Glimpses of Past and Present

Colorado's Official Emblems

by Pam North

States love to adopt official symbols and emblems all their own, and Colorado is no exception. Ours all have been adopted by legislative action of the Colorado General Assembly, or by executive order of the Governor of Colorado. The official designation of several of Colorado's symbols have been influenced by the participation of the state's schoolchildren and their teachers. Colorado has its own state flag (adopted on June 5, 1911) and circular seal (November 6, 1861), a nickname (Centennial State), and a variety of other categories representative of its special character.

The name Colorado is of Spanish origin, meaning “colored red”. The name was applied to the Colorado River because of the red sandstone soil of the region, and came into use for the entire territory after the discovery of gold in the Pikes Peak region. In 1861, congress chose Colorado as the name for the Territory. Colorado has two nicknames: “Colorful Colorado” (because of its magnificent scenery of mountains, rivers, and plains), and “Centennial State” (Colorado became the 38th state in 1876, one hundred years after the signing of our nation's Declaration of Independence).

The official state bird is the Lark Bunting, an elusive species that most Coloradans likely have never seen or heard. Neither a lark (it's a finch) nor a year-round resident, the bird thrives in warm months on the sparsely-populated grasslands of Colorado's eastern plains, and is probably most frequently sighted northeast of Greeley in the Pawnee National Grassland. The male of the species sports summer plumage of black with snowy white patches, is a distinguished flier, and has a beautiful warble-and-trill call. It achieved its status as state bird as the result of a knock-down-drag-out debate in the State Assembly in 1931. Roy Langdon, a professor at Fort Collins' Colorado A&M College, gave an eloquent speech recommending the lark bunting as a choice candidate, and was endorsed by the enthusiastic support of 121 students from Fort Collins High School. State School Superintendent Katherine L. Craig was in favor of a more widely-distributed species as a selection, but the bluebird and meadowlark already had been claimed by other states. The snowy owl, night owl and swallow were also nominated, and waggish reporters covering the event facetiously suggested the dodo or stool pigeon. After much spirited discussion, the lark bunting ultimately won everyone's support, and the State Assembly voted unanimously to adopt it as the official state bird.  
 The state gemstone, the aquamarine, is named for the color of the ocean, and is a beautiful, transparent stone ranging from light blue to deep green in color. It can be found at the 14,000-feet level of Mount Antero and White Mountain, between Salida and Buena Vista in the Sawatch Range, an area of granite rock which has yielded several museum-worthy specimens. This area, incidentally, has also yielded a spectacular 5 1/2-inch diameter pure crystal ball, remarkable for its large size, which was exhibited at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition in 1893.  
 The state animal, the Rocky Mountain Big Horn Sheep, is found only in the Rockies, usually above timberline in rugged alpine areas. These large animals (about 3 1/2 feet high at the shoulder and weighing approximately 300 pounds) are known for their agility and perfect sense of balance.  
 The state fossil, the Stegosaurus, is a 10-ton creature that lived 150 million years ago in the area we now know as Colorado. A skeleton of the huge dinosaur (one of only six on public display in the United States) may be viewed at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.  
 The state tartan is comprised of a pattern that symbolizes Colorado's splendor and history. Blocks of forest green and cerulean blue, with wide dividing bands of black are its main colors, and any resident or friend of Colorado may wear it, whether or not they are of Celtic heritage.   
 The state tree, the Colorado Blue Spruce, is known for its stately symmetrical form and superb silver-blue color. The species was first discovered on Pikes Peak in 1862. It grows at 6,000 to 19,000 feet elevation in its northern range, and 8,000 to 11,000 feet in southern regions.  
 The state insect, the Colorado Hairstreak Butterfly, is about two inches in width, and has purple wings with black borders, orange accents in the corners, and a blue underside. It is found in scrub oak ecosystems on both sides of the Continental Divide at elevations of 6,500 to 7,500 feet.  
 Colorado also has its own state motto (Nil Sine Numine - Nothing Without the Deity), flower (White and Lavender Columbine), fish (Greenback Cutthroat Trout), folk dance (Square Dance), grass (Blue Grama Grass), mineral (rhodochrosite), reptile (Western Painted Turtle), fish (Cutthroat Trout), grass (blue grama grass), rock (Colorado Yule marble), sports (snowboarding and skiing), two songs ("Where the Columbines Grow" and John Denver's “Rocky Mountain High”), and in 2006 got its own state quarter.