Bird Imagery in Macbeth

Throughout Shakespeare’s tragedy, Macbeth, Shakespeare uses metaphors and imagery to create a picture through words. The images that are used are instrumental in creating the tone of the play. One of the main, and arguably most brilliant, imagery that Shakespeare utilizes is bird imagery.

After Lady Macbeth hears of the witches’ prophecies in a letter sent by Macbeth, and receives word from a messenger that the King himself is coming to stay, she begins to think about murder. This can be seen when she states, “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements”. (Act I, Scene V) The raven, a bird that is completely black and ominous in and of itself, historically was a foretelling of evil deeds or bad news. When Shakespeare used the image of the raven in this particular passage he was foreshadowing the evil deeds that Lady Macbeth and her husband were about to commit. The raven made the deeds inevitable.

When Macbeth goes to kill King Duncan, Lady Macbeth is nervous that her husband will not have the courage to complete the act. However, she is reassured by the hooting of an owl; “Hark! Peace! / It was the owl that shriek’d, the fatal bellman, / Which gives the stern'est good-night. He is about it”. (Act II, Scene II) Historically, the screeching of an owl announced death. Lady Macbeth uses the term “fatal bellman” to explain the owl’s role. This sound was a bit of a comfort to her because it proved to her that Macbeth was fulfilling his role as the murderer of the King. Another time that the owl is mentioned in relation to King Duncan’s death is right before Macduff discovers the murder. It is mentioned that during the night “the obscure bird / Clamour'd the livelong night”. (Act II, Scene III) This “obscure bird” is probably referring to an owl because of its nocturnal and mysterious nature and was a foreshadowing to these particular
characters of Duncan’s murder. There is also the possibility that this is the same owl that Lady Macbeth heard to announce the death of Duncan.

In a few instances in the play Macbeth is referred to as an owl. One of the first instances is when Ross and the Old man are discussing all that has happened recently. In describing one strange event the Old man explains, “On Tuesday last / A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd”. (Act II, Scene IV) The falcon and the owl symbolize Duncan and Macbeth respectively. Historically, falcons were used by royalty for hunting. It is only fitting that a royal bird would be a symbol for a king. The owl, who is mysterious and “obscure” is also fitting for Macbeth as he killed Duncan in secrecy. In seeing this strange event, as falcons do not usually fall prey to owls, the Old man was effectively seeing what had transpired between King Duncan and Macbeth.

Another person that refers to Macbeth as an owl, although unknowingly, is Lady Macduff. When she receives word that her husband had fled Scotland, she chastises Macduff for his weakness when she cries, “"He loves us not; / He wants the natural touch: for the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl””. (Act IV, Scene II) Lady Macduff questions her husband’s courage when she compares him to a wren, saying that he is weaker than the smallest of birds, and unlike the wren does not have the courage to stay. Her statement contains some foreshadowing when she declares that even the wren protects against the owl. In this instance the owl can refer to Macbeth as later on in the play he murders Macduff’s family while he is away. Macduff’s family stood no chance against Macbeth just as the wren would stand no chance against the much larger owl. Lady Macduff’s words about her husband prove to be true since he was not there to protect his family from the owl, Macbeth.
Shakespeare’s brilliant use of bird imagery in *Macbeth* gives us beautiful and frightening descriptions that set the tone for the play. With the amount of imagery that Shakespeare used, it is obvious that he knew much about the superstitions that many believed during that time. In using as much imagery and superstition as he did, this play would have been vividly frightening to many people. This shows Shakespeare’s brilliance with imagery.