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Background Paper

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British Columbia's Provincial Emblems

An elusive white bear haunting the B.C. coast became the province's official mammal emblem in 2006. But the spirit bear is only the latest on a list of legislated B.C. symbols. The province also claims an official flower, mineral, tartan, tree and bird. The story of how each emblem received official status reveals a small part of the history of British Columbia.

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Prepared by Emily Yearwood-Lee
Reference Librarian
Legislative Library of British Columbia

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An elusive white bear haunting the B.C. coast became the province's official mammal emblem in 2006. But the spirit bear is only the latest on a list of legislated B.C. symbols. The province also claims an official flower, mineral, tartan, tree and bird. The story of how each emblem received official status reveals a small part of the history of British Columbia.

SPIRIT BEAR

A bear hitherto unknown to science¹ was making its home in the Kitimat Valley, a Victoria reporter wrote in 1905.¹ Long before the Kermode, or spirit bear, became an official emblem, the mysterious creature captured the attention of British Columbians and the world. The bear was creamy white with "unspotted or unmarked" fur, the *Daily Colonist* journalist wrote, adding that First Nations were bringing three to six skins from this type of bear a year to district traders.² Francis Kermode, the director of the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum) in Victoria, sent specimens to the New York Zoological Society. The bear was eventually named *Ursus Kermodei* in his honour.

The most famous Kermode bear was Ursus, a female kept on display in Victoria's Beacon Hill Park for more than 20 years. The Kermode cub was captured on Princess Royal Island south of Kitimat in May 1924. She was eventually handed over to government officials and moved to a cage in the Victoria park. At one point, it was reported that the bear would be filmed by William Dean Sweet, the "well-known camera hunter of New York."³ Ursus was often at the centre of hot debates over whether it would be better to return her to the wild and whether her living conditions in the park could be improved.⁴ Her original captors once demanded that she be handed over to Stanley Park in Vancouver.⁵ But Ursus lived all but a few months of her life in a steel and concrete cage where provincial museum officials said she was happy and healthy.⁶ Ursus died while sleeping, apparently of old age, in 1948.⁷

Far more is known today about Kermode bears. It was originally thought that the Kermode was a separate species, but it is now known that it is merely a black bear born white due to a genetic mutation. In fact, some litters have both black and white bears.⁸ The greatest number of spirit bears are found on Princess Royal Island, where as many as one-tenth of black bears are born white.⁹

The white bears again captured international attention in the late 1990s when a West Vancouver teenager launched a campaign to protect their habitat from logging. Simon Jackson founded the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition and was eventually named one of the *Time Magazine for Kids* heroes of the planet in 2000. A movie was later made

¹ "Museum Curator Gets High Honors," *Daily Colonist*, 1 February 1905, p. 8.

² "Museum Curator," p. 8.

³ "White Bear to be Film Topic," *Daily Colonist*, 27 April, 1935, p.1.

⁴ Lloyd G. Baker, "14 Years Since Ursus Came to Beacon Hill," *Victoria Times*, 18 June 1938, Magazine sec., p.1.

⁵ "Vancouver men Claim White Bear," *Daily Colonist*, 23 January 1925, p.2.

⁶ "Ursus Caged Whole Life, Quite Happy, Says Museum," *Victoria Times*, 7 March 1947, p.6.

⁷ "Familiar Park Resident Since 1924 Ursus Kermodei Succumbs in Sleep," *Daily Colonist*, 7 December 1948, p.23.

⁸ Kevin Van Tighem, *Bears*, (Canmore: Altitude Publishing, 1997): 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

telling the story of Jackson's fight. In 2005, the B.C. government announced new land use rules that would protect spirit bear habitat. In her Feb. 14, 2006 throne speech, Lieutenant Governor Iona Campagnolo said the rare bear "speaks to the majesty, uniqueness, and mystery of our province."¹⁰ The government also applied for commercial control of the name "spirit bear."¹¹

DOGWOOD

The Pacific dogwood is the province's best known and oldest official emblem. The white flowers that appear on dogwood trees on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland received a legal designation in 1956. But the flower enjoyed unofficial status long before emblem legislation was passed. So symbolic of British Columbia is the flower that high school graduates say they have been given their "dogwood" when they receive their diploma.

