

Nordic Folklore Water Creatures - transcript of the Nordic on Tap podcast at <https://nordicontap.com/nordic-folktale-water-creatures/>

Naar er det tid for Nordisk paa Trykk!

Welcome to our podcast featuring interviews, music, folktales, and lots of hygge -- all with a Nordic flavor.

I'm your host, Eric Stavney.

In this podcast we'll be traveling to various parts of the Nordic countries to hear stories of strange creatures and spirits that have haunted places with water - the marsh, the sea, waterfalls, and lakes.

But before we get started, I wanted to call out our listener survey on the website - it's right there on the nordicontap.com homepage. Just as soon as this episode finishes, navigate to the nordicontap.com website and click that blue button to share with me what you enjoy most about this program. You can also contact us at nordicontap@gmail.com, or leave comments right there in the Comment box after the show notes, links, and photos.

And, you can click on the Buy me a coffee (or a pickled herring) button to contribute a few dollars to the show, to help us keep it going, which is much appreciated.

So, that said, I now want you to settle in like you're sitting warm, next to the hearth. You've had a good meal, and you're ready to consider your life so far. Have you ever seen something out of the corner of your eye, especially looking out over a still lake, maybe with a little fog or out to sea....and maybe you see something or hear a splash. A lump or a dark thing that seems to be moving out in a lake. Or something is wailing out among the skerries during a raging ocean storm.

Or maybe you see something out of the corner of your eye, but when you look straight at it, it's not there. You've probably experienced this. What is that about? We've all seen something weird and hard to explain.

And even more sinister, you sometimes hear stories about people who just disappear without a trace. Fishermen who never come back. Young men and women who go missing. Maybe while hiking in the mountains, out in a lake, in a boat at sea. And you hear stories, tales about these places

These are the kinds of things that people the world wonder about, worry about, and in the Nordic countries, these strange tales have their own special flavor to them. There are so many tales, that I've chosen to focus just on those involving water - streams, waterfalls, marshes, and the ocean.

There are so many tales that I've chosen to focus mostly on those involving water, and one from the deep forest. No trolls this time - we have other podcasts to hear tales about them.

Let's begin with the marshes in Denmark, of which there are many. The land in Denmark is nearly flat - some hills -- but mostly low, with lots of inlets and gulfs from the sea. And along the sea, there's huge salt marshes. Inland the marshes or bogs are places where plants fall down and slowly decompose to form peat. These places are almost impossible to walk through - suddenly you find yourself stepping into dark water over your head and tangled in branches of fallen trees.

And then there's the fog, what they call taag in Danish. It settles in the evening, almost like it rises out of bog. The fog is brewed by the mosekone, the bog woman, who is a witch somewhere out there, out in the bog, brewing something in a large black kettle. That's the origin of the expression *mosekone brygger*.

Hans Christian Andersen, the famous Danish storyteller, wrote about the mosekone and the fate of a young girl named Inger. I'll tell you a shortened version of "Pigen, som trådte på brødet", The Girl who stepped on the bread loaf.

One there was a girl named Inger, a poor child, but proud and arrogant. Even as a little child she found pleasure in catching flies, to pull off their wings and make creeping insects out of them. And she used to stick May bugs and beetles on a pin.

As she grew older she became even worse instead of better; but she was very pretty, and that was probably her misfortune. Because otherwise she would have been disciplined more than she was.

"You'll bring misfortune down upon you," said her own mother to her. "As a little child you often used to trample on my aprons; and when you're older I fear you'll trample on my heart."

Then she was sent into the country to be in the service of people of distinction. They treated her as kindly as if she had been their own child and dressed her so well that she looked extremely beautiful and became even more arrogant.

When she had been in their service for about a year, her mistress said to her, "You ought to go back and visit your parents, little Inger."

So she went, but only because she wanted to show them how fine she had become. But she saw her mother, resting on a stone nearby, with a bundle of firewood she had gathered. She was ashamed that one dressed as smartly as she should have for a mother such a poor, ragged woman.

