

# DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD



The skies are troubled over Saltmarsh. Long-forgotten magic spreads its wicked wings once more, and the birds are out for blood.

A Saltmarsh adventure for 1st-4th level characters.

by Stacey Allan

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## OVERVIEW

*Down Came a Blackbird* is a Dungeons & Dragons adventure set in the Forgotten Realms. Events take place in the small fishing town of Saltmarsh, the surrounding marshlands, and the Sea of Swords, but could easily be adapted to fit any coastal fishing town in your preferred game world. For a detailed description of Saltmarsh and its residents, please refer to *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, published by Wizards of the Coast.

This adventure is designed for **1st-4th level characters** and is optimised for **five 3rd level characters**.

## BACKGROUND

Salty Maude is a mistress of ancient rituals – spells that run deep through the veins of the natural world, like sap in the roots of the oldest trees. Maude is one of a dwindling number of migratory sea hags, whose magic holds dominion over any birdlife in their territory. Having spent decades studying their peep-talk, Maude has learned how to bend the will of these creatures for her own nefarious needs. Birds are now her scouts and her army. A murmuration of starlings can sling her across the sky and seabirds flock and strike at her bidding.

Maude is infatuated with a male peryton called Kraggen who roosts in the nearby peaks of the Sword Mountains. That is, she's enamoured with the man she believes the peryton is destined to *become*. Despite their monstrous physical appearances, perytons cast human shadows. Salty Maude's bird-bone auguries prophesize that this peryton is destined to transform into a human and form a hellish union with her. Thus, she plots to hurry Kraggen's metamorphosis.

A peryton's egg is the key component for Maude's transformative ritual. Kraggen has managed to snatch one from a mating pair in the mountains to the south. Maude intends to hatch the egg and then cast a spell to transfer Kraggen's monstrous essence across to the hatchling as it matures to adulthood. Kraggen's humanoid aspect will remain, leaving him permanently altered.

The egg, however, has been stolen. Having collected it from her betrothed, Maude was flying back to her lair when she dropped it somewhere in the swamps outside Saltmarsh. When the egg slammed into the water, the splash drew the attention of some children mudlarking nearby. Elated by their rare find, the children took the egg back to Saltmarsh.

The birds have told Salty Maude that the egg is somewhere in the vicinity of the town. Now she weaves her magic over the neighbouring bird

colonies, causing outbreaks of aggression: gulls circle and swoop on fishermen in the bay and throngs of blackbirds peck and tear at people in the streets. Kraggen and the hag raid homesteads on the outskirts of town by night, slaughtering any unfortunates who dwell inside. The peryton sates himself on the hearts of his victims whilst Maude conspires with the birds for their next strike. With the egg due to hatch any day, the pair receive word that a gang of Saltmarsh urchins have it, and they connive to launch fresh assaults within the town itself.

The people of Saltmarsh are anxious and afraid; they pull their hoods tightly and aren't look up to the skies; they board their windows and block their fireplaces at sundown. A small band of children are in grave danger, having unwittingly brought a curse to their home. This is a town in dire need of heroes!

## ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

The characters arrive in Saltmarsh after the murders at the town's periphery. The bird attacks are becoming brazen and the townsfolk are starting to panic. As the characters investigate, they uncover details of the diabolical transmutation ritual and finally face off against Kraggen and Salty Maude.

The adventure is broken into four parts, most likely played out in the following order:

**Part 1: Arrival at Saltmarsh.** The characters encounter a boy being attacked by a flock of gulls: one of the gang of children who found the peryton egg in the swamps. The boy reveals details of the discovery, and his worries about the troubles that have followed.

**Part 2: A Night in Saltmarsh.** The characters visit a tavern for food and lodgings. Pinned on a noticeboard are several leads which the characters can pursue to aid them in their investigation. During the night, Maude and Kraggen strike within the town; the characters investigate the crime scene and question the town's guards for clues.

**Part 3: Town Meeting.** The town council gathers to discuss the recent deaths and disturbances. Here the characters receive the egg from the children just as Maude and Kraggen make a bold attack on all in attendance.

**Part 4: Trail of the Hag.** The characters home in on the hag's lair and cleanse the Saltmarsh skies of her curse.





## Location and NPC Summary

The following NPCs and locations feature prominently in this adventure.

**Saltmarsh.** A small, respectable fishing town surrounded by swampland.

**Salty Maude.** A menacing sea hag with bird-like features. She assumes the form of a tall, frightful woman when dealing with others, including Kraggen.

