

Cottontail Shoots the Sun

A Uintah/Ouray Ute Tale



Cultural Note

To the Ute people, the bear, *quee yahgudt*, is a sacred animal. He gave the Ute people their Bear Dance, which is held in the springtime after the first thunder.

The Bear Dance begins with the construction of a large circular brush corral of juniper trees. A group of singers use resonators and notched sticks to make sounds like a bear growling and thunder rumbling. The men and women sit in groups at first, until the women choose their partners. Then they form two lines opposite each other and link arms or hold hands. The men are on one side and the women on the other. The dancers take two steps forward, then three steps back. The men step forward when the women move back.

One dancer, called the Cat Man, keeps order while also being humorous, lightly tapping dancers with his stick if they get out of line. The dance ends when someone falls down from exhaustion at the end of the last day. A large feast is then held for everyone.

Vocabulary

beckoning

clutched

jagged

jubilant

wary

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The booklets are available on a CD from the USOE. You may print the booklets off the CD, free of charge, for educational purposes. If you would like to purchase printed copies of the booklets, contact San Juan School District Media Center at (435) 678-1229.

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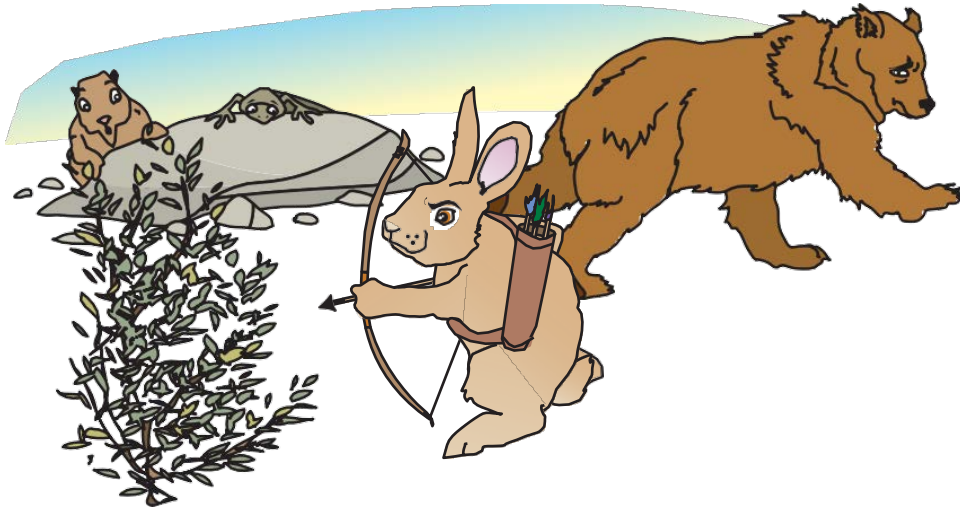
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Long ago, Sun filled the sky with scorching rays of light and fire. Water in the lakes and the rivers dried up, and plants withered in the intense heat. The animals suffered miserably. They hid in shady places under rocks and bushes to protect themselves from the blazing rays of Sun. Sun was powerful indeed.

Tahvooch, Cottontail, worried about the animals. He came out of his shelter and stood in the sunlight. He raised his arms high and yelled at Sun. "Sun, we cannot bear this heat any longer. Please, let us be!"

Sun didn't listen. That day his fiery rays shot out the hottest they had ever been. Cottontail bounded for shelter once again in the shade of an overhanging rock. "What Sun is doing to the animals and the land is more than we can bear. I must teach Sun a lesson. I will go and fight him."



For many days, Cottontail worked. He gathered jagged pieces of flint and fashioned glistening arrowheads. He wove smooth, brightly-colored feathers onto the ends of each arrow. He tightened the leather bands on his bow. Then he practiced shooting the arrows. They flew like the wind, straight and fierce.

He gathered his bow and arrows in a leather pouch and slung them over his shoulder. "I am ready," he announced to his family. "I will journey to the eastern sky, where I will face Sun, and I will kill him." He knew it would not be easy, but he knew it had to be done.

And so he went.

As Cottontail traveled, he became fierce. He wanted Sun to see how brave and fearless he was. As he journeyed, he shot his arrows at the many creatures he met. He fought with Lizard and with Groundhog. He shot his arrows at trees and bushes. In a loud and determined voice, he sang a jubilant battle song. Even Bear, as large and fearsome as he is, scrambled to safety when Cottontail crossed his path. Sun must surely see

with what fury Cottontail was coming. And so he went, with only one thing on his mind: find Sun and shoot him.

