

The Legend of the First Fire, or How the Water Spider Got Its Red Bowl

Adapted from a Cherokee Legend

*From Myths and Legends of the Great Plains
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At the beginning of the world, there was no fire. As a result, much of the earth was always cold and dark. The animals shivered constantly and, because it was so dark, were always running into each other and getting hurt. One day the Thunders, who lived high in the clouds and saw this problem, sent down a bolt of lightning. The lightning struck the hollow of a sycamore tree that grew in the middle of an uninhabited island. This created a spark that developed into a flame and the flame became a roaring fire. The animals from the mainland, who had never seen anything like it, were curious.

As the word spread, the animals decided to meet in a small clearing to decide what they would do. Deer, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, snakes, owls, and other woodland creatures all jabbered away, each giving their two cents. From where they assembled, they could see the smoke and smell the burning wood. However, they all came to the same conclusion: they needed to get a closer look in order to figure out the cause. At first they did not know how to get to the island, as it was surrounded by water on all sides, but every animal that could fly or swim eagerly volunteered to get the fire.

Raven, who saw himself as the smartest and strongest, was the first to offer to go. His large, strong wings carried him swiftly over the water and he gracefully landed on the branches of the sycamore tree. As he wondered what to do next, he glanced down and saw that the heat of the fire had blackened his beautiful, snow white feathers. Raven was so frightened by this discovery that he flew back across the water without completing his mission. Raven's wings and those of his children have remained as black as night ever since.

Now it was Screech Owl's turn. With confidence, he soared high and far across the water and perched on a branch above the hollow of a tree. While he was gazing down at the hollow, a wave of hot air blew up and stung his eyes, making it difficult for him to see. So desperate was he not to lose his eyesight, Screech Owl flew back to the others without any fire. To this day, Screech Owl's eyes, and those of his children, are still red from the heat.

Next, Hooting Owl and Horned Owl flew together across the water to bring back fire. They were sure that they would succeed where the others failed. However, by the time they flew to the island, the fire was burning brightly in the hollow of the tree. When the owls got close, the smoke from the fire billowed upward. Luckily, they

remembered what had happened to Screech Owl. They shut their eyes tightly, but felt the heat on their faces. Too afraid to stay, the owls flew back to safety, leaving the fire behind. The white circles around their eyes are a reminder of the hot air that scared them away.

After seeing such powerful birds fail, no birds remained who were willing to fly to the island. Next, the creatures that could swim offered to get the fire and bring it back. First, little Racer Snake swam through the water and moved through the grass to the tree. He entered a small hole near the base of the tree. The ground was covered in fiery ashes, which burned his body. He desperately darted back and forth, trying to escape. When he finally left the fire in the tree and swam home, his body was completely black. His twisted movements and dark skin remind him of the fire still today.

Now, great Climbing Snake undertook the challenge to bring fire back to the animals. He believed that his climbing ability would make him more capable than the other animals who had failed. He was a strong and powerful snake who swam easily through the water and climbed high up the sycamore tree. But when the great snake looked down into the hollow of the tree, the smoke choked him and he fell into the burning stump. By the time he climbed out his body was burned and the Climbing Snake has been black as coal ever since. He returned, to the other animals without any fire.

Disappointed because of all the failed attempts, the animals called for another meeting. While the world remained cold and the fire still burned brightly on the island, everyone was too afraid to attempt and get the fire. Finally, tiny Water Spider piped up and said she would go. The animals wondered, among themselves, how she would be able to help them. She was not as big or strong as the other animals that had already tried and failed. How would she bring back the fire, all of the animals wanted to know.

Water Spider was very wise and knew that she must prepare and plan how she would bring the fire back. She spun a thread from her body and patiently wove it into a little bowl that she then attached to her back. Unlike the bigger or stronger animals, she had a unique skill. She could run across the top of the water or dive to the very bottom. She easily made it to the island. There, she crossed the grass to the sycamore tree. She carefully climbed the tree, then she reached up and put one little piece of coal into her bowl. Once it was secured, she walked on top of the water back to the other animals.

That is the story of how fire came to the world. And how the Water Spider got the little red bowl she still wears proudly on her back to this day.