

HOW THE MI'KMAQ KNOW

Story and illustrations
by Gerald Gloade



Weather is part of nature's cycles. So the more you pay attention to nature, the more you start to understand about the weather. A Mi'kmaq artist and cultural educator shares the knowledge he has been given about other ways of watching and predicting the weather.

You are all familiar with the 12-month calendar. But the Mi'kmaq calendar is different. It celebrates the 13 times the moon goes around the Earth as the Earth goes around the sun. Every month is named after something in the environment that happens during that period of about 29 days. The movement of the Earth around the sun gives us our weather, so it's all connected. Dr. Lillian Marshall, who is a Mi'kmaq Elder, says there are three keys to recognizing patterns in nature: observe, memorize and compare. That's how we learned to survive and live here for thousands of years before European contact, and it's still something we do today. It's important to have what we call two-eyed seeing, using both Mi'kmaq knowledge and settler knowledge to understand the world.



PUNAMUJUÍKÚS - JANUARY

This is the time of cod spawning. When the tide comes in, it brings ice. When the tide turns, the ice jams, the water flows over it and the fish get caught on the ice. When it's low tide, we can go and pick up the fish.

APUNKNAJIT - FEBRUARY

This is the hardest month. Its name means "The time of year when the sun is very strong," because there's a layer of moisture on top of the snow where the sun has melted it, and it's like a mirror. We have feasts at different times in different communities. We're sharing with each other to get through, and we're also trying to appease the god of winter by filling his belly so he'll go away and sleep and leave us alone. On February 1 we have the Feast of Apunknajt and we have an extra setting at our table for the god of winter to take. Because he's a shape-shifter, he can come and claim that food in the shape of a blue jay, a crow, a fox, a squirrel or even your neighbour's dog. At the time of the full moon in February, around February 22, that's when we get the biggest and heaviest snowstorms of the year, so we call it the Full Snow Moon. It's also known as the Hunger Moon because the storms meant people couldn't get out and hunt for days at a time. We all make sure we have enough supplies and gas for our generators because we know storms are going to come.



SIWKEWIKÚS - MARCH

Now the weather starts to warm up and the maple sap starts to run. Maple sugar was important to the Mi'kmaq and to our relationship with the European visitors, to help them get through the hard winters as well. This is the time of year when the fireflies come out of hibernation, and that's the indicator that it's time to harvest bark. It comes off in thick pieces that we can use for baskets, canoes and other things.



PENAMUIKÚS – APRIL

This is egg-laying time. We didn't have chickens laying eggs for us every day, so we harvested the eggs of gulls, ducks, partridge, geese and other birds. We used the eggs to leaven our bread. Other people call it bannock but we call it *luskinikn* (loo-skin-e-ghen). It was also called "four cents" because that's how much it cost to make.

ETQULJUIKÚS – MAY

The frogs are croaking at this time. They're telling things to the other animals. When they come out to sing their mating songs, other animals come out too, like the eel, so when we hear the frogs croaking, that's when we go out to catch eels. When the Mi'kmaq see strawberry blossoms in this month, we know that if the temperature is right for that flower to bloom, it's a good temperature for the sea-run trout. When we see strawberry blossoms, we go fishing.

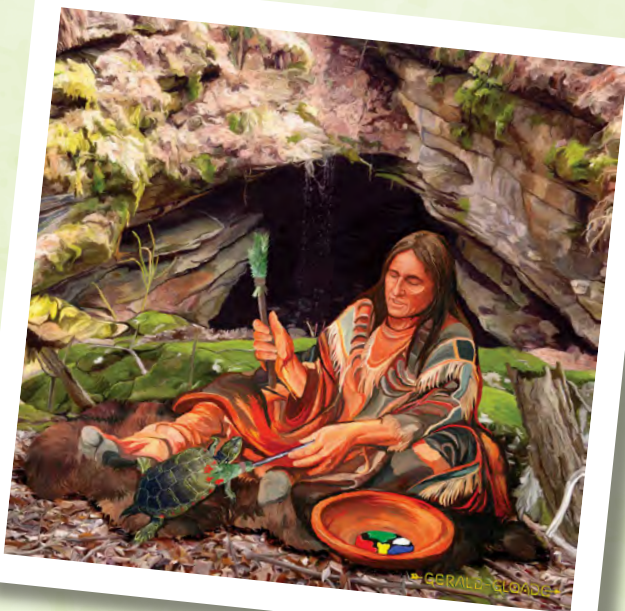
NIPNIKÚS – JUNE

This is when the leaves are in full blossom and the fireflies turn on the lights in their butts. We go and harvest our bark again because now it comes off in thin layers for different things like quillwork.

PESKEWIKÚS – JULY

This month is the time when birds shed their feathers. We don't go into the water for recreational use until the month of July. In May and June, it's not your turn. The bugs and fish and frogs are using the water.

If you go in the water and disturb them, the bugs won't be there to feed the frogs, the frogs won't be there to feed the fish and the fish won't be there to feed you. You need to know your place in the cycle for everything to survive.



KISIKWEKEWIKÚS – AUGUST

This is the ripening time for things like blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries. It is also the time to harvest *s'gepn* — wild potato in English.





KJIKÚS

This is the time of the great moon, our 13th month. People also call it the supermoon. The moisture in the atmosphere acts like a magnifying glass, so the moon looks bigger and brighter when it rises.

WIKUMKEWIKÚS – SEPTEMBER

This is moose-calling time. When the leaves start to turn colour, it's time for our traditional hunting season to begin. That goes hand in hand with the nutrition cycle, because in September, the animals are preparing for winter and increasing their food intake, so their nutritional value is very high.

WIKEWIKÚS – OCTOBER

This is the time of the fat animals. When I was a kid, I would realize that in August, the crickets and grasshoppers would start singing and that meant I would have to go back to school soon. But the Mi'kmaq don't listen for when the singing starts; they listen for when it stops, and that happens in October. The insects have gone through their mating period and they're laying eggs. For a delicate little egg to survive the winter, that means the humidity has to be out of the air, so if it's safe for these insects to lay their eggs, then it's safe for us to dry our fish.

KISKEWIKÚS – DECEMBER

This is the month of the chief moon. Because of the crystallized moisture in the air, the moon looks big again.

KEPTEKEWIKÚS – NOVEMBER

The name for this month means that the rivers are about to freeze, but they don't do that anymore here in Nova Scotia because of climate change. When I was a kid we used to skate on the rivers.



I was once taking a van-load of Elders to another community in the valley. Doug Knockwood was sitting up front with me and he saw a red-tailed hawk sitting on a fence post beside the highway. He said, "Did you see that? The red-tailed hawk is a timid, shy bird. He's put himself in a very compromising position today. He doesn't like people, he doesn't like traffic and motion. He's there on a fence beside the highway because he has to eat today. The reason he has to eat today is because there's a storm coming. Whenever you see red-tailed hawks close to civilization, close to people, you can guarantee there's going to be a storm." Since he shared that with me, any time I see a red-tailed hawk I know there's going to be a heavy rainstorm or snowstorm. The animals know, and they prepare. Elder Dr. Lillian Marshall once told me, "The animals know when a storm is coming. When you see them acting differently, that's what you have to pay attention to. The weatherman thinks he can look at the weather today and predict what the weather is going to be for the next seven days. It's the reverse. You have to look at the pattern that's been set by the last seven days to see what the weather is going to be."