Cottontail chased Sun as fast as he could go, but when night came, Sun hid from Cottontail. Frustrated, Cottontail threw his bow on the ground and sat down to rest. "I will hide in the brush, and when Sun begins to rise in the morning sky, I will jump out and shoot him before he sees me," thought Cottontail.

But Sun was clever. He knew where Cottontail was hiding. When morning came, Sun leapt up from behind the hills and rose quickly into the sky. Cottontail sprang up, took aim, and shot an arrow. Sun dodged to the right, and the arrow missed its mark. Sun laughed and laughed as his fiery rays shone down upon the land.

Each night, Cottontail hid. "I will be ready this time. I will stay awake all night long if I have to and I will be ready for Sun," he vowed. But each morning, Sun checked for Cottontail's hiding place and raced into the sky ahead of Cottontail's arrows.





"He is mocking me now," said Cottontail. He was growing weary from the heat, and from the many sleepless nights spent waiting for Sun. He collapsed, exhausted and hungry, and crawled into a hole to protect himself from Sun's fiery rays.

"You cannot hide from Sun," a voice said.

Cottontail lifted his head wearily and turned to face the direction the voice was coming from. It was *Chee ee pah*, Thorny Bush.

"Yes, it's true," Cottontail answered, "but I don't know what to do. I only know I must not fail."

"Sun always sees you, but I will hide you," Thorny Bush said. "Sun cannot see under my thick branches. My shiny thorns reflect his light, like a mirror, and anything behind them is hidden. Come, Cottontail. Hide under my thorny branches. Sun will never see you."

That night Cottontail hid beneath Thorny Bush, where he made ready his bow and arrows. Then he waited.

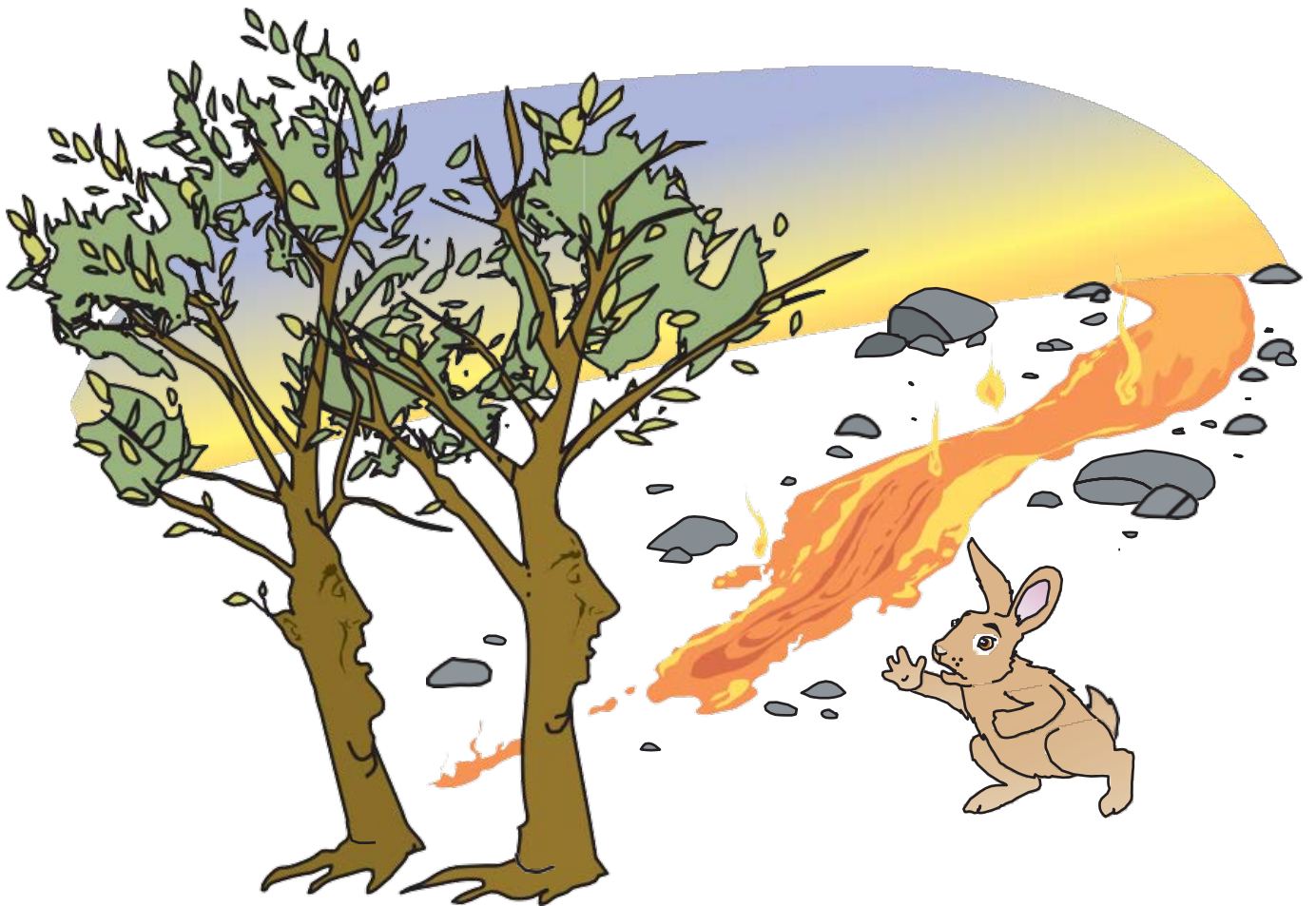
The next morning, Sun came up and looked around. Nowhere could he see any sign of Cottontail. "Aha, I see Cottontail has given up," Sun laughed to himself. He rolled across the sky. Suddenly, a streak of bright color came whizzing through the clouds. Cottontail's arrow pierced Sun. Cottontail let out a shout of victory. Sun would listen now! Cottontail danced and stomped and sprang in every direction, but his celebration lasted only a moment.