The tree was first granted special protection under the Dogwood Protection Act in 1931. At the time people were picking flowers from the branches of dogwoods along the highways of Vancouver Island, leaving "torn and dismembered branches gaping at the roadside."¹² The act made it illegal to pluck dogwood flowers on private property without the permission of the tree's owner. The punishment was a \$25 fine. There were reports in 1943 that Vancouver residents were cutting trees on their own property for fuel. City council then passed a resolution making it illegal for recipients of city wood-cutting permits to injure dogwoods.¹³

The demand for dogwood as an official symbol goes back at least as far as the mid-1930s when two women's groups approached the provincial secretary about choosing a floral emblem. The Victoria Council of Women wanted the dog tooth lily, while the Native Daughters of Victoria requested the dogwood.¹⁴ In 1940, a group of Vancouver women raising money for soldiers dubbed the dogwood "British Columbia's floral emblem."¹⁵ They wrote the slogan on cards attached to homemade dogwood pins made from white and green calfskin. About 2000 pins were sold for a dollar each by the Women's Auxiliary to the B.C. Regiment at Vancouver stores over Christmas. Vancouver Rotarians and Kiwanians later distributed the pins and the rights to the design were eventually given to the Shaughnessy Hospital Women's Auxiliary.¹⁶ In 1954, a *Victoria Times* reporter noted that "so popular has the dogwood emblem become unofficially that tourist lapel buttons feature the bloom, as do dishes, car stickers and what-not."¹⁷ Two years later, the flowering dogwood became the province's emblem under the Floral Emblem Act.

¹⁰ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Speech from the Throne – British Columbia* (Victoria: Province of British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, 2006). Delivered by Lieutenant Governor Iona Campagnolo.

¹¹ Larry Pynn, "B.C. trademark on Spirit Bear name riles conservationists," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 May 2006, sec. A, p.2.

¹² "Would Protect Dogwood Tree", *Daily Colonist*, 27 February 1931, p.6.

¹³ "Citizens Warned Against Cutting Dogwood Trees," *Province*, 2 February 1943, p.9.

¹⁴ Alan Morley, "Which Would You Choose As B.C. Floral Emblem?," *News Herald*, 15 January 1944, p.6.

¹⁵ Ivers Kelly, "Accidental Emblem," *Vancouver Sun*, 24 February 1951, Magazine Sec., p.3.

¹⁶ Kelly, "Accidental Emblem," p.3.

¹⁷ Tony Dickason, "Dogwood Gains Favor as B.C. Flower Emblem," *Victoria Times*, 30 January 1954, p. 1.

It bears mentioning that not everyone wanted the dogwood. A July 1943 letter to the *Daily Colonist* stated that a committee of B.C. residents had been created to look into the selection of a provincial flower. The letter said the committee had invited nominations and would forward a recommendation to the legislature.¹⁸ But in 1944, an editorial in the *News Herald* complained about the committee's recommendation of the wild columbine, suggesting that not enough people were consulted. "It pains us to point out that the columbine is already the emblem of the state of Colorado, that it is unknown to a great number of British Columbians, and that it has no conceivable symbolic or traditional connection with this province or its history," wrote the editorialist.¹⁹ Ironically, there was also some opposition to the dogwood as an emblem because the tree appears in British Columbia only on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland, making it an unfamiliar sight to many residents.²⁰

JADE

Many British Columbians hadn't heard of jade in 1968 when it was declared the province's official mineral, a newspaper reporter wrote at the time.²¹ But nearly four decades later, British Columbia is a top producer of nephrite, a popular form of jade.²²

Almost all Canadian jade is found in British Columbia and the major finds were in the Lillooet, Cassiar and Dease Lake areas. Jade was first noted by Westerners in British Columbia in the mid-1800s, but it is believed First Nations were using it as far back as 3,000 BC.²³ There is also a story that Chinese miners recognized it during the Gold Rush and shipped some back to China in the coffins of dead miners.²⁴

The sixties saw the "apex of the lapidary hobby boom," or rockhounding, Stan Leaming and Rick Hudson wrote in *Jade Fever*.²⁵ The rockhounds were "a gregarious, friendly group devoted to collecting minerals and finding, cutting and polishing rock that had some attractiveness of colour and pattern."²⁶ In 1968, the same year that jade was declared the provincial emblem, the B.C. government created a Crown reserve for rockhounds on an area of the Fraser River between Hope and Lillooet. Amateur prospectors could scout on the Fraser River Jade Reserve without acquiring a certificate.

It was also during the 1960s that newspapers ran stories about fabulous jade discoveries, with flashy headlines such as "Housewife jade-rich after going by book."²⁷ The woman in question was Win Robertson, a successful jade prospector who, according to Leaming and Hudson, was also a former model and CBC interviewer. Robertson found herself at the centre of a media frenzy and the recipient of an unwanted

¹⁸ Alex H. Sutherland, "British Columbia Emblem Flower," *Daily Colonist*, 4 July 1943.

¹⁹ "The Bearberry Forever!" *News Herald*, 15 January 1944, p.4.

