Native American Winter

When one envisions the Sauk and the Fox tribes, Native Americans that historically inhabited the area around Taft, and their ways of life, you may first think of large villages growing and harvesting crops, immense bison hunts, or wars stretching as far as the eyes could see across the sun-dried prairies. Given more reflection on the subject, one may become more conscious of the hardships that were endured by our past inhabitants. This time of year, it may be valuable to become acquainted with some traditional ways in which Native Americans persisted throughout the winters of the Rock River Valley.

In preparation for the cold season ahead, the year’s crops were harvested in the fall. It was time for the women and children to begin preparing the rations for winter. A portion of food was dried and mixed together to make pemmican, while other food was stored in large, bark-lined caches in the ground. The men organized large bison hunts to obtain meat, while also contributing more hides and commodities to utilize the animal to its fullest potential.

As winter ensued, it was time for trapping small game and working on hand crafts such as beading, tanning hides, and making stone implements. This frigid season was also a time to work on weaving fabrics, sewing, and making repairs to items that had become worn throughout the year.

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Students from Highland Middle School assist in the creation of the new Native American teaching site. The students helped to construct a new wigwam, fire ring and teaching area. We hope to have the area completed and in use this spring! Thanks for your help!
With winter already well on its way, the sounds of frogs calling near the river and birds calling back and forth in the trees, have been replaced by one sound, silence. Gone are the days of early morning rise and shines as the sun works its way through the trees, such in a way to say “Good Morning,” to all the inhabitants of the forest. Even more so, as the sun drops below the horizon and the moon takes its prominent role in the night sky, no longer do frogs and toads sing the world to sleep. Instead, an eerie sound takes over as the forest drifts to sleep. While asleep, the forest and all that lives within it dreams of Spring.

During the warmer parts of the year, sounds of life echo through the hills and gully’s here at Lorado Taft. As birds return from the winter habitats in search for nesting spots, or as snakes crawl out from their warm winter homes, sounds of life return to the once quiet world of winter.

Through spring and summer, animals may seem as though they live a carefree life. Running here, swimming there, climbing up, digging down, in what seems to be an orchestrated movement beating to the sound of their own hearts. However, if you look a little closer, you may start to notice that their actions aren't so carefree. It almost seems as though they are getting ready for something, but what?

Just as humans prepare for winter through the “winterizing” of our homes and vehicles, creatures of the forest have to prepare or they may find themselves in Mid-December cold and hungry.

Animals as small as insects are busy at work to ensure survival throughout the winter. As each insect has its own life cycle in which it grows and changes, many insects find themselves in diapause or hibernation. By dropping heartbeat, breathing and body temperature, an insect is able to survival the bitterly cold winter when food may not be readily available. If food is an issue, many insects will produce a small lump on a plant, called a gall, which becomes the insect’s home and source of food for the long cold winter.

While there are many animals that hibernate for the winter, such as: frogs, toads, snakes, chipmunks, ground squirrels, skunks, bats, prairie dogs and badgers; bears are left off the list. Bears often wake up during the winter and their heartbeat doesn't slow down as fast as hibernating animals. Furthermore, some bears actually give birth in the winter! This causes them to stay fully alert to care for their new cubs.

There are, however, some animals that find themselves active in the wintertime.
Corner

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Saturday’s schedule includes a Bioblitz at the Byron Forest Preserve co-sponsored by the Four River Environmental Coalition. Presenters are currently being sought out for workshops and sessions. To find out more about the conference, go to www.eeai.org.

The Environmental Education Association of Illinois states that its purpose is to work that supports its environmental out the state.”

Lorado Taft has recently benefited from EEAI’s annual mini-grant program. We have been awarded $200 to help purchase equipment for our astronomy classes. We will be purchasing an astronomy laser pointer, a new telescope, and a book that features astronomy activities for kids. We’re looking forward to receiving these items to help us to provide a better quality astronomy experience for the students. Now if we can just find a machine to remove those pesky clouds in South Field, we’ll be set!

Native American Winters

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For amusement, a common game called Snow Snake was played in which villages competed with neighboring natives. The game was performed by using a log to shape the snow, forming a long trench. Players then took turns throwing flat, carved pieces of wood called snakes down the trenches. The winning team was the one whose throws added up to the furthest distance.

A time honored tradition, that took place primarily throughout the winter, was storytelling. Before the written language became popular, storytelling was how customs and religion were passed through generations. The stories had many personal modifications that all exemplified the same morals, while reflecting individual undertones.

With most Algonquin tribes, including the Sauk and the Fox, strong boys remained with the elderly in the large farming villages throughout the winter. The smaller family units then split up and retreated to smaller winter villages deeper into the forests. Here at our campus, construction has begun on a new Native American site at the bottom of the Taft House stairs. Students have assisted our outdoor education staff in building a Native American wigwam reminiscent of the winter lodges of the 1800s. This has contributed to the students’ learned knowledge of survival skills and historical awareness of the area.

Winter Adaptations

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When the days begin to shorten, an internal clock inside many birds causes a mass migration to warmer climates. Many birds will wait until a strong north breeze is flowing in order to help themselves on their trip.

Birds that stay during the winter months often fluff their feathers out, trapping warm air in their down feathers. Some may even slow their metabolism down, thus decreasing the amount of food needed for survival. Although these methods are not perfect and many birds may not survive the winter, it’s an alternative to migrating south for many birds.

We unfortunately don’t have the luxury to sleep all winter or fluff up our feathers to stay warm. We do, thankfully, have warm jackets and good food from our dining hall to keep us energized all winter long. As winter is well on it’s way, look to animals for advice. Put on a jacket, sleep a little more, or fly south for the winter.

http://www.tolatsga.org/sf.html
http://nativeamericans.mrdonn.org/iroquois/snowsnakegames
http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/northamerica/sauk
New Addition to Water Ecology Room!

Through the talents of Ali Schafer, one of our Program Specialists, we have been able to add a mural of all the Illinois watersheds to the floor of the Water Ecology room in Taft House. We hope to use this mural as a teaching tool to visually demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Illinois network of rivers. Thank you Ali for all your hard work!