From where Sun hung in the sky, great flames poured out of his wound, like lava from a volcano. Cottontail's eyes grew wide at the sight. Sizzling drops of liquid fire fell upon the earth, setting ablaze whatever they touched.



Cottontail ran as fast as he could, trying to outrun the rain of fire. He raced toward a grove of trees and begged, "Please, Cottonwoods, will you help me? I need protection from the fire that comes!"

"We will try, we will." The cottonwood trees gathered around him, but when the fire came, they burned to the ground. Cottontail leapt out of the flames and ran as fast as he could go.





He came to a small, trickling stream and begged, "Please, Water, will you help me? I need protection from the fire that comes!"

The droplets of water answered, "We will try, we will." They gathered around him, but when the fire came, the water boiled and steamed until there was none. Cottontail leapt out of the dry waterbed and ran as fast as he could. He looked around frantically, but everything was burning up! He coughed and heaved as the heat of the smoke and flames filled every breath. He trembled with fear and ran with all his might.

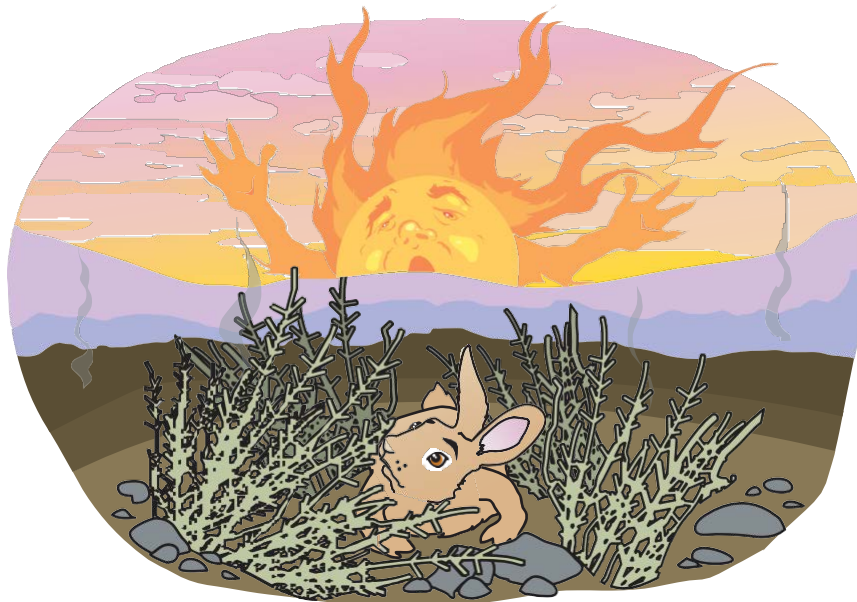


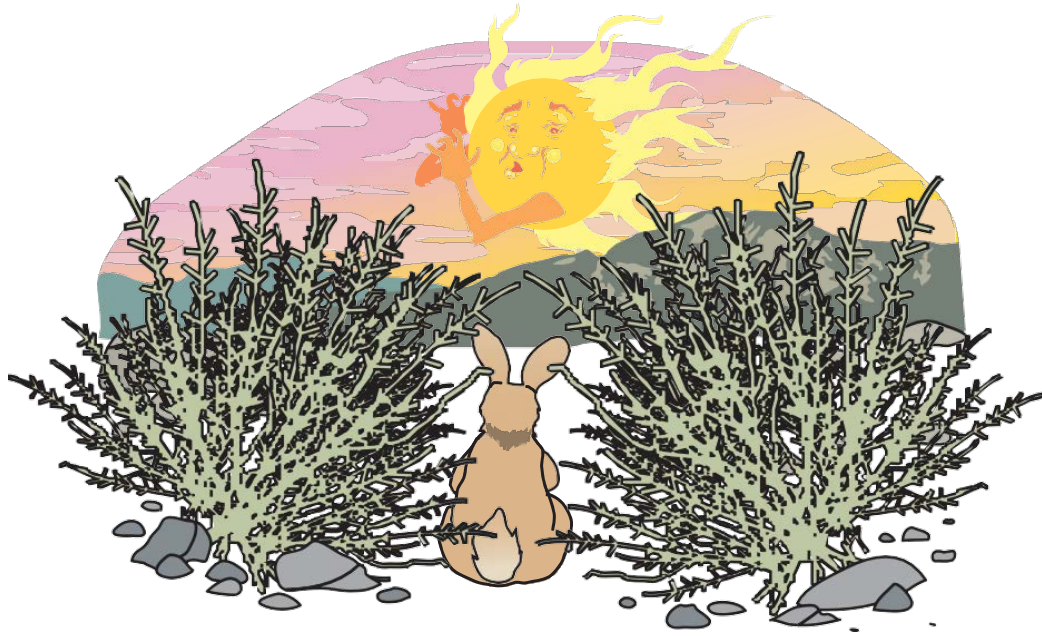
Breathless, he spotted a clump of bushes. The branches waved at him, beckoning to him, and he sprang to the center where he curled up into a ball, sheltered by the blue-gray leaves of the desert brush. He lifted his head, and in gasping breaths, asked, "Will you burn up, too?" The brush answered gently, "No. Wait and see."

The fire crackled all around. Popping noises came from every direction. Cottontail burrowed his body deep into the sand at the base of the desert brush. He closed his eyes tightly. He felt his fur warm on his back, and he cried, the smell of his own singed fur filling his every breath.

As quickly as the fire began, all was quiet once more. Sun, setting low in the western sky, quaked and trembled from his wound and the pain.