²⁰ "Dogwood for an Emblem," *Times*, 21 March 1955, p.4.

²¹ "Reserve Placed on Jade Country for Rock Hounds," *Victoria Times*, 26 January 1968, p.17.

²² Chris Tenove, "Romancing the Stone," *Canadian Geographic*, Vol. 24, Issue. 4 (2005) Academic Search Premier EBSCOHost (29 May 2006).

²³ Rick Hudson, *A Field Guide to Gold, Gemstone and Mineral Sites of British Columbia*, vol 2. rev. ed., (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2006), 92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Stan Leaming and Rick Hudson, *Jade Fever: Hunting the Stone of Heaven*, (Surrey: Heritage House Publishing Co. Ltd, 2005), 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ "Housewife Jade-Rich After Going by Book," *Daily Colonist*, 25 October 1968, p.22.

marriage proposal after her big find in the O’Ne-ell Creek area.²⁸ Another successful prospector received plenty of press when he sold a jade boulder at the New York Exhibition for \$30,000, a tidy sum in those days.²⁹

The term jade refers to two types of mineral aggregate: jadeite and nephrite. Nephrite is the only kind of jade found in British Columbia. It is commonly coloured green but is sometimes white or close to black. Some B.C. nephrite has been nicknamed “chicken guts” jade, due to swirls in its colour pattern.³⁰ It is often used for jewelry or sculpting. A pectoral cross of jade made at a Lillooet factory was presented as a gift to the pope in 1966.³¹ Pieces of jade were also included in a stained glass window celebrating the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth now on display at the B.C. legislature.

TARTAN

British Columbia’s least-known emblem is likely its tartan, a term referring to a distinct textile design that signifies the wearer’s allegiance to a chief of a Scottish clan. The B.C. tartan was initially created to mark the double centenaries of the Union of B.C. and the Confederation of Canada in 1966-1967.³² It was eventually recognized in legislation through the British Columbia Tartan Act of 1974. It was also officially marked down on Jan. 8, 1969 in the books of the Court of the Lord Lyon, King of Arms, Scotland, which records details of clan tartans.

Talk of creating a B.C. tartan went back at least to 1937. According to a letter published in the *Daily Colonist*, Hastie Cochrane created a tartan that he registered in Ottawa, but which was not accepted by officials in Scotland.³³ Cochrane was “well aware of the close affinity between his native land and B.C.,” said the letter writer, R.G.H. Murray. A new tartan was later designed by Island Weavers Ltd. and Murray said it would be a “fitting emblem” for British Columbia. Island Weavers put in a proposal to the government to create an official B.C. tartan in 1956. The idea of an official tartan appeared to annoy editors at the *Daily Colonist*, who called the possible adoption of an official tartan an “enormous gaffe.” The writer suggested finding symbols “indigenous to the province” and compared adopting a tartan to draping “a Hawaiian lei around everyone’s neck.”³⁴ Ultimately, it was a tartan design by Earl Kitchener Ward of Langford, B.C., that was designated the official symbol a few years later. Ward had also designed the Centennial tartan in 1958 and the official tartan for Seattle’s Century 21 Exhibition in 1962.³⁵

Ward’s design was heavy with provincial symbolism. The blue was meant to represent the Pacific Ocean and the gold was to remind wearers of the Crown and the sun in the B.C. crest. The white symbolized dogwood and “the maple leaf red” pointed to Canada, but also reminded British Columbians of their “bond with the

²⁸ Leaming, 31.

²⁹ Hudson, 94.

³⁰ Hudson, 92.

³¹ Phil Holcroft, “Pope’s Gift from B.C.,” *Vancouver Sun*, 7 April 1966, p.60.

³² “Province’s New Tartan Will Mark Centenaries,” *Daily Colonist*, 5 December 1965, p.23.

³³ R.G.H. Murray, “B.C. Tartan Inspires Pride,” *Daily Colonist*, 3 February 1956, p.4.

³⁴ “Purloining an Emblem,” *Daily Colonist*, 3 February 1956, p.4.

³⁵ “Province’s New Tartan,” p.23.

Commonwealth by forming the Cross of St. George.”³⁶ Green represented the province’s forests. The *Vancouver Sun* fashion editor called it “a good looking tartan, muted in tones and rather less bold than the new Dogwood tartan also produced for this year.”³⁷

STELLER’S JAY

A “lively campground scamp” beat out the dignified peregrine falcon to become the province’s official bird emblem in 1987. In an unusual public vote, more than 20,000 B.C. residents voted for the Steller’s jay as their symbolic bird. They selected an “intelligent, mischievous, inquisitive clown that will take the bacon from the camp fry pan, the food from the picnic table, or even the soap from the soap dish,” said a government press release issued after the vote.³⁸

The contest to pick a bird was organized to help mark the national centennial of wildlife conservation in Canada. Bruce Strachan, then the environment minister, told the provincial legislature in December 1987 that it “occurred to us in British Columbia that we did not have a provincial bird, and perhaps it might be a good idea for all British Columbians to enter into the process of selecting one, and we did.”³⁹ At the time, most other provinces had already picked provincial birds, such as Alberta’s great horned owl and New Brunswick’s black-capped chickadee.

