

Knowledge of Native Elders

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Peter and Elsie John

By: Joe Kwaraceius

Peter covered three main topics today-how to foretell cold weather, how to take care of yourself during winter camping, and mens relationship with the animals around him. We found it somewhat difficult to elicit detailed information about each subject, but Peter did mentioned a few details.

When asked about how one foretells cold weather, Peter mentioned that when two stars are close together near the moon that there will be cold weather. He stated that the, "moon covers its dog with a blanket." I was kind of confused by the information. Maybe a review of the tape or more questions will make the statements clearer. I was similiarly confused with his comments on the sun about predicting cold weather.

However, most of the other comments were clear. Before a cold spell the northern lights would really dance and come closer to earth. A red light would also show. He also pointed out that before a cold winter, beaver will put more of their food into the water (eg. aspen branches), and animals will thickly insulate their "breathing hole" in their dens and tunnels with dead leaves on top.

Peter mentioned how animals can give messages to people. For instance, sickness or war may come if one hears a crow in the middle of the night. Trouble may come to a person if he hears an owl call his name or to a person (or persons) of a group if a fox comes to camp and makes noise.

He also expalined how people, especially pregnant women should be careful of what they eat. He noted that pregnant women breaking these rules of abstainence with drinking (alcohol) with fetal alcohol syndrome (not his words). Beaver was avoided by pregnant women as well as bear. Since the bear cleans itself out just before its winter's hibernation, and because it sleeps so much during winter, the baby may not be born healthy.

Peter pointed out the necessity of being prepared and being able to care for oneself. When one went out hunting, he usually would take along a few rabbit snares in his pocket. If he looses his rifle, he can always snare rabbits. If the person sees a rabbit, he would throw a stick over its head and watch where it will enter its burrow's entrance. The rabbit would be snared when it leaves the burrow.

When asked how does a person take care of himself when winter camping, Peter replied that when alone, one must be careful of the tools and weapons he uses and the things in the forest. There is a lot of danger in the woods. One should know how to use the tools and understand the environment. He knew people who camped out at -35 F with no blankets. What they would do to protect themselves

overnight would be to take spruce boughs and bank them with snow. They would build a fire inside the structure and when they were ready to sleep, they would remove the host ashes, put spruce boughs over the place and sleep on top. The campsite was selected near some dry spruces, willows or cottonwoods, preferably cottonwoods. These trees or shrubs were used for firewood.

There were a few other minor comments that Peter offered:

- He mentioned animal songs that were sung when making nonabode, of mixture containing moose or caribou marrow and fine, softened dried meat. Bear and rabbit were two animals the Minto people did'nt sing about.

- He used to measure snow with an eagle feather (he did not mention how).

- He used to hunt moose with dogs. A good dog would keep the moose in one place, especially backed to a tree. (but often this did not happen).