things that we share our lives with. For example, there's a long tradition in Scotland among sailors and fishermen of seeing the gulls that follow the boats as actually being the embodiment of dead sailors, and to kill a gull is still in many places considered to be very back luck.

Rob: He says sailors and fishermen consider it very bad luck to kill a seagull because gulls are the **embodiment** of dead sailors. Could you explain embodiment for us Alice?

Alice: Embodiment. It literally means to give something a body. So here it means that the seagulls have given physical bodies to the spirits of dead sailors – they're the **embodiment** of the dead sailors.

Rob: So it's bad luck to kill a seagull in Scotland because they're the embodiment of dead sailors. Let's listen to another bird superstition from Scotland. This is Paul Walton again talking about another of his favourite superstitions. Listen out for the bird noises in this clip and see if you can identify which bird he's talking about. What you should do when you hear its call?

One of my favourites is the cuckoo [Cuck-oo cuck-oo] If you hear a cuckoo calling and then you start to run away from it as quickly as you can, the number of times you hear the cuckoo calling before it fades into silence is the number of years you've got left to live.

Rob: Did you hear the sound of the **cuckoo**? The cuckoo is a bird with a long tail and a very distinctive cry.

Alice: You can find **cuckoo clocks** in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, with the cuckoo making a distinctive cry every hour.

Rob: But in Scotland, if you hear the cuckoo calling then you should run away from it as quickly as you can. And the number of times you hear the cuckoo is the number of years you've got left to live.

Alice: Oh dear. So surely you should walk away very slowly – then you'd hear more calls and live longer? It seems like a very odd superstition to me – it's a real

old wives' tale. An **old wives' tale** is what we call superstitions that are totally untrue and ridiculous sometimes. Now I would definitely say that that sounds like an old wives' tale to me.

Rob: You could be right – a lot of these superstitions are old wives' tales; possibly including the one in today's question. Now, if you remember Alice, I asked you, according to British folklore, which bird's eggs are meant to improve your eyesight?

Is it:

- a) ducks
- b) owls
- c) swans

Alice: And I said swans.

Rob: Well, apparently it's owl's eggs that are meant to improve your eyesight. You're meant to cook the eggs until they're ash, and then eat them to get better sight.

Alice: Urgh, that sounds horrible; eggs made into ashes!

Rob: Yes, I wouldn't recommend doing it. Anyway, before we go Alice, could you please remind us of some of the vocabulary we've heard in today's programme?

Alice: Sure, we had:

Superstition

To touch wood

Knock on wood

A lucky charm

Off the top of my head

Seagull

Embodiment

Cuckoo

Old wives' tale

Rob: Thanks Alice.

Alice: See you next time!

Both: Bye!

Vocabulary and definitions

superstition	the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by science or reason
to touch wood/knock on wood	something you do in order to avoid bad luck, either when you mention good luck that you have had in the past or when you mention hopes you have for the future
a lucky charm	a small object worn on a chain or bracelet that is believed to bring good luck
off the top of my head	to think of something quickly or instantly without much research
seagull	a wild bird that tends to live around the coast
embodiment	a person or thing that represents an idea or quality, or a memory of something
cuckoo	a wild bird with a call that sounds like its name
old wives' tale	superstitious belief or story belonging to traditional folklore

Read and listen to the story online:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/2011/08/110810_6min_english_superstitions_page_latest.shtml