Another half year went by. "You must go home someday and visit your old parents, little Inger," said her mistress. "Here's a large loaf of white bread to take them. They'll be happy to see you again."

So Inger put on her best dress and her fine new shoes and lifted her skirt high and walked very carefully, so that her shoes would stay clean and neat, and for that no one could blame her. But when she came to where the path crossed over marshy ground, and there was a stretch of water and mud before her, she threw the bread into the mud, so that she could use it as a stepping stone and get across with dry shoes. But just as she placed one foot on the bread and lifted the other up, the loaf sank deeper and deeper, carrying her down until she disappeared entirely, and nothing could be seen but a black, bubbling pool! That's the story.

But what became of her? She went down to the Marsh Woman, who brews down there. Nobody knows much about the Marsh Woman, except that when the meadows begin to reek in the summer and the dense fog rises in the marshes, the old woman is brewing down below. Little Inger sank into this brewery, and no one could stand it very long there. A cesspool is a wonderful palace compared with the Marsh Woman's brewery. Every vessel is reeking with horrible smells that would turn a human being faint.

The Marsh Woman was at home, and she was visited that day by the devil. She saw Inger, then put on her spectacles and looked again at her. "That girl has talent,". "Let me have her, she said to the devil, she will make a suitable statue in my great-grandchildren's antechamber." And she was given to her!

Thus little Inger went to hell! People don't always go directly down there; they can go by a roundabout way, when they have the necessary talent.

Inger was tortured by standing like a statue; it was as if she were fastened to the ground by the loaf of bread. "This is what comes of trying to have clean feet," she said to herself. "Look at them stare at me! Yes, they all stared at her, with evil passions glaring from their eyes, and spoke without a sound coming from their mouths. They were frightful to look at!

"It must be a pleasure to look at me," thought little Inger. "I have a pretty face and nice clothes." But she saw that Her dress was covered with clots of nasty slime; a snake had wound itself in her hair and dangled over her neck; and from every fold of her dress an ugly toad peeped out, barking like an asthmatic lap dog. It was most disagreeable. Worst of all was the dreadful hunger she felt. Could she stoop down and break off a bit of the bread on which she was standing? Then the flies came and crept to and fro across her eyeballs. She blinked her eyes, but the flies did not fly away, for they could not; their wings had been pulled off, and they had become creeping insects.

"If this keeps up much longer, I won't be able to stand it!" she said. But she had to stand it; her sufferings only increased.

Then a hot tear fell upon her forehead. Who could be weeping for little Inger? Had she not a mother up there on earth? Her mother wept sorrowfully, she still said, "Pride goes before a fall. It was your own ruin, Inger. How you have grieved your mother!"

"I wish I had never been born!" thought Inger. "I would have been much better off. "They ought to have brought me up better," Inger thought. "They should have beaten the nonsense out of me, if I had any."

Her heart became harder, and full of hatred for all mankind.

But one day, when hunger and misery were gnawing at her hollow body, she heard her name mentioned and her story told to an innocent little girl, who burst into tears of pity for the haughty, clothes-loving Inger.

"But won't she ever come up again?" the child asked.

"She will never come up again, " they answered her.

"But if she would ask forgiveness and promise never to be bad again?"

"But she will not ask forgiveness," they said.

"Oh, how I wish she would!" the little girl said in great distress. "I'd give my doll's house if she could come up! It's so dreadful for poor Inger!"

These words reached right down to Inger's heart and seemed almost to make her good. For this was the first time anyone had said, "Poor Inger," and not added anything about her faults. An innocent little child had wept and prayed for her, and she was so touched by it that she wanted to weep herself, but the tears would not come, and that was also a torture.

The years passed up there, but down below there was no change. So many years had passed since that little girl had wept over "Poor Inger" that that child had become an old woman, now being called by the Lord to Himself. At that last hour, when the thoughts and deeds of a lifetime pass in review, she remembered very clearly how, as a tiny child, she had wept over the sad story of Inger. That time and that sorrow were so intensely in the old woman's mind at the moment of death that she cried with all her heart. Inger was astonished. One of God's angels wept for her! Why was this granted her?

