

Why Chipmunks Have Stripes

a Native American Pourquoi Tale

Long ago, Chipmunks had soft, earth-colored fur, but no stripes.

One morning a Chipmunk was storing food in her burrow for winter. She scampered in and out carrying nuts and berries in her mouth pouches. Then she saw Bear coming her way.

He was walking along, rolling fallen logs around with his paws to find insects, