

Why the North Star Stands Still

A Paiute Tale

Cultural Note

Tookwee'nup are Paiute legends or stories told during the winter months. They are mythical and humorous, and they often contain a moral.

A Paiute elder explained, "The most important purpose of *Tookwee'nup* is to teach children to laugh at themselves. When a child falls and cries, the parent's laughter turns the child's tears into joy. Thus, when the child becomes an adult, he then has the ability to take calamity in stride."

Vocabulary

crevice

dignified

inverted

peer

shaft

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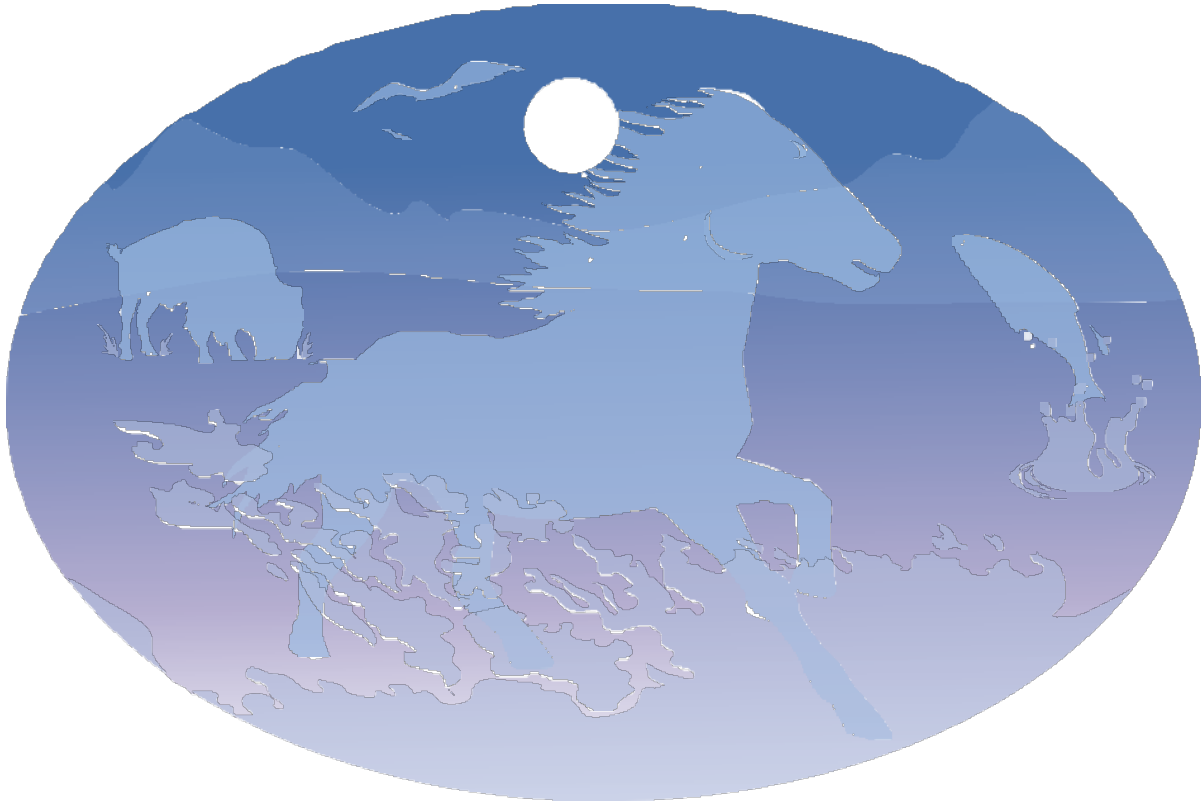


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In the night sky, there is a star that never moves. It stays in the same spot all night, even as all the other stars seem to glide across the sky. There are many stories that tell how creatures on earth found their place in the night sky as stars. This story tells of how the North Star found his.

Long ago, the night skies were the hunting grounds of all kinds of creatures. There were rivers and mountains and valleys in the sky. There were creatures of the ocean, like fish and lobsters. There were creatures of the air, like birds. There were insects, horses, deer, bears and buffalo. They left trails across the night sky. To the Paiute people, these animals were known as *pootseev'*, or stars.



One such animal was the gallant *Nawk'*, Mountain Sheep. He was the son of *Shinob*, the Great One, and very beloved. Mountain Sheep climbed massive peaks and mountains with lightning speed and power. "I am Mountain Sheep, the greatest climber of them all!" he'd shout. The skies and the trees and the boulders would cheer him on through all his journeys. The Great One loved seeing how powerfully Mountain Sheep journeyed.

One day, Mountain Sheep came to a fearsome peak. It was covered with snow and jagged ice on the north side. He tried many times, but it was impossible for him to climb.

"*Shinob* will see I cannot climb this mountain," he thought to himself. "I cannot disappoint him!" And the skies and the trees and the boulders cheered him onward.