The tormented soul gathered into one thought all the deeds of its earthly life, and trembled with tears, such tears as Inger had never wept before. Grief filled her whole being. And as in deepest humility she thought that for her the gates of mercy would never be opened, a brilliant ray penetrated down into the abyss to her.. And under this ray, the petrified figure of Inger evaporated; then a tiny bird arose and followed the zigzag path of the ray up to the world of mankind.

But it seemed terrified and shy of all about it; as if ashamed and wishing to avoid all living creatures, it hastily concealed itself in a dark hole in a crumbling wall. There it sat trembling all over, and could utter no sound, for it had no voice. The bird wanted to sing out the thoughts that filled its breast, but it could not; gladly would it have sung like the nightingale or the cuckoo in the springtime. Now came the feast of holy Christmas.

Close by the wall a farmer set up a pole and tied an unthreshed bundle of oats on it, that the fowls of the air might also have a merry Christmas, and a joyous meal in this, the day of our Savior.

Brightly the sun rose that Christmas morning and shone down upon the oats and all the chirping birds that gathered around the pole. Then from the wall there came a faint "tweet, tweet." The swelling thoughts had at last found a voice, and the tiny sound was a whole song of joy as the bird flew forth from its hiding place; in the realm of heaven they well knew who this bird was.

The winter was unusually severe. The ponds were frozen over thickly; the birds and wild creatures of the forest had very little food. The tiny bird flew about the country roads, and whenever it chanced to find a few grains of corn fallen in the ruts made by the sleds, it would eat but a single grain itself, while calling the other hungry birds, that they might have some food. Then it would fly into the towns and search closely, and wherever kindly hands had strewed bread crumbs outside the windows for the birds, it would eat only a single crumb and give all the rest away.

By the end of the winter the bird had found and given away so many crumbs of bread that they would have equaled in weight the loaf upon which little Inger had stepped to keep her fine shoes from being soiled; and when it had found and given away the last crumb, the gray wings of the bird suddenly became white and expanded.

"Look, there flies a sea swallow over the sea!" the children said as they saw the white bird. Now it seemed to dip into the water; now it rose into the bright sunshine; it gleamed in the air; it was not possible to see what became of it; they said that it flew straight into the sun.

Now, the mosekone is often talked about together with Lygtemænd, the lantern men, who are nasty little men, hard to see. Some say they are the undead. They are seen as little lights out in the marshes, but if you follow them, you'll never be seen again. Don't even look at the lights, or you'll get the urge to follow them. Those Lygtemænd try to lure people out where

they step into the wrong place and drown. Lantern men who are able to split themselves, you know, and become several. However, you can protect yourself from lantern men by turning the inside of your [hat](#) inside out. And you must avoid pointing at a lantern man, as this will draw him towards you.

The lantern men, sometimes called will o the wisps, are also known in other places, such as Ireland where some say they are lost souls or spirits in the fog. In Finland, they are the Lempo, and are most commonly seen over lakes in midsummer. These evil spirits are the reason why people disappear or are found dead floating in the marshes.

Let's walk out of the marshes of Denmark and go north along the coast of Norway. We can do as Theodor Kittelsen did, a famous illustrator of folklore books and author of *Troll Magic*, as it's entitled in English, which I highly recommend. Kittelsen spent two years with his sister and brother-in-law way out on a remote island named Skomvaer, which has a lighthouse. Those were days when lighthouses had to be tended by people, they weren't automatic lights, but lanterns that had to be lit and refueled, especially on stormy nights when ships needed to see the light and avoid crashing on the island's rocks.

Kittelsen must have seen a lot of strange things out there, judging by his illustrations in the book *Troll Magic*.

