

Leapin' Leprechauns!



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Want a little more luck in your life this St. Patrick's Day? Then you might want to learn a wee bit about some special little folk who are a central part of this holiday celebration, leprechauns. Though they are noted for being shorter in height, these green-wearing creatures play a large role in Irish folklore, capturing imaginations over the centuries and inspiring generations to follow the rainbow in hopes of finding their pots of gold.

According to Irish folklore, a leprechaun is related to a fairy. Historians say that the first tales of these small creatures were shared during the 8th century when stories about small water-dwelling beings were first told amongst the Celts. It is believed that the term 'leprechaun,' is derived from the word *lurcopán*, which means "small body." As such, it's not surprising that they are most commonly depicted as a bearded man of about two to three feet in height, often pictured smoking a pipe.

Although the leprechaun's typical attire has traditionally consisted of a top hat, waistcoat, and snazzy buckled shoes, the original color of this outfit was red. Around the 18th century, the hue changed to the emerald-green that we know today. It's not known for certain why this shift occurred, but experts posit that it may be in recognition of Ireland's reputation as the Emerald Isle. The last piece of his ensemble—the buckled shoes—nods to the fact that throughout folklore, leprechauns have been shoemakers, so an important clue to finding them has been to listen for the signature tap-tap sound as



they plied their trade. Since the old term "leath bhrogan" means shoemaker, the term 'leprechaun' also alludes to their profession, which is how they earn their signature pots of gold. These magical beings are said to make their homes in hollow tree trunks or tiny underground caves. Fond of music, drink, and fellowship, they can be heard dancing in the distance to traditional Irish music often while playing instruments.

In addition to their distinctive look and sound, leprechauns are known for their personality which leans towards making mischief. As legend has it, they love playing tricks on people and therefore should not be trusted; however, the flip side of this trait is that, due to their respect for cleverness, leprechauns will grant three wishes to anyone who can catch them since this entails outsmarting them. But you better keep your wits about you—legend also has it that when granting their captors' wishes, they will often try to lead them astray!



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HISTORY

Several special traditions and beliefs surround leprechauns. One of the main symbols identified with them is the pot of gold filled full of treasure that they have earned and protected, with many stories having it hidden at the end of a rainbow. Some view leprechauns as a warning against greed because it is believed that they hide their gold simply to lure in more avaricious people. A more playful version of this custom has emerged more recently, where children are encouraged to set "leprechaun traps," which can be as simple as a plate with tempting sweets on it, on the night before St. Patrick's Day. If gold-covered candy coins, small toys, or other treasures are found in the trap when the children wake up, they'll know for sure that they caught the leprechaun!

As luck would have it, although leprechauns are generally associated with the Emerald Isle, they can be found throughout American popular culture if you know where to look for them. Sports teams like the Boston Celtics and Notre Dame's Fighting Irish have leprechauns as their mascots. If you take a trip down the cereal aisle at any local grocery, you'll see the face of Lucky the Leprechaun on boxes of Lucky Charms cereal. In TV commercials for this breakfast treat, he urges kids to try Lucky Charms because they are "magically delicious." Leprechauns are also popular characters in St. Patrick's Day-related movies and children's TV shows.

No matter how you choose to celebrate this special March holiday—whether by gathering with loved ones to enjoy a meal, sending someone a St. Patrick's Day card, or simply wearing a touch of green—may a little bit of the luck of the Irish come your way!

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