

Conservation Corner:

A Star By Many Other Names

By Niki Wilson



My Dad loves the stars. As a child I remember him showing me the easy-to-find constellations like Orion the Hunter and the Summer Triangle. He showed me how to navigate using Polaris, the North Star, located just up from the upper right tip of the ladle or “dipper” from the Big Dipper. Since then, I’ve looked up and found the familiar comfort of the Big Dipper many times. However, now I know it by another name – Mista Muskwa – the Cree name for The Big Bear.

In the Cree legend, Mista Muskwa was a massive bear that roamed the land doing

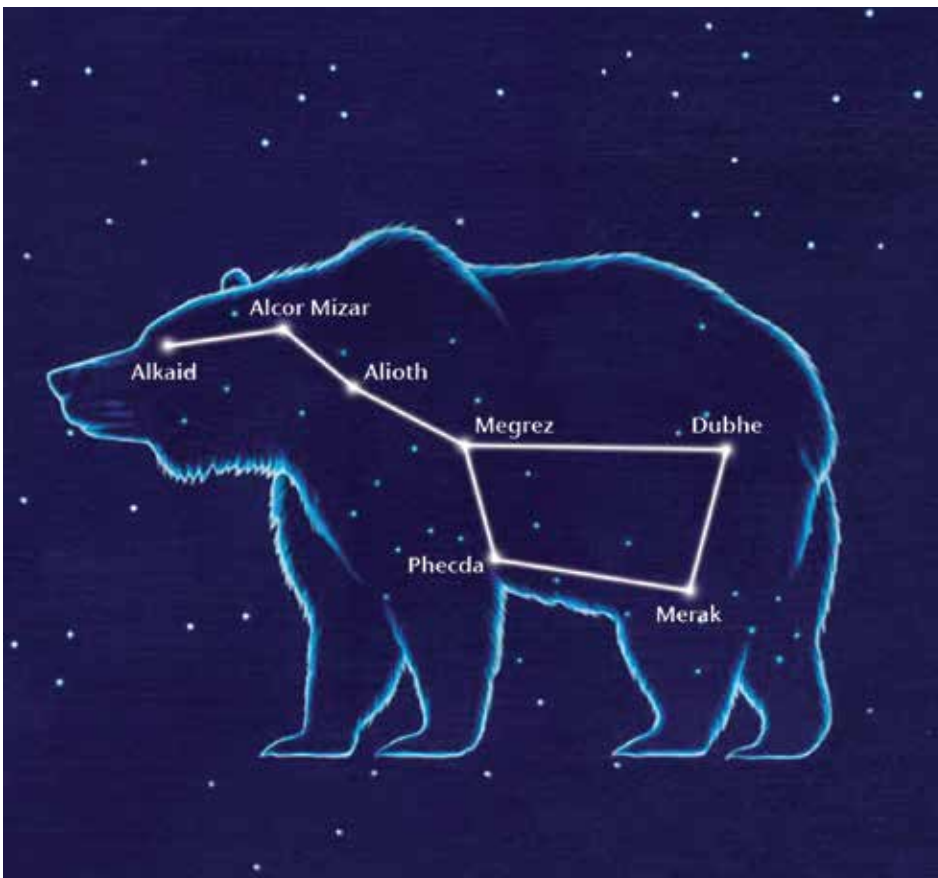
whatever he wanted. He wrecked homes, pillaged food caches, scared away game, ripped up edible plants and killed all who got in his way. He got away with this bad behaviour for many years, until the rest of the animals decided it was time for the bullily Mista Muskwa to leave traditional lands. The animal group sent the best hunters and trackers – the birds – to run Mista Muskwa off the land.

Wilfred Buck, Science Specialist at the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, finishes this story in his paper *Atchakosuk: Ininewuk Stories of the Stars*:

It is said that Mista Muskwa and his pursuers were so fast that they flew into the northern night sky. Just as this happened, the bear was mortally wounded and he turned and faced his attackers. Mista Muskwa was bleeding badly and he shook, as a wet dog would shake, and as he did, blood from his wound fell to the earth and landed and stayed on all the broad-leafed plants. That is why the leaves of all broad-leafed plants change color in the fall. As Mista Muskwa, shook he also splattered a drop of blood on the bird that mortally wounded him. To this day, pipichew – the robin – has a red chest. To remind all of the rewards of bullies, Mista Muskwa was placed in the sky along with the seven birds (Corona Borealis). Pipichew (the brightest of the 7 birds) was given a further honour by being granted a special egg. It was the color of the sky and had speckles that represented the stars.

“The story of Mista Muskwa is always a favourite of children,” says Buck, “because the constellation is easy to pick out, and it is in the northern sky all year.” Buck hails from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation of Northern Manitoba. I met him during the Jasper Dark Sky Festival a few years ago, where he captivated festival-goers of all ages and backgrounds with his stories told both in a planetarium and around the fire at the Lake Annette Star Party.

While Buck enjoys sharing stories, he also teaches others about the academic traditions of his people. “First Nations people were theorists, adventurers, philosophers and astronomers,” says Buck. “It’s import-



Mista Muskwa (The Big Bear) by artist Edwin Bighetty PHOTO: © E. BIGHETTY



Tehpakoop Pinesisuk (The Seven Birds) by artist Edwin Bighetty
PHOTO: © E. BIGHETTY



Atima Atchakosuk (The Dog Stars), popularly known as *Ursa Minor*, reminds us how the domestic dog came into being by artist Edwin Bighetty
PHOTO: © E. BIGHETTY

ant our children grow up with an awareness of that.”

Buck was 16 before he heard a Cree star story. Though he'd been in school, until then he'd only been exposed to the Greek and Roman names for the stars. An elder named Murdo Scribe told him another Big Dipper Story, that of the Fisher Stars. It tells the tale of how Fisher brought summer to the people. “It got me thinking, and got me asking questions,” says Buck.

First Nation astronomy is more than stories and legends. The stars and planets assisted Cree and Anishinabe people in telling time, direction, and weather, and was vital to survival. Buck says that in only teaching Canadian children the Greek and Roman version of this information, they miss out on a valuable and relevant source of knowledge about the Northern Sky. He writes:

I hope to see a day where Anishinabe, Dene, Oji-Cree, Inuit, Lakota, Ininewuk and all other marginalized peoples hold their stories and relationships to the stars in plain view for their children and all the world to see...We arrive at knowledge from many different paths and the more aware we are of other possibilities, the more sensitive we will be to understanding and difference.

This sentiment couldn't be more relevant than it is in the world we live in today. This holiday, surrounded by the Christmas sto-

ry of another family that followed a star, I'll also think of Mista Muskwa, and the gift of appreciating that there are many ways to know the world. ♣

Niki Wilson is a multi-media science communicator and biologist living in Jasper. Visit her at www.nikiwilson.com.

Coming in 2017...Poems Commemorating Canada's Wildlife

What do you do when you're concerned about protecting wildlife and their habitat? Rosemary Gell's answer was “write poetry.” Rosemary did this as part of her effort, along with Mark Campbell, to keep

a parcel of land in Calgary between Silver Springs and Varsity (199R Silverview Way) in Bowmont Park. That series of poetry, “Wildlife of Bowmont Park – Who Am I?,” was well-received in the communities around Bowmont Park. With the land staying in Bowmont Park Rosemary and Mark now have turned their attention to publishing a series of poems about Canada's wildlife to commemorate Canada's 150th birthday. We look forward to bringing you some of those poems in the New Year. Here's a taste of what you can expect. The poem below was part of the Bowmont Park series.