In some tales from Helgeland, a bit to the south, along the coast, they believed a serpent monster lived on the bottom of the ocean. They would surface, and take boats, people, and fish down into the depths with them. The thing is, when they surfaced, they would first rise, slowing, and then they would shoot up and collapse like a breaker, swamping the boat.

And there was a fisherman, named Johansen, out in his boat, fishing with a handline. He paddled to a place where he knew there were a lot of fish. He hardly got bait on his hook before he caught one. But after sitting there for a while, he noticed that the water was becoming more and more shallow. It seemed like he could see the bottom, and it was getting closer and closer. He thought that was strange. He looked toward land to see whether he had drifted and lost his bearings. But, no, his position was exactly what it should be.

It must be "gamle Eirick himself", he said, referring to the devil. And so he hurriedly pulled up his line and rowed away as fast as he could, and just in time too. As soon as he got away from that spot, the waves crashed around it as if it was stormy. YOU see, it was the sea serpent. And there are always a lot of fish swimming around just above it, so you think it's a good fishing spot. But if a fisherman does not get away before the monster breaks through the surface of the water, he is doomed. That's why fishermen sometimes go out fishing and never come back.

The *sjøorm* explains how fishermen drown when a big wave suddenly breaks over the boat, as if from nowhere. But the spirits of those dead fisherman, or rather undead, might haunt you in the form of a draug. Just as there are dead spirits of the sea, there are also those on land, who inhabit the graves of people buried in the church cemetery.

In the year 1837, it happened on the Island of Luroy that the servants at a farm were carousing on Christmas Even after they had eaten supper. They ran out of spirits - which means alcohol like glogg, but no one wanted to go down to the boathouse to fetch more. The farm boy got up enough nerve and set out with a jug in one hand, and a lantern in the other.

He got down to the boathouse safely, unlocked the door, and filled the jug. But when he shut the door behind him, and was going to go back across the bridge from the boathouse, for it was on a little island, a man without a head was sitting there blocking the way.

He was dressed in a heavy fisherman's coat, and big fishing boots, but where the head and fisherman's hat should be, there was just a dark hole.

The boy knew right away that it was a draug. When he saw that he could not get by, he swung at it with the jug, so the draug tumbled down off the bridge with a shriek. So the boy ran up the path from the sea, but all at once he heard a strange commotion behind him, as if many large fisherman were following him in their big boots., and when he looked around, he saw a tremendous number of draugr coming up from the shore. The graveyard next to the church lay right in his way and the flock of draugr would catch up with him again if he ran around it. So he hopped over the graveyard fence, sprang across the graves, and cried,

Up, up every Christian soul, and save me!

At the same moment the clock struck twelve midnight, and the earth shook under the boy's feet. When he was well over the fence on the other side, he looked back again.

And the draugr were right behind him in hot pursuit, like a flock of sheep, in over the graveyard.

But there they were met by a great host of head souls who wanted to help the body and stop the unholy draugs from coming onto consecrated ground.

You see, only faithful Christian folk got to be buried in the churchyard.

It was a bitter struggle. The land spirits used boards from coffins, while the sea draugr had seaweed and kelp for weapons.

But the boy dared not look on. Pale and half out of his wits, he ran into the servant's quarters, put down the jug of wine, dashed up to the attic, and went to bed with the covers over his head.

On Christmas morning he came to his senses and told what he had experienced during the night. The other servants doubted it a little, but when they came down to the church with the rest of the congregation, they saw for themselves. Over the whole church yard were strewn boards from coffins, seaweed, kelp, and sea spittle or jellyfish, and everyone could tell that the land spirits had battled the sea draugs. Uff - those sea draugs. Theodor Kittelsen drew them in Troll Magic, along with a sea troll, and their shrieking is like the sound of the wind during a storm.

Now, a different kind of creature is found on the land where streams and rivers fall from a height, forming a waterfall. If you stand and listen to the rushing, crashing water, it seems like you can almost hear fiddle music being played. You know what I mean? Of course, what you hear is the fossegrim, the sprite of the waterfall. In Sweden, he might be called Strömkarlen or the stream man.