Seven avian candidates were narrowed down from a list of 460-plus B.C. birds. They were selected based on factors such as common distribution throughout the province, nesting in British Columbia, and being attractive and recognizable.⁴⁰ In addition to the jay, B.C. residents were given the choice of voting for the peregrine falcon, trumpeter swan, rufous hummingbird, varied thrush, harlequin duck and American dipper. There were also write-in ballots favouring unofficial candidates such as the eagle, raven, seagull and whiskey jack.⁴¹ More than 80,000 ballots were cast and some voters even submitted poems and satirical sketches. The jay won more than 21,000 votes with the peregrine falcon coming in close behind with about 19,000. The American dipper came last, with about 2,000 votes.⁴²

British Columbia’s jay is about 30 centimetres long. It is mostly blue with a blackish upper body and long, prominent crest. There is black banding on its tails and wings. The bird has a variety of voices and is “often heard before seen.”⁴³

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Diana Ricardo, “Pacific Blue, Forest Green in B.C. Tartan,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1966, p.5.

³⁸ British Columbia, Ministry of Environment and Parks, *Fact Sheet: Steller’s Jay*, (Victoria: Ministry of Environment and Parks, 19 November 1987).

³⁹ British Columbia, *Debates of the Legislative Assembly 1st Session 34th Parliament*, vol. 6 (Nov.27 1987-March 11, 1988), p.3000.

⁴⁰ British Columbia, Ministry of Environment and Parks, *Backgrounder: B.C. Bird Vote*, (Victoria: Ministry of Environment and Parks, 19 November 1987).

⁴¹ British Columbia, Ministry of Environment and Parks, *Steller’s Jay Chosen B.C. Bird*, (Victoria: Ministry of Environment and Parks, 19 November 1987).

⁴² Ibid. The results were as follows: Steller’s jay 21,261; peregrine falcon 19,417; trumpeter swan 11,713; rufous hummingbird 10,609; varied thrush 4,275; harlequin duck 4,108; American dipper 2,062.

⁴³ Richard J. Cannings, *Birds of Southwestern British Columbia*, (Surrey: Heritage House, 2005), 267.

WESTERN REDCEDAR

British Columbians were asked their opinion twice about provincial emblems in 1987. Although the decision about an official tree was not put to public vote, residents were given the opportunity to nominate a worthy tree. British Columbians were given a list of 25 possible candidates, including the eventual winner – the western redcedar.⁴⁴

Picking a tree was tied to the B.C. Forest Service's 75th anniversary. It was thought that an official tree could be used as an educational tool that would raise public awareness of forest resources.⁴⁵ Beside public nominations, the decision was also based on essays submitted by students and a final recommendation by the British Columbia Tree Council. The western redcedar was proclaimed the official tree of British Columbia Feb. 18, 1988.

Cedar is a valuable commodity in contemporary markets, but its significance to coastal B.C. First Nations is immeasurable. Cedar was traditionally used to build homes, canoes, totem poles, baskets, and ropes. Archaeological excavations on the northwest coast have turned up evidence of ancient objects made from cedar wood, bark, roots and withes.⁴⁶ Cedar also holds deep spiritual meaning for the First Nations.⁴⁷

Western redcedar can grow to gigantic proportions, reaching heights of 60 metres.⁴⁸ It is found on low to mid elevations along the coast and in parts of the Interior. Its aromatic branches appear to droop and produce small, oblong cones. Ironically, the western redcedar is not a true cedar, which is not native to North America. Instead, British Columbia's provincial tree belongs to the cypress family.

⁴⁴ British Columbia, Ministry of Forests and Lands, *Still Time to Help Select British Columbia's Official Tree*, (Victoria: Ministry of Forests and Lands, 1 Oct.1987).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hilary Stewart, *Cedar*, (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1984), 26.

⁴⁷ To read a Coast Salish legend about the origin of British Columbia's official tree, see page 27 of Hilary Stewart's *Cedar* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1984).

⁴⁸ Roberta Parish, "Western redcedar," in *Tree Book: Learning to Recognize Trees of British Columbia*, 2nd ed., 1994 < <http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfd/library/documents/treebook/westernredcedar.htm> > (31 May 2006).