**Kraggen.** A haughty Peryton who believes he's destined for greatness. He'll stop at nothing to ensure that Maude succeeds with her ritual. Unlike other perytons, Kraggen can talk, due to Maude's nefarious magic.

**Wildak Mythkin.** A jovial scholar who has a wealth of knowledge for all sorts of objects and curios. He's on a tour of the Sword Coast with his 'Relic's Roadshow' and is currently in Saltmarsh.

**Hollylove Dardusk.** A young woman, fledgling ranger, and town veterinarian. Normally level-headed and organized, she's quite overwhelmed with Saltmarsh's problem birds.

**Brynn Seablossom.** A middle-aged woman and veteran sailor. She's tough but hearty and, having undergone a bird attack at sea, holds a personal vendetta against those responsible.

## ADVENTURE HOOKS

Use one of the following hooks to draw the characters into the adventure.

**Troubled Tidings.** If you're a druid, ranger, or one attuned with nature, you hear worrying reports from a mentor or ally about the behavior of the birdlife around Saltmarsh. Perhaps you hear this news directly from birds who've flown over the town. You convince your friends that these rumors are worth investigating.

**Pursuit of Knowledge.** You're keen to learn more about an antique object or trinket that you own, and have heard that the wisdom of Wildak Mythkin, a prominent travelling lore-master, is immeasurable. He's touring the Sword Coast and is presently in Saltmarsh where you intend to seek him out.

**A Stop for Supplies.** You and your party are pursuing adventure along the Sword Coast. Travelling north from Waterdeep to Neverwinter you decide to stop for supplies at the sleepy town of Saltmarsh. Plus, you've heard on the road that their smoked fish pies are truly delicious. It's just a little detour, what could possibly go wrong?

## SALTY MAUDE'S PLOT

Salty Maude is no normal sea hag and she wields old and terrible magic. Salty Maude should be a powerful and memorable enemy with unusual and unknowable magic. Familiarize yourself with the following information before beginning play.

## THE HAG'S POWERS

Salty Maude is a migratory sea hag: one who isn't bound to a single place, but instead, relocates her lair to follow the migration of birds. Salty Maude can cast many archaic rituals, druidic in nature, which allow her to manipulate birdlife. She uses the following powers throughout this adventure:

**Language.** Maude is fluent in peeptalk, the language of birds.

**The birds' curse.** Maude has cast a ritual which allows her to see through the eyes of the Saltmarsh birds. She can do this whenever she's at her scrying pool in her lair (see Part 4: "Trail of the Hag"). The same ritual allows her to compel the birds to scout, swarm, and attack. As a sea hag, her magic is linked to the waves, so this power only works when the tide is coming in and peaks at high tide. The enchantment also ends if the characters destroy the scrying pool or kill the hag, or if the hag moves away from the area or chooses to end the enchantment.

**Teleportation.** Salty Maude can summon a murmuration of starlings to teleport her across the sky from one whirling vortex of birds to another. She can use this innate power three times per day.

**Flying mount.** Salty Maude's mount is a flying rowboat which duplicates the effects of a broom of flying.

**Hag's Lair.** The hag lairs inside the corpse of a giant whale, which she can animate once per day to dive and travel underwater, thus allowing her to follow her migratory path whenever she wishes (see Part 4: "Trail of the Hag").





## THE PERYTON AND HIS RITUAL

The male peryton Kraggen is one of the two villains of this adventure.

**Appearance.** Perytons have the heads of stags with sharp wolves' teeth, and the bodies, wings and talons of birds of prey. They stand roughly 5-feet-tall and 7-feet-long. Males have light blue chest feathers and females are brown. Kraggen is a brute, standing nearly a foot taller than others of his kind.

**Habits.** Carnivorous and thoroughly evil, Perytons feast on the hearts of their prey, which are preferably humanoids. Female perytons must eat a freshly-slain humanoid heart before they can reproduce.

**Shadows.** Perytons cast human shadows. When a peryton feeds on a heart, its shadow changes briefly to show its true bestial form. However, when Kraggen consumes a heart, his shadow remains that of a man, fueling Salty Maude's belief in his destiny.

**Mythology.** Several myths surround the mystery of the peryton's shadow. One of these is that the first perytons were in fact humans, magically transformed through some curse or experiment. Maude is convinced that Kraggen is one of the first of the perytons.