After searching for hours, Mountain Sheep found a large crack in the mountainside where he placed his hooves. The crack led to a pathway that went deep into the mountainside, curving upward and upward. But Mountain Sheep couldn't see a thing! "Was I mistaken in thinking this was a sure path to the top?" he wondered. Suddenly, a thundering sound filled the space inside the mountain.

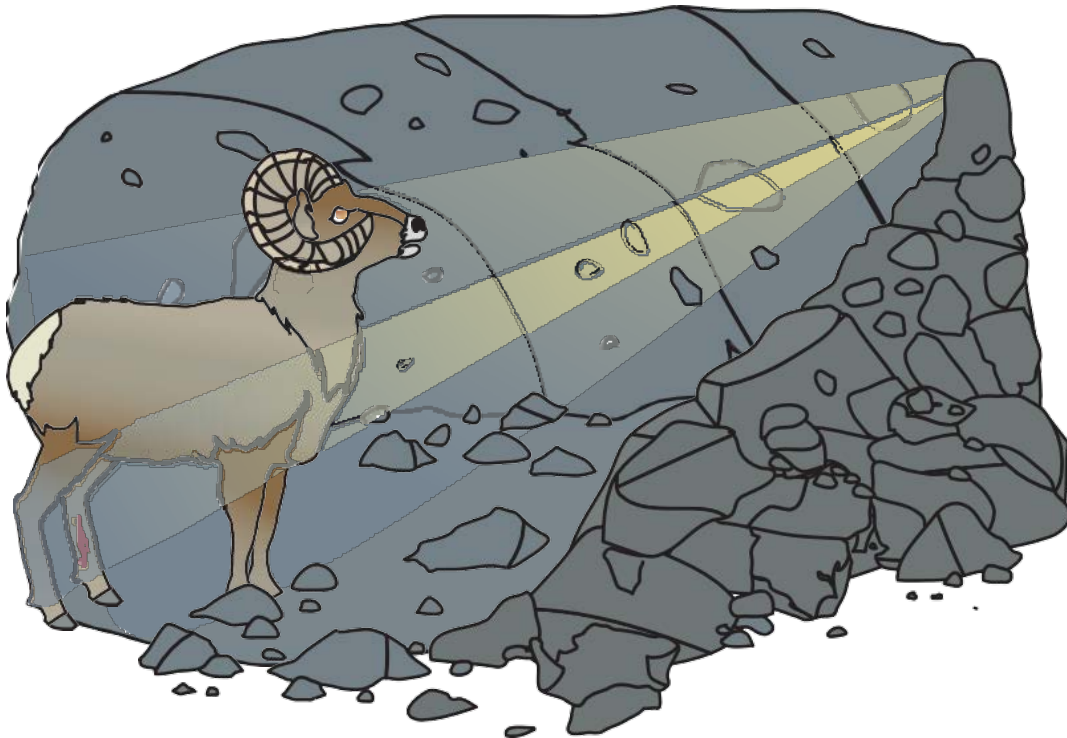




Rocks crashed all around Mountain Sheep. Dust filled his nostrils. He darted from one side of the pathway to the other. In the darkness, Mountain Sheep slipped often. Blood dripped from his skinned knees. His shoulders, bruised and scraped, ached from the strain of pushing rocks aside. Mountain Sheep grew worried. "I'll go back the way I came. Perhaps this is a wrong path after all." He turned around and headed back the way he had come.

Mountain Sheep found the opening, but it was now covered with enormous piles of rocks and boulders that had fallen. He was trapped! "What am I to do now?" he thought. He trembled with fear. He had no choice but to return and follow the dark pathway once more. "Perhaps it does lead somewhere, and I must keep going if I'm to find a way out," he said.

After many painful hours, Mountain Sheep saw a small thread of light ahead. His energy and courage returned. His muscles flexed as he trudged further along the path. The light became larger the higher Mountain Sheep climbed. Finally, he reached an opening. It was just large enough for him to wriggle through.



Free from the inner darkness of the mountain, he came out into the brightness of the noonday sun. His eyes squinted in pain after having been used to the darkness for so long. When his eyes adjusted to the light, he looked around. The place he found himself on was not very big. He looked over the edge. The sight took his breath away. He was on top of the highest peak he had ever seen! The sheer sides of the mountain went straight down as far as he could see. He knew if he tried to climb down the dangerous, steep sides, he would surely fall and crash to the bottom. "Am I to be trapped here at the top forever?" he cried to himself. He nervously nibbled on a bit of the grass covering the ground and drank from a tiny pool of water. Mountain Sheep could see the food and water wouldn't last forever.





Meanwhile, *Shinob*, the Great One, hadn't seen Mountain Sheep for several days, and he missed him. "Mountain Sheep, where are you?" he cried as he searched the valleys and skies.

Shinob was filled with sorrow when he saw Mountain Sheep at the top of the high peak. He said to himself, "My brave son...he has truly proven himself." *Shinob's* heart ached for Mountain Sheep. "Mountain Sheep," he said, "you must know I cannot rescue you. It was you and your desire to conquer the mountain that brought you here. But I will bless you with an eternal blessing."

