



How Beaver Lost the Fur on His Tail

A Paiute Tale

Cultural Note

Tookwee'nup, legends, are Paiute stories told during the winter months.

They are mythical, often humorous, and they contain a moral.

Tookwee'nup teach Paiute children why things are like they are. The stories give spiritual instruction and expose the children to human characteristics that we all possess.

Vocabulary

ornament

marveled

strut

envying

vanity

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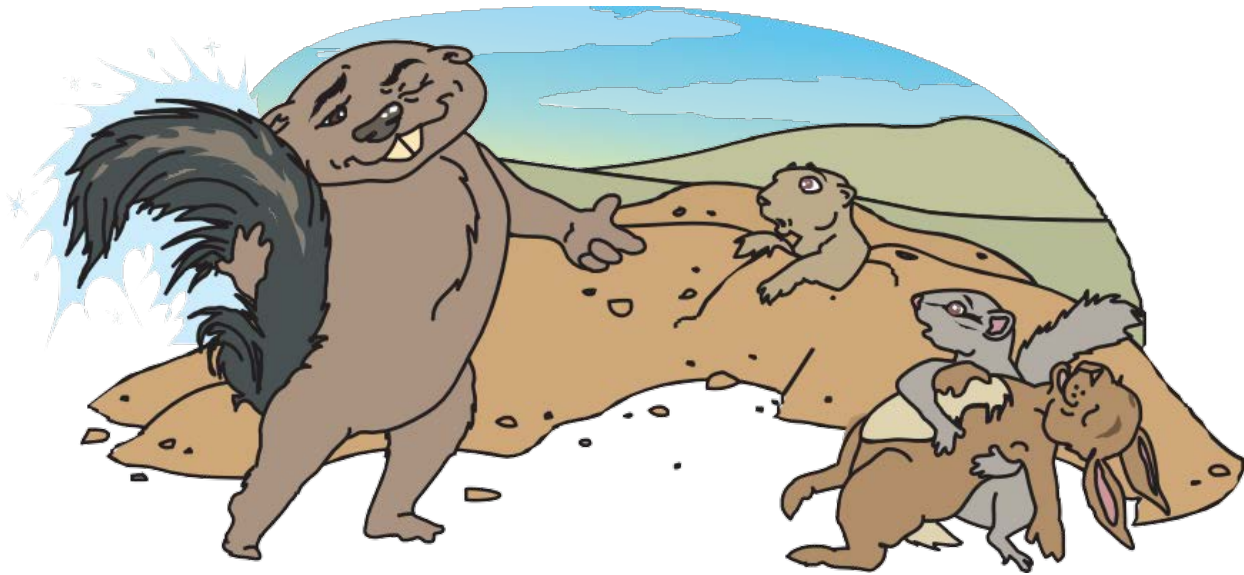
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Long ago, *Paoons'* Beaver, was very different from how we see him today. He was a proud creature, and he loved to strut around. His fur was sleek and beautiful, and the other animals marveled at how his fur shimmered in the morning sun. He loved all the

attention. Back then, he especially loved to show off his beautiful tail. It was not thin and round and bare, like the tails of most of the other animals. It was broad and flat, and it was covered with thick, long silky black hair.

His tail was strong and useful, too. During the day, Beaver could tuck his tail beneath him like a soft, smooth blanket. At night, when the cold winds blew, Beaver could fold his tail back over himself, providing shelter and warmth. His little ones, wrapped up within its great softness, were always as cozy as little birds under their mother's wings.



Yes, Beaver loved his tail. With his tail held up, he loved to strut along on his travels among the other animals, and he often felt their envying gazes. The evening breeze combed through the long strands of shiny black hair, and moonlight and sunlight alike made it glimmer beautifully. Beaver could think of no other animal with as fine an ornament as his tail. He was indeed very proud of it.

One morning, *Toovuts*, Wolf, came to visit all the animals. The morning dew covered the meadows, and the animals shivered from the cold. Wolf shivered too. He asked, "Where is your fire?"

The animals looked around at one another and replied, "Fire? We do not know what it is you speak of. We have no fire."

