

Program 15 - DON'T YOU BELIEVE IT! - January 13, 1941
(Superstitions about Nature)

SOMETHING TO DO AND TALK ABOUT FIRST

Ask the pupils to tell each other their pet beliefs about nature. Stimulate them by mentioning such superstitions as the following:

1. Beavers carry mud on their tails with which to construct dams.
2. Porcupines throw their quills.
3. Bats like to get tangled in girls' hair.
4. Large muskrat houses prophesy a cold winter.

Suggest that the children ask their parents about similar notions.

DO YOU KNOW THESE WORDS?

superstition

scientific

myth

LISTEN FOR THESE IDEAS

Take notes while you listen. Many of the stories in the fields of woodcraft, Indian beliefs, weather, and animals reveal notions that have influenced people for generations. The broadcast will give some scientific bases for these beliefs. As you listen, think of ways in which you could build these superstitions into stories.

SOMETHING TO DO AND TALK ABOUT LATER

1. What belief is the most ridiculous?
2. Which ones have a basis in science?
3. Has anyone of them ever influenced you?
4. Write an imaginative story around one of these beliefs.

Wisconsin School of the Air
Afield with Ranger Mac
January 13, 1941

DON'T YOU BELIEVE IT!

Hello Boys and Girls:

There are many things of my childhood that stick in memory like a burr in fuzzy wool. I can remember pulling a hair from a horse's tail, putting it in water, and thinking that in a certain number of days it would turn into one of those writhing little creatures which is so thin it is hard to believe it could live - the hair snake - which is not a snake at all. That the experiment failed did not seem to disturb my belief that the hair snake came from a soaked horse hair. Now that I know this childhood tale is a fancy, and am acquainted with the life history of that squirming thin creature, I think the real story, the one I know now, is far more wonderful than the belief of childhood. I suppose that there still exists in the minds of some children the belief that warts come from toads. This belief robs a boy or girl of a friendship that would add interest and joy to his life. But before we start talking about these legends, these misbeliefs, these superstitions, Ranger Mac wants to answer many of the questions we left unanswered last week. He received many letters last week requesting that this be done.

Do ants have cows? Not cows exactly, but with a little use of your imagination you will see why they are called cows. You have heard about those stupid little creatures called plant lice. They live by sucking the juice from plants. Wherever you find plant lice you are quite sure to find ants. These lice have a peculiar habit of excreting from their bodies little drops of a very sweet liquid called "honey-dew", when they feel the touch of the ant's antennae on their backs. So whenever an ant wishes honey-dew she approaches an aphid,

which is another name for a plant louse, strokes its back gently with her antennae, and if the aphid has not been milked dry by some other ant, a drop of this sweet liquid is at once forthcoming. Ants take care of the eggs of the aphid by carrying them to their nests for the winter, and then placing them on the roots of some weeds in the spring so that there may be cows to milk the coming season.

Why is the witch hazel called the "howitzer" of the woods? That is a name that Ranger Mac has given to this plant because in the fall of the year, after the sharp frosts have come, the fruit of the witch hazel, which is in the form of a capsule or nut, opens ^{up} with a sharp report and throws its seeds as far as thirty feet.

How do sandhill cranes migrate? This bird, which is now very scarce, migrates by traveling in the stratosphere. The stratosphere is the upper reaches of the atmosphere, high above the earth, 8 or 10 miles above, where clouds do not form. The airplane has taught us this fact about the migration of the sandhill crane. Have you ever seen a sandhill crane? Not a heron, but a sandhill crane?

What happens to the antlers of a deer after they are shed? As you know, the buck deer grows a new set of antlers each year. These are shed after the mating season is over, along in December. They are seldom found in the woods because it is believed that porcupines devour them for the salt which they contain. They are so full of holes that those which do escape the porcupine are quite readily decomposed by the weather. It is quite a feat to find a pair of antlers in the woods.

How do blue jays carry their eggs? In Audubon's drawing of the blue jay, he has pictured a blue jay carrying an egg in its mouth. We find blue jays living in oak woods in the winter and we know that they carry acorns in their mouths, and the acorn of the red oak is larger than their own eggs. John Muir in the delightful book which he wrote called "The Boyhood of a Naturalist" describes how he discovered a blue jay's nest while on the first

of his adventures upon coming to this country. He left the eggs untouched but on climbing the tree to take another admiring look the next morning, he found the nest empty. And he wondered all his life, even as a great naturalist, how in the world the birds were able to carry off their thin-shelled eggs either in their bills or in their feet without breaking them, and how they could be kept warm while a new nest was being built. "Well, I am still asking these questions," he said as a man. Maybe one of our Trail-hitters will make the discovery.

Why does the great crested flycatcher use a molted snakeskin in the construction of its nest? The only reason that we can think of is to scare away its enemies. You know that the snake's skin is not elastic, and as the snake grows it must shed its old skin to allow for increased growth. This they do several times a year; and the flycatcher has the ability to discover and use it. So there we always find it. But I might add that when the fledglings come out of the eggs, the first thing they behold is this snakeskin. In fright, the feathers on the top of their heads stand on end, and they remain in that position throughout lifetime. You can believe that if you want to.