Night came. The night sky filled with a soft glow as Moon shone overhead. Cottontail lifted his head and looked up into the branches of the desert brush that had protected him. The outside of the branches were scorched black, but the inside was still green. The fire had passed right over him! He felt behind his ears, where his fur had been burned. He stood up, shaking himself free of the ashes caught in his fur. The land all around him was black and smoldering as far as he could see. Cottontail took a deep breath. "Oh, what sadness Sun has caused," he whispered. He curled up in the middle of the bush and slept.





The next morning, Sun peeked over the horizon and came up very slowly. To this day, when Sun comes up in the eastern sky, he moves slowly, cautiously. Perhaps he is wary of Cottontail or some other warrior who might come to shoot an arrow at him. Each morning, the world is reminded of the day Cottontail shot the sun.

If you look behind Cottontail's ears, you will see brown spots, forever a reminder of the day the little desert brush saved him.

That same little desert brush still grows throughout the valleys, blue-gray branches waving in the springtime. During summer, when Sun shines hottest, the flowering tips of the branches become golden-yellow, like a flame. Many people call it desert yellow brush, sometimes even rabbit brush, in honor of the day it saved Cottontail.

Glossary

chee ee pah - thorny bush

quee yahgudt - bear

tahvahch - sun

tahveeneegat - sun rays

tahvooch - cottontail rabbit

Reading Suggestions

- In 1975 Gerald McDermott won the Caldecott Medal for his Pueblo story *Arrow to the Sun*. Go to the library and check it out. Caldecott books win the award for the very best illustrations of the year. Newbery books win the award for the very best text. Have your parents read some of these award-winning books aloud to you.
- A phonogram, or rime, is a spelling pattern or word family. There are 37 most frequently used patterns. From these patterns, you can master over 500 primary words. Google Jan Brett's web site to see her phonograms. In this tale, for example, look at the word "old." You will find *told, fold, hold, gold*; then *older, colder, bolder, mold*, and *smolder*. Just see all the fun things you can do with phonograms.
- Have someone read you this story before you look at the illustrations. Picture what you think the illustrations should be like. Draw your own illustrations for the book. The illustrator for this book is Molly Trainor.

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