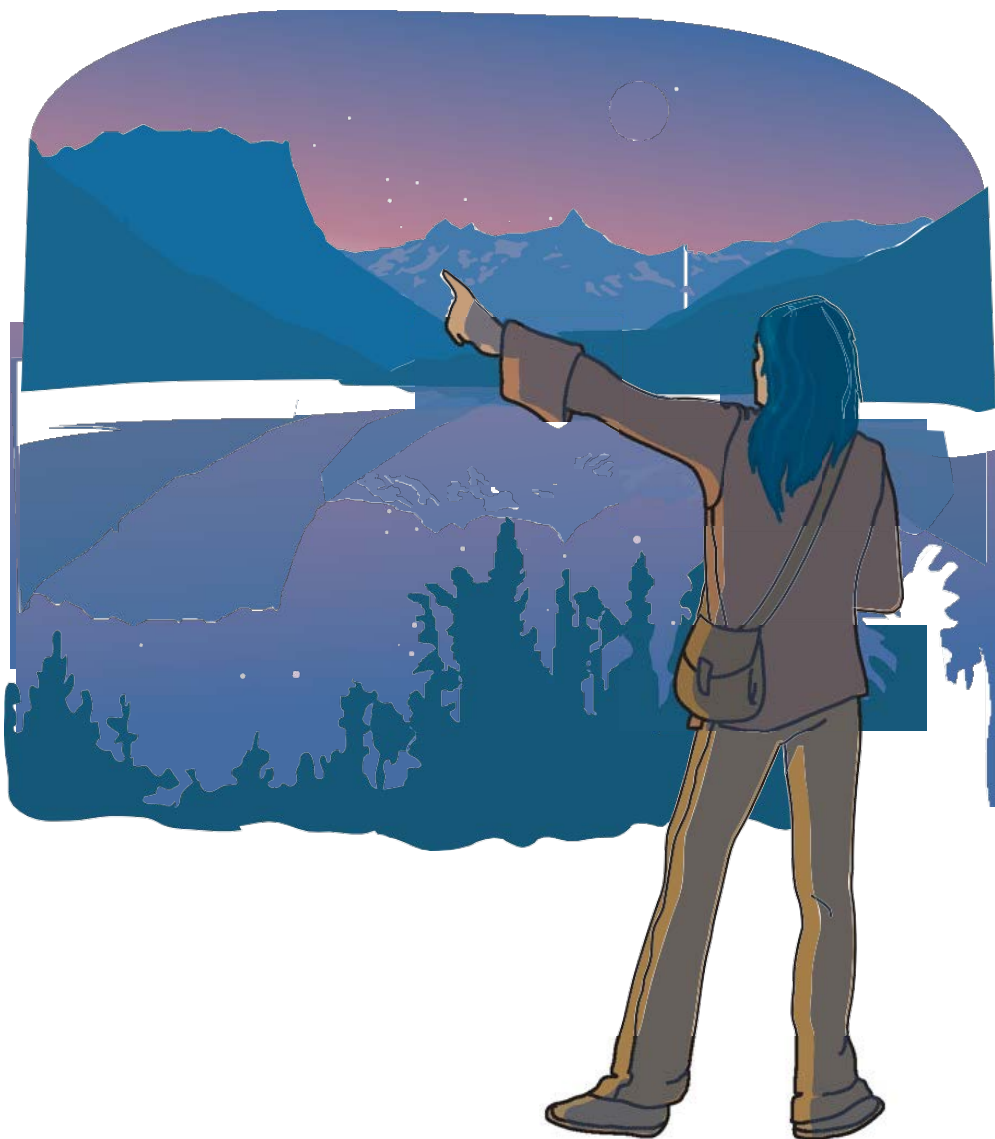


He bowed his head and chanted an ancient melody. He looked up into Mountain Sheep's eyes. "*Nawk'*, my beloved Mountain Sheep," he said, "you will travel and climb no more. You have reached your final destination. The sky is now your home. Forevermore, you will become a star that will shine for everyone to see."

And so it was that Mountain Sheep became a star. Because of *Shinob's* great love for him, Mountain Sheep became the most important star, a star that would forever guide all living things upon the earth and in the sky. It never moves, the only star that is always found in the same place.

Over time, other animals traveled to the base of Mountain Sheep's great peak. The Great One turned them into stars as well. Those who watch the skies at night can see that all stars travel around the North Star. It is forever a reminder of how the other animals tried to climb the great peak to the summit that only Mountain Sheep had reached.





Today, the North Star is a symbol for truth— never changing. The Paiute people call it “star of the true north.” For generations, the North Star has guided travelers across the land and sea, for man has come to trust its never-changing place in the sky.

Glossary

nawk' - mountain sheep

pootseev' – star

Shinob - the Great One

toohoom'paiahv - sky or heaven

tookwee'nup - Paiute stories or legends

tuh'ee - deer

Reading Suggestions

- Go outside and look at the night sky. See if you can find the North Star, the Big Dipper, and the Little Dipper. Identify any other constellations you know.
- With your family, visit a mountain cave or go rock climbing. Have a family adventure.

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