There are abroad more stories, legends and superstitions about snakes than any other animal, I suppose. You have read in the Bible the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. That story does not give us a strong affection for the snake. It is, however, one of the most beautiful and useful of creatures and yet many people regard it with awe and fear. "As slimy as a snake" is a figure of speech we use. Snakes are not slimy. Quite the contrary, they are covered with perfectly dry scales. There is a superstition that if you kill a snake its tail will live on until sun-down. But the fact is that a snake is so ~~poorly~~ ^{well} equipped with nerves that it takes a long time for it to die, and its tail shows signs of life for some hours after the killing, no matter what time of day the deed is done. But the most general superstition about the snake is that it stings

with its tongue that it thrusts out in so threatening a manner. But the facts are a snake has no ears and its eyesight is very imperfect. Yet there is no quiver of the earth so delicate, no tread so gentle but what it can be detected by its nervous flesh. The snake's world is not a world of things seen and heard, but a world of temperatures and pressures felt against its body, and a world of vibrations which it catches with its extended tongue. So that tongue is a sense organ, and when it thrusts out its tongue in so threatening a manner, it is simply trying to find out about its surroundings and what is going on. Snakes make interesting pets. I know of many schools where snakes are kept within glass enclosures and cared for, watched, studied and handled by the pupils.

"Blind as a bat." You have heard that statement; probably you have use it many times. But no one who has looked a bat in the face and watched it dart among the branches of trees with terrific speed without touching a twig, would say as "blind as a bat." Men have strung wires across a room and found that bats could fly among them without touching them, even in the daytime. Then they blindfolded the bats and found that they could among the wires with just as much accuracy. Then they stuffed the ears of the bats and then they found that the bats could not fly among the wires without hitting them. So we can say that a bat can "hear" a branch, or a stone wall or any other obstacle. Now that sounds rather odd, but that stuffing up the ears tells a story. So delicate is that inner ear that the bat can tell when it is close to a branch or any object by the air-pressure. So we can say that the ears more than the eye guide a bat in flight. Sometimes bats fly so low about our heads in search for insects that some people have a senseless fear that they like to get entangled in a lady's hair - a situation that would frighten the bats as much as it would the lady. The saying "blind as a bat" probably came from the old saying "blind as a brickbat."

Some people believe that a beaver carries mud on its tail, and uses

its flat hairless tail as a trowel to plaster its dams. The fact is he carries this material between his forepaws and his breast and throat, and branches in his mouth, his hind webbed feet propelling him through the water. The flat scaly tail is used as an aid in swimming, as a prop when cutting down trees, and as an alarm signal by slapping it violently on the water. Nor does the beaver eat fish, as many people suppose. Its food is made up entirely of trees, popple taking first place in his choices, and then when the supply of popple gives out, maple and birch. By building dams he turns rushing water into placid quiet lakes where fish thrive and grow big, where water fowl find feeding places, and where the soil, washed into streams by the heavy rains, is deposited to build up in time a beaver meadow.

Muskrats are very much like beavers in their habits. They make dome-shaped houses out of reeds and mud that look much like the houses of the beavers, which are made out of sticks and branches. Some people believe that the kind of winter we are going to have can be prophesied by the size of the muskrat homes - cold if the houses are large and thick; moderate if the houses are smaller and the walls not so thick. The muskrat is smart, but not as smart as that. The fact is, the size of the house depends upon the amount of building material there is at hand, and the number that occupy the dwelling for the winter. In the roof of Johnny Muskrat's home is an air hole left for ventilation, which is not a poor suggestion for those who sleep with their windows closed because they are afraid of the night air. Once in a while you will find a person who is afraid of the dark; yet most of the birds that will come back to us this spring will do all their traveling in the night because there are less dangers then; and many of our shyest animals come out only at night because there is less to be afraid of then.

There is a myth among woodsmen that if you cut a tree on the 29th of August it will not sprout again, but the fact is that if you want to cut trees with the least chance of their sprouting, the best time to do it

is just when they have come into full leaf, sometime in June; for it is then that the food stored in the tree has been somewhat exhausted.

We have all heard it said that it rains angleworm, for after a rain we see the worms lying on the surface of the ground and on the sidewalks. But the fact is the angleworms crawl out of their burrows, which fill up with water, to prevent drowning.

There is a superstition that porcupines throw their quills. They do not shoot their quills, but when alarmed they raise their quills so that the whole body bristles with them, and if the enemy comes close they slap their tails vigorously, but they have not the ability to throw their quills.

At the Zoo I watched a monkey searching affectionately the body of another monkey, and frequently putting something to its mouth. "Looking for lice" someone said. I don't believe there was a louse on the whole batch of monkeys, for it would have been eaten long ago. But what it actually was finding was little particles of dry salty material which had been secreted from the body of the monkey.

Did you ever see a cat claw a tree? "Sharpening its claws" is what some people will tell you. But what it is actually doing is stretching its muscles like an athlete loosens his muscles before he starts his race. And if the cat happens to be black and it crosses your path, you are to have bad luck. Nonsense!

Bees do not gather honey; they gather nectar. The nectar is partly digested in one of the two stomachs of the honey bee, called the honey sac, and then it is put in one of the cells of the combs as honey to be used for food.

And so we could go on mentioning superstitions that have influenced the lives of people, and giving incorrect statements that you and I make most every day of our lives. But my time is up, and I leave you with

this problem. If you place eggs under a setting hen, and she hatches them, which is the rightful mother, the hen that incubated the eggs or the hens that laid the eggs?

Good luck, and may the Great Spirit -- etc.