

Yahgan: **Tátapuj**, Kátapuj, Tetapux, Totupux
 Mapudungun: **Küreu**, Cureu, Chihuanco, Quereu, Furare, Kürew
 Spanish: **Tordo**, Tordo patagónico
 English: **Austral Blackbird**
 Scientific: *Curaeus curaeus*

The Austral Blackbird is a completely black bird, endemic to Chile and Argentina. In these countries, they say "it's as if the blackbirds were bathed in Chinese ink," for, even the feet and eyes are black. The Mapudungun name *küreu* could be related to the color black (*kuri*), as well. Most of the year blackbirds form boisterous flocks inside and outside of forests, which emit a variety of calls, from strident cries to melodious songs. These vocalizations permit the blackbirds to keep their group together while they feed. The Mapuche name *küreu* might be onomatopoeic with its most common call. From the Mapudungun *küreu*, the Jesuit abbot and naturalist Ignacio Molina derived the Latin name: *Curaeus curaeus*.

The Huilliche people of Chiloé Island attribute distinct meanings to the variable calls of the *küreu*. If they are melodious, or if they cross you in the road and call softly, then your business will go very well, but if its call is harsh your fortune will be adverse. The blackbird possesses an elegant black-blue color that has given him the nickname of "dandy."



Julia González tells that when the Yahgan see the blackbirds or *tátapuj* descend to the coasts of Na-varino Island and the Archipelago of Cape Horn, it is because snow storms will come, or because it has already snowed abundantly in the mountains or *tulára*. For the Yahgan and other inhabitants of the extreme southern region, albino blackbirds that "take the color of the snow" are well known, as well.



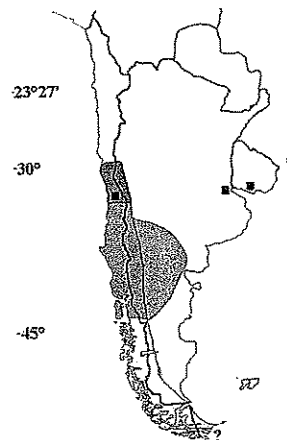
Yahgan: **Sámakéar**, Omora, Samakéa
 Mapudungun: **Pinda**, Pinguera, Pinuda, Pifuda, Pigda, Pichi pinda
 Spanish: **Picaflor chico**, **Colibrí**, Picaflor rubí
 English: **Green-Backed Firecrown**, Crown Hillstar, Fire Crown
 Scientific: *Sephanoides sephaniodes*

Hummingbirds are a bird family found exclusively in the Americas, whose species are concentrated in the tropics. They dart about, and then suspend themselves, seemingly motionless in the air, beating their nearly-invisible wings up to 200 times per second. This extraordinary type of flight is fueled by one of the highest metabolic rates known for living organisms. Because the climate of the tropics is warm, the energy needed to maintain body temperature and fly is



less than at cold, high latitudes. For this reason, it is surprising to find a species of hummingbird that reaches to the southern extreme of South America, in the Chilean Antarctic Province. Moreover, in the austral forests there are, however, more than ten species of plants with red, tubular flowers whose pollination depends on this little bird. As it flies among the flowers, the Green-Backed Firecrown brings an unexpected tropical character to the austral forested landscapes.

The presence of the Green-Backed Firecrown excites not only biologists. Its Spanish name, *picaflor*, means to prick (*picar*) the flowers (*flores*). Its

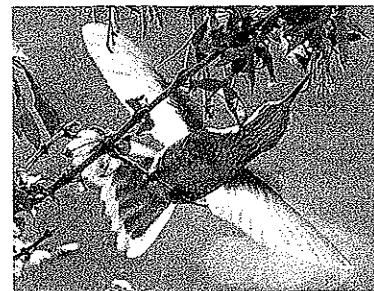


Mapudungun names *pinda*, *pinguera*, *pigda* or *piñuda* are related to the verb *pigudcun* (to rub together), and denotes the sound the wings make during rapid flight. The English name for hummingbirds also alludes to this peculiar humming sound emitted by the bird's wings. The full English name Green-Backed Firecrown literally describes its green back and the males' iridescent, fire-orange crown.

Hummingbirds are admired by many Amerindian cultures, especially the Yahgans. In the austral extreme of the continent, the Green-Backed Firecrown or *omora* is an occasional visitor considered by the Yahgan people



to be a bird and, at the same time, a small man or spirit who maintains social and ecological order. Today, the figure of *omora* has inspired a conservation initiative that integrates the biological, ecological, anthropological, social and cultural dimensions of life with the goal of promoting the well-being of all species, including humans, in the Cape Horn region. Narratives, such as the following, teach us how *omora* achieves such a life-affirming integration since long ago:



Yahgan story. In ancestral times, when birds were still humans, a great drought occurred in the region of Cape Horn and the people were dying of thirst. Only the wily fox, known as *Cilawáia*, found a lake. He told no one and built, instead, a solid fence around it so that no one could enter. Hidden as such, he drank lots of water, concerned only with himself. However, after some time the other people discovered this lake and went as a group to ask the fox for a little bit of water. *Cilawáia* did not even listen to their supplications and expelled them with rude words. The condition of the people got increasingly worse and when they were at the point of death, they decided in their desperation to send a message to the hummingbird or little *Omora*, an occasional visitor who had saved them before in times of crisis. *Omora* was always prepared to help others and arrived quickly. Although diminutive, this little tiny bird-man-spirit is braver and bolder than any giant. When he arrived, the downcast people told him about their great sufferings, and, indignant, *Omora* raised himself and rapidly undertook the flight towards where the egotist *Cilawáia* was, and he confronted him directly saying: "Listen! What is it that the people are telling me? Have you had access to a lake full of water, but you don't want to share it with other people who soon will die of thirst!" The fox replied, "Why should I worry myself about the others? This lake has only a little water, and it barely is enough for me and my closest family. I cannot give anything to other people because soon I'll suffer thirst myself."

Upon hearing this, *Omora* became furious and without replying to the fox, returned to the settlement. He reflected briefly and rapidly rose again, took his sling and flew back to the fox. Along the way he collected several sharp stones, and when he was within sight of the fox and sufficiently near, he shouted to him: "Are you going to share your water for now and for always with the other people? Come on, don't be so selfish. If you don't spare water, they surely will die of thirst!"

The fox answered indifferently, "They can all die of thirst. Why should I worry? I can't give water to each one of the people who live here, or else my family and I will also die of thirst." *Omora* was so offended that he could not control himself any longer and furiously fired a sharp stone with his sling, killing the fox with his first throw.

The rest of the community had been watching and became happy, running to the place. Rapidly they broke down the fence, went to the lake and drank, satiating their thirst. They drank so much that the lake became completely empty and a few birds that arrived too late barely found a few drops with which they moistened their throats. Then, the wise owl *Sirra* or *Sita*, the grandmother of *Omora*, said to the birds that arrived late, "collect mud from the bottom of the lake and fly to the peaks of the mountains, and fling the mud over them." The little birds flew, and their balls of mud gave birth to springs that became water courses that spouted from the mountains, forming small streams and large rivers that flowed through the ravines. When all the people saw this, they were extremely happy and drank great quantities of fresh, pure water, that was much better than the water of the lake, and now all find themselves safe again. Today all of those water courses still flow down from the mountains and provide exquisite water. Since that time no one has died of thirst.