It's a man who sits on the rocks, under the falls, playing a fiddle constantly, the sounds of the forest and stream and falls. And some say he only inhabits streams that flow northwards.

The fossegrim is described as a young naked man under or inside the falls. While some tales say his music is merely enchanting, others say it's more sinister, in that it lures you in where you drown.

However, the wild, beautiful music is harmless. And in fact, the fossegrim might agree to teach you to play the fiddle - especially a hardanger fiddle - if you leave him a gift of fenelår - dried leg of lamb, which you must steal from your neighbor and set out 4 Thursdays in a row.

But be sure have a good lamb leg for him, or he might say you "Eg skal læra deg leikjen stille, men inkje på den slå, fe du ga meg det bånåbeinet som inkje kjøt va' på" , which means, something like I shall teach you to play silence, not to play music on that fiddle, for you gave me a leg that had no meat on it).

If you learn the fiddle with the fossegrim, your music has no parallel, it's fantastic. Some of the greatest fiddlers from Scandinavia are thought to have learned from the fossegrim, like Ole Bull for example. That's why there's a bronze statue of Ole Bull playing his fiddle atop a pile of rocks, with a statue of the fossegrim playing in the waterfall below.

Now many years ago there lived a little boy by the name of Paul. He was working at the mountain farm here, herding cattle. The boy wanted very much to learn to play the fiddle; he walked around all day sawing on his little ragged instrument.

Then, one evening, he sat playing, close to where we are sitting now. Suddenly he heard beautiful sounds coming from the little waterfall over there. At first he was frightened, but then it sounded so very beautiful that he forgot his fear, took his little ragged fiddle, and began playing. It seemed that he had learned to play all at once, his fingers were more pliant and lighter, and the box was dancing over the strings almost by itself.

When he had been sitting and playing for a while, a little man appeared to him and said, "If you will promise one thing, Paul, I'll teach you to play so well that you will be the best idler in the whole village." Paul asked him what that might be.

"Oh, nothing more", said the grim -for that is what he was -- than that you stop shouting and playing so poorly so in the meadows at night.". Well, Paul promised, and then he really learned to play.

Once he was playing at a dance on a farm. Later that night all the folks became so crazy from his playing that each and every one of them, young and old, had to get up and dance, whether they wanted to or not. And in the end, even the furniture in the house began to dance, the cups and the teaspoons too. There was no end to the dancing, until they took Paul's fiddle away and locked it up for the following day. if they had not done this, they would all have danced themselves to death. Yes - that music he learned from the fossegrim was impossible to ignore.

Well, if you're not near a waterfall, or out at the sea, you might find yourself near a lake. Nearby, maybe a little ways away, you might see a white horse. You hear about these animals in several Nordic countries, but I'm thinking of stories about them told in Iceland and the Faroe Islands now.

In Iceland and the Faroes, this horse creature, sometimes called a water horse, is called Nykur or Nennir, where elsewhere it's called a Nøkk or sometimes a bakahest - a brook horse.

He looks just like a horse, sometimes, white, often gray, and occasionally black, but if you get up close you'll see the hooves are turned backwards and the hair just above the hooves point backwards too. However, he is in no way limited to this form; it is characteristic of him to change suddenly into various shapes, just as he chooses. In winter, when cracks appear in the ice and cause loud booming noises, you know what I mean if you've heard it. That is the Nykur, neiging.

It lives down in the bottom of lakes and streams. It is characteristic of all horses descended from a nykur that they like down whenever they are ridden or led through water that reaches to their bellies. A Nykur will often appear on land near rivers or lakes that are difficult to cross. He seems quiet enough at such times, and tempts people to ride on him. Sometimes he encounters people while in human form, as a handsome young man, to lure young women to himself, and promises them joy and gladness back where he lives, if they want to go along with him and ride on him. But as soon as they are up on his back, he rushes wild in the water, lies down flat in it, and drags his rider down too.

They say too that you should never touch his tail when he's a horse, or you'll get stuck fast to him and then he releases no-one, but he drags them with him to the bottom of the water.