**Ritual.** Using an old ritual, Maude plans to transfer Kraggen's monstrous nature over to a fledgling peryton. If she succeeds, Kraggen will shed his bestial features and emerge, reborn, as a man. At the same time, the young peryton will lose its human shadow and be left only with its true shadow. Maude has prophesized that she and Kraggen will become a powerful force for evil in the world. To ease their scheming, she's magically grafted a human tongue into Kraggen's throat, allowing him to speak Common.

**Resistances.** Normal weapons are less effective against perytons than magical ones.

### Perytons of the Sword Coast

*Ghosts of Waterdeep* features perytons as a constant threat to travelers in this part of the world. The book introduces Rasp, a monstrous peryton – perhaps the egg was snatched from the roost of one of his mates?

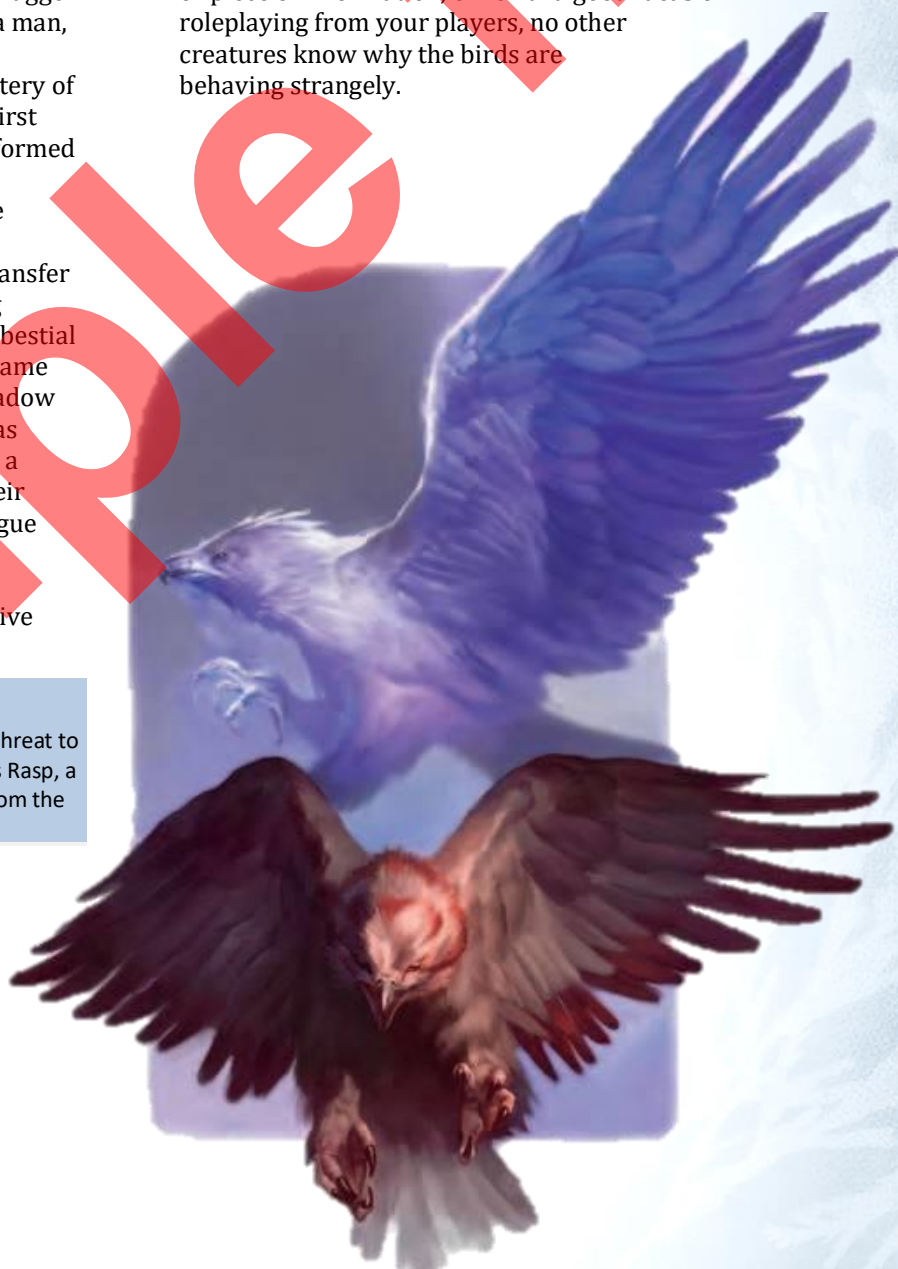
## SPEAKING TO THE BIRDS

Characters may have access to the *speak with animals* spell or other similar magic. Use the following to describe what happens if the players try to use these spells on the birds during the adventure.

