



Whiskey-jack and the Long Winter

Otanskatapewak, our great grandparents, tell us that Wiskachan, whiskey-jack or Canada Jay, is one of the only birds in the bush that will not bother a person's body if they should have the misfortune to leave this world while they are in the bush. In fact, Wiskachan will respect the body by cleaning up the area around it of sticks and grass, then burying the body with great care. We are told there is a reason that Wiskachan does this. It is a story that goes way back to a time when Sagaw Neeheowak, Woodland Cree, first began walking this land.

Kayas, takwakin peehchi, long ago in the fall, a young brave was making his way to his winter camp along the Wabasca River heading north to lake country. The rest of his tribe had already left to go there while he stayed behind to look for Mōswa to help feed the tribe through the winter. As he walked he looked around at the beautiful colours of takwakin, fall. Looking at sky he could see that the clouds were starting to gather and there was a chill in the air, telling him that pipon, winter, would soon be there. He also noticed that all the birds had already left for the year and there were only the few winter birds like Kahkawkew, the raven, Kwihkwisew, the blue jay, and Pipon Peewaysis, the snowbird.

It was then that he noticed Wiskachan the whiskey-jack following him. He thought this strange for at that time Wiskachan was a peeyeesis, small bird, that usually flew south for the winter. He found it odd that this one was still around. He continued north along the river.

The brave hadn't walked far before it began to snow huge, wet, heavy snowflakes. He decided to walk just a bit further before he needed to stop in the sitah, spruce, and make a camp for the night. He was still far behind his tribe but he was in no hurry as he loved hunting and walking through the bush. Not far down the river he found a nice patch of sitah that looked good to make a camp in. He stopped and began making a makeshift hunter's camp for the night. As he gathered firewood he once again noticed Wiskachan sitting on a nearby branch watching him. He thought again that it was odd, especially since it was now snowing! Wiskachan should have already been making a quick retreat to the south.

"Keekway tikwee Wiskachan? I wonder why whiskey-jack? Why aren't you already flying south for the winter? It's already getting cold and you'll never make it through the long cold winter. You should get going."

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Whiskey-jack and the Long Winter

Wiskachan moved his head from side to side in quick, jerking motions, as though trying to understand the young brave. The brave shook his head and continued clearing an area under the sitah to make a fire for the night.

The snow continued to fall fast and heavy and it was getting very cold as the wind picked up. The brave tried hard to keep the snow from gathering beneath the sitah but it was a battle he was losing. Just as the last light was fading, the brave could still make out the outline of poor Wiskachan sitting on the branch. He was now huddled in a small ball and shivering a great deal. Again, the brave shook his head, looking at Wiskachan. "Wiskachan! Ki mooschoot n'deehteen. Whiskey-jack, I think you've gone crazy! It's too late for you now. There's no way you will live through the winter! Mamawi Ohtawimaw, The Creator, has made it so Sagaw Neeheow, Woodland Cree, must take care of the land and all the creatures around us so I can't let you die this way just because you've lost your mind. Let me help you."

The brave got up even though he was starting to get cold himself. He slowly approached Wiskachan with one hand held out in front of him. Wiskachan made no effort to move. He only buried his head beneath his wing for warmth, still shivering.

The brave gently put his hand around Wiskachan and gently picked him up off the branch. Still Wiskachan made no effort to escape.

"Wiskachan, I'm going to lie close to the fire and hold my muskwayan, bearskin, above you so you are protected from the cold and can get the heat from the fire. I'll hold it open just enough so a little heat can come in but not too much cold air can get in also. I'll put out my pimeehkan, pemmican, beside you too, in case you are hungry when you warm up. Warm up and sleep now n'toteem. My friend."

It was morning when Wiskachan woke. The only sound breaking the silence was the sound of Kahkahkew cawing through the trees as he hunted. Wiskachan could see that now there was a great deal of snow and the fire was long buried. Wiskachan was feeling warm beneath the muskwayan and he could see there was a great deal of pimeehkan next to him, enough to last many weeks. He moved closer to the brave's chest to see if he could wake him but there was no movement. It was then that Wiskachan noticed that the snow totally covered the brave and that he could not see his chest moving in and out. The brave had passed on during the night, still holding the muskwayan to keep Wiskachan safe and warm!



Whiskey-jack and the Long Winter

This saddened Wiskachan a great deal as he realized that Sagaw Neeheow cared so much for the creatures around them that they were willing to give their life for them if needed. Wiskachan promised that he would never forget and that he should show Sagaw Neeheow the same respect.

Wiskachan stayed with the brave through the long winter, making sure that his sacrifice was not in vain. Even though it got very cold, especially during the month of the popping trees, keesi-peesim, Wiskachan found that he was becoming accustomed to the snow and cold, even comfortable. There was still a great deal of pimeehkan that the brave had left for him and Wiskachan was sure it would last the coming months.

Time seemed to fly by and it wasn't long before Wiskachan noticed the snow starting to melt and the little green buds beginning to pop out of the branches on the willows nearby. Each day Wiskachan was growing stronger and more accustomed to the different weather than he was used to in the south. Wiskachan flew farther and farther away from the shelter of the brave each day to explore his surroundings and eat the newly formed buds of the soskomitosak, white poplars, around him.

Wiskachan was so busy enjoying spring's arrival around him that he hadn't noticed he had been gone for a few days from the shelter of the brave. He returned to the place where the brave lay and could see that now the snow had fully receded and there was grass begging to grow in and around the area. The body of the brave had begun to melt and the muskwayan had already dropped to cover him completely. It was then that Wiskachan felt a deep sorrow as he could fully see the brave's body and how he had laid down on the bare ground just so he could provide shelter for him. Tears formed in his little eyes and he bowed his head in respect.

Kahkahkewak, ravens, started circling overhead as they spied the brave's body. They saw it as a possible food source as Kahkahkew will eat anything they can in the bush no matter what kind of poor creature it is. Wiskachan noticed them and quickly set to work. There was no way he was going to let Kahkahkew eat the brave! Not after the sacrifice he made to save him! He began covering the brave with grass, twigs, leaves, and anything he could find to make sure that Kahkahkew could not see the body and eat it. After many hours, the brave was no longer visible. Where he once was, there was now only a huge mound of grass, twigs, and leaves and the ground surrounding the brave was nice and clean as though someone took great care to tidy up the entire area.



Whiskey-jack and the Long Winter

The sun broke through the sitah, shining down on the mound where the brave lay. Wiskachan looked at the mound and again the tears flowed from his little eyes. He swore he would tell all Wiskachan about what had happened and how this one Sagaw Neeheow had given his life for him. He vowed that from that day on, Wiskachan would always stay close to Sagaw Neeheow and trust and respect them just as this brave had done for him.

To this day, Wiskachan stay very close to Sagaw Neeheow, even continuing to stay throughout the winter to keep their promise. For even now, they show a trust that few birds will show and will often feed from the hands of Sagaw Neeheow. They are also one of the only birds that will honour Sagaw Neeheow and take great care to bury them should they come across someone who has passed on in the bush. They continue to keep the vow that the little Wiskachan made all those years ago.

Ekosi Maka