Wolf said, "I will tell you about fire." He pointed to the east. "Over that mountain, there is a tribe of people. They have fire. Fire is a good thing. The people have learned to make fire. Go and talk to the people. Take something to trade for some fire, so you may have it in your own country."





The animals were eager to get some fire. They traveled over the mountain, racing one another, anxious to be first to get fire. Each one took along something to trade and something to carry fire home in. When night came and the stars filled the sky, they followed the moonlit trails that led to where the people lived.

Soon they saw the people gathered around a great fire. The orange and yellow flames crackled and danced, and the animals moved in closer to feel the great warmth of the fire. "Please," they said to the people, "share your fire, so we can carry it over the mountain to our land."

The people shook their heads and answered, "Fire is only for those who can create it. You may feel its warmth tonight, but you cannot take it with you."

"Teach us how to make fire," the animals begged, but the people only shook their heads. The animals hovered nearby, watching the wonderful sight of the fire. Four men with great spears moved in close to the fire, standing guard, for they were fearful the animals would try to steal some and run away with it.

Beaver was especially fascinated with the firelight.

He watched how the light bounced off the stones and the trees. He stepped out of the shadows into the group of people. He wanted to let the firelight dance on his beautiful fur and elegant tail. He wanted to show the people what a fine creature he was. He fluffed his tail and fanned it back and forth. The people oohed and aahed, impressed with Beaver's show.

One man said to himself, "That is indeed a fine tail.

I would like to have it for a decoration. I will catch that creature and take his tail." He called out, "Brother Beaver, come over here, you fancy fellow. Show me again how you do that."



Beaver smiled, pleased with the attention he was getting. He turned and walked past the man. Suddenly, the man reached forward and grabbed at Beaver's back. Startled, Beaver leapt sideways. He heard the man moving quickly toward him, so Beaver kept running. He jumped over the fire to escape the man's hands that were grabbing for him. In his fright, his tail drooped down and touched the flames of the fire. It flared up like a torch!

Beaver leapt high over the heads of the people. He yelled out to the animals for help, but they scattered in every direction. Beaver ran for his life as fast as he could, back over the mountain. His tail, dragging through the dry grass and brush, left a trail of fire all the way up the mountainside.

The people sent their fastest runners to catch Beaver. They believed they had been tricked and that he was stealing their fire!





Because Beaver was running so fast, the fire went streaming behind him. It never reached his coat, but by the time he reached home, the smoldering fire had burned every last hair on his tail. His once beautiful tail was now blackened and blistered. Beaver plunged himself into the river, where the water eased his pain.

The next day, the animals called out to Beaver, but he did not emerge from the water for days. He could not bear the thought of seeing his burned tail. He stayed down under the water, hidden in the reeds that grew along the river.



Wolf returned and asked, "Creatures, where is your fire?"