**Birds cursed by the hag.** No matter their intelligence, the cursed birds have one or two words they convey repeatedly. Examples are "Thieves", "Hurt", "Find", and "Egg". Characters who speak to the birds can discern that they're acting against their will.

**Birds acting normally.** These birds have no recollection of any strange or aggressive behavior they may have exhibited while cursed. If they see other birds acting oddly, they become agitated.

**Other creatures.** Unless you want to supply a clue or piece of information, or reward good ideas or roleplaying from your players, no other creatures know why the birds are behaving strangely.





# PART 1: ARRIVAL AT SALTMARSH

The characters encounter a boy being attacked by a flock of gulls: one of the gang of children who found the peryton egg in the swamps. The boy reveals details of the discovery, and his worries about the troubles that have followed.

## INCIDENT AT THE HARBOR

The characters have entered Saltmarsh mid-afternoon and are walking through the harbor district on their way to the town center. Read or paraphrase the following aloud:

Strolling through Saltmarsh’s harbor is an assault on the senses: from the sloshing of waves against the quayside walls to the heavy smell of fish; the peal of bells on buoys in the water, stall-holders pitching their freshly-caught fare, and the constant cawing of gulls.

### Saltmarsh

Saltmarsh is a small fishing town on the Sword Coast, located midway between Neverwinter and Waterdeep. Refer to *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* for detailed information on Saltmarsh and its environs.

**Geography:** The Sea of Swords stretches west; otherwise the town is surrounded by dense marshland. The Sword Mountains rise in the east but are usually obscured by layers of fog which hang thick over the swamps.

**Governance:** Saltmarsh is governed by a town council of traditionalists, who seek to preserve the old ways of the town, and loyalists, who welcome change and commercial growth.

**Weather.** Winter hits this part of the coast hard, with gales blowing in from the sea and icy storms rolling across the marshes from the mountains. Spring and autumn are invariably wet – there is rainfall most days. Dry spells do increase with the summer, but rain is never far away.

## A GAGGLE OF GULLS

Ask each player to describe their character as they walk along the harbor. After this, the character with the highest passive (Wisdom) Perception score spots a young boy being harassed by a large herring gull. He’s fishing at the end of a stone jetty and the gull has knocked his hat off.

Seconds later, the sky becomes noisy with more seabirds whirling and wheeling overhead. The boy clutches his fishing-rod and swipes at the gulls as

they begin to swoop down on him. His cries for help are muffled as the creatures engulf him.

The boy is Ham Barleywain, and he has the statistics of a **commoner**. He’s being attacked by three swarms of gulls. Each swarm has the statistics of a **swarm of ravens**.

The gulls focus their attacks on Ham but retaliate against anyone who harms them or who tries to aid the boy. Though the harbor is bustling, no-one intervenes to help. Some look on in fear, but mostly the townsfolk hide or flee.

If at least two swarms of gulls are defeated, the rest of the birds disperse. Characters who succeed on a DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) check know that this level of aggression isn’t typical gull behavior.

Characters who cast the *Speak with Animals* spell hear the gulls babble a few words repeatedly: “Boy!”, “Thief!” and “Egg!”.

**Jetty.** The stone jetty is 10-feet wide and 25-feet long, jutting out into deep water.

### Adjusting the Encounter

The following suggests adjustments which could be made to this encounter depending on the level of your players. These adjustments are not cumulative:

- **Very Weak:** Remove two swarms of gulls.
- **Weak:** Remove one swarm of gulls.
- **Strong:** Add one albatross. The albatross has the statistics of a **giant vulture** with the following changes: Its size is Medium, and it doesn’t understand Common.
- **Very Strong:** Add one swarm of gulls and two albatrosses (see above).

## HAM AND THE EGG

Ham should survive this encounter. He squeezes under a fishing crate for cover as the gulls overwhelm him. He’s scratched and shaken but grateful to the characters for coming to his rescue.

He’s adamant that he knows why the birds attacked him and is quick to offload his opinions (see the “Roleplaying Ham Barleywain” sidebar). Ham reveals the following information:

- Ham and his friends were looking for treasure in the swamps outside town when they found an enormous egg. They heard it splash into the water as if it fell from the sky.
- Ham doesn’t have the egg; the children have been taking turns to look after it, as each wants to be in possession of it when it hatches.
- Ham thinks the egg is cursed because the birds “started acting funny” ever since they brought it into town.

