Each of the figures on a totem pole has a different meaning. Where they are placed on the pole is also part of the pole’s story. Here’s how to “read” some of the animal symbols you’ll find on a totem pole.

**Eagle:**
Eagle is one of the two main Haida crests. Many families on the coast still own the right to use it. Eagle gave great hunting skills, sharp eyesight and hearing to his people. You can tell eagle by his beak. It always curves down.

**Wolf:**
Southern tribes respected wolf as a happy spirit who helped people. He’s the same spirit as killer whale at sea. Wolf gives wisdom and courage. He helps men become good hunters and helps women weave baskets and cloth. Wolf always has lots of sharp teeth.

**Bear:**
Bear is a popular guardian spirit, often called "Elder Kinsman." Grizzly bear especially symbolized power and high status for the clan who owned him. Bear gave hunters exceptional strength and daring. He gave women power and wisdom to be good mothers. Bear has long claws on his powerful paws. He is often shown with his tongue hanging out.

**Raven:**
Raven was one of the most popular crests. Raven was a hero, the creature who made the world. He put the sun and moon in the sky. He created people and gave them everything they needed to live. He was a trickster and played many pranks on people and other spirits. You can tell raven by his long straight beak.

**Beaver:**
Beaver is an important crest. He has magical powers, and can change snow to rain, bringing good weather. Because his fur is so valuable, beaver showed that its owner was very wealthy. You’ll know beaver by his two big front teeth and wide tail. He is usually shown holding a stick in his paws, ready to chew on the tasty bark.

**Orca:**
The killer whale is ruler of the sea, a very powerful and important spirit. He is the most valuable symbol to have on a totem pole. You’ll know orca by his big mouth and smooth skin.
How to Read a Totem Pole

Totem poles are the best known symbols of Northwest Coast art. Each of these carved and painted poles tells a story. Some totem poles are family crests. The figures stand for the wealth, status and history of a family. An important clan might have up to 20 different figures. They would need a pole 85 feet tall to show them all. Totem poles were often raised by a village at the waterfront to welcome visitors. Some poles were funeral monuments. Other poles were carved to celebrate important village events.

The Haida people of the Queen Charlotte Islands are the most famous carvers of totem poles.
Northwest Art Animals

From killer whales to thunderbirds, most of the designs in traditional Northwest Coast Art contain pictures of animals. Sometimes the animals are real, like bear, loon and wolf. Other animals are imaginary, such as two headed sea serpents and lightning snakes. Some animals turn themselves into people, then back again.

"Native people believe in animal helpers that serve as guiding spirits," explains Charles Elliott, a Coast Salish artist. "You could have a Thunderbird or a Killer Whale or any other animal as your spiritual helper, and then your songs and dances would include images of that animal. You may have heard of guardian angels; well, we believe in guardian animals." *

Can you match the animal designs below with each creature's real name?

1. ____________ 2. ____________ 3. ____________ 4. ____________ 5. ____________ 6. ____________


ANSWERS:

1. Raven 2. Orca 3. Beaver