So, the story goes that one evening there were some children out near Úlfarsá in Iceland who had gone down to Langevatn to play. A nykur appeared in the shape of a large horse, and they wanted to climb on its back. And the horse let them on, all except the smallest boy, who couldn't climb on. But the horse started galloping away down towards the river, and became frightened and called to his broker Niklas, who was on the horse, saying Nika! Nika!

You see, the boy was so little that he still could not speak properly. And a good thing too, for the nykur thought its own name had been called, Nykur! Nykur!, and disappeared, so the children were saved. It is said that when the nykur hears its name, it loses all its power.

So those are the mosekone, lygtemænd, skogsra or hulder, sjøorm, draug, fossegrim, and the nøkk.

I used a variety of sources for this show, many of which you can look up or purchase story books fairly cheaply. Many of the same nordic tales are found in all of these books. Now I'm going to list these books quickly, but never fear, they'll be in the episode's notes and links on nordicontap.com if you don't quite catch them.

Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend by Reimund Kvideland and my old professor Henning Sehmsdorf. They've collected the bones of nordic tales found in Lindow's Swedish Legends and Folktales, Svend Gruntvig's Danish Folk Tales, Reidar Christiansen's Folktale of Norway, and Icelandic Folktales and Legends by Jacqueline Simpson. Theodor Kittelsen's Troll Magic is fairly recently made available in English, but between the illustrations and Kittelsen's own stories, it's, well, pretty magic. Thanks Byhulder, as they call themselves on Deviant Art dot com,, for the fossegrim information. Thanks to Jean Hersholt for her translation of Hans Christian Anderson's The Girl who stepped on a bread loaf.

And while I didn't specifically search in the gaming websites, many of these nordic creatures are well known to the Dungeons and Dragons community, who they have adopted and added their own folklore about.

Special thanks also goes to Rachel Nesvig who let me use some of her hardanger fiddle music. You can hear the whole concert from which I drew some selections by Googling Rachel Nesvig and Hardanger Fiddle for Syttende Mai. Her website is rachyelnesvig.com. We also did a podcast where we interviewed Rachel and heard about the making and playing of the very Norwegian instrument, the hardanger fiddle. Check it out on nordicontap.com.

Don't forget to check out the show notes for more information and extras from this episode. Depending on what app you're using to listen to the podcast, you should be able to find them by looking for a button or a link labeled 'show notes' or 'episode notes.' If you're using Apple Podcasts or Google podcasts you can simply scroll down while listening to an episode, and the show notes should be there. For other apps like Spotify, Overcast, Podbean, or Pocket Casts, you may need to tap a button or a link to access the notes. And if you're having trouble finding the show notes, don't hesitate to reach out via our website, nordicontap.com, or our facebook page. We'll be happy to help you out!"

And if you appreciate and want to support the show, click that Buy me a coffee button to help us out. Of course, Nordic on Tap will continue to be, and will always be, free to listen to.

For some good nordic music to brighten your day, get online with the [thescandinavianhour dot org](http://thescandinavianhour.org) 6am Saturdays and 6am Sundays, and again 9am Saturdays, streaming to you on Pacific time. As you may know, streaming programs are being delivered to you live, so you don't want to miss it. My friend Seth Tufteland at the Scandinavian Hour spins a huge variety of songs, mostly in some Nordic language, and occasionally in English or other, from jazz, to pop, to dance songs, fiddle tunes, choral numbers, marching band music -- it's all there.

Our intro music is Ingela's Waltz played by composer Morten Alfred Hoirup, mortenalfred.com and Ruthie Dornfeld, who both have websites, as does the composer and performer of our outgoing music, Darryl Jackson, at darryljacksonmusic.com.

Thanks for sitting at the hearth with me for these nordic stories. You can rest easy, knowing those things you see fleetingly at the edge of your vision, and then they're gone are in fact real.

I'm Eric Stavney, and vi sees neste gang pa nordic on tap..