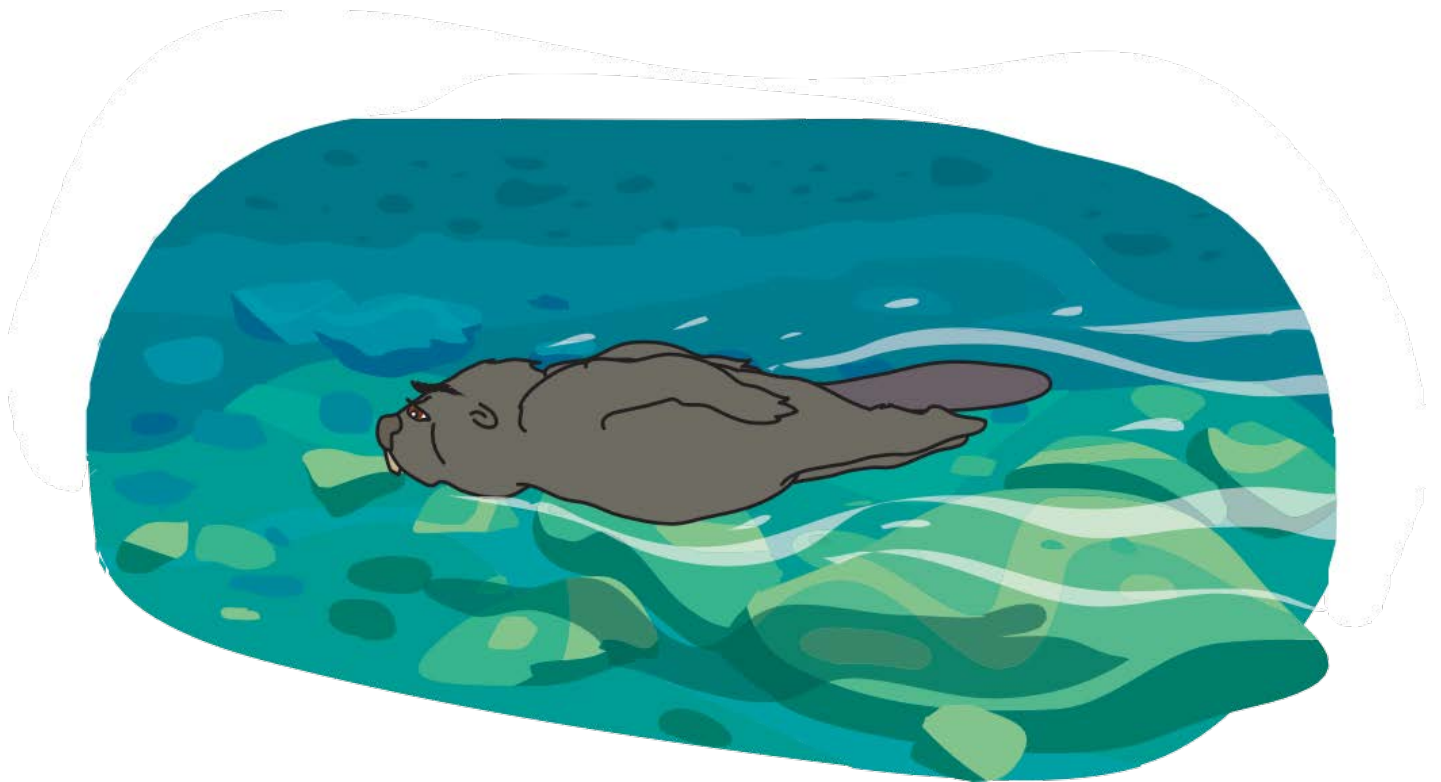
The animals answered, "We could not gather it for ourselves to use. But Beaver carried some here. See there on the mountainside? It has burned all the trees."

Wolf replied, "Ah, yes. I see you have brought fire here. Fire is very good, but only if you know how to use it and how to take care of it."

Hearing this, Beaver splashed out of the water. He slapped his thick, bare tail upon the bank and cried out, "Fire is not good! See what it did to my tail?" Then he spun around and showed Wolf his badly burned tail.

"Oh, Beaver," Wolf said, sadness in his voice. "Fire is not bad. It was only your vanity that burned your tail. Be thankful that bush of hair you were so proud of was not on your head."





Beaver's tail never grew hair again. Instead, it healed over with a thick, coarse hide. He has learned to use his strong, bare tail as a paddle in the water. He uses it as a tool to hold the logs in place as he builds his home in the river.

Poor Beaver. He is ashamed of what his tail now looks like. He builds his home in the water where he can hide his tail. He comes out only at night, for the heat from the midday sun causes him great pain. Once proud and arrogant, Beaver is now a quiet and humble animal, very rarely seen outside the safety of his home.

Glossary

kaiv - mountain

kwusee' - tail

na'ai' - fire

paoons' - beaver

tookwee'nup - Paiute legends or stories

toovuts - wolf

Reading Suggestions

- Write about a favorite animal or an animal you've always wanted to have as a pet. Would a beaver make a good pet?
- A synonym is a word that means the same as another word. Go to the story to find synonyms for these words: "scattered," "decoration," "said," and "emerge."
- Review the rules for fire safety. What is the escape route from your home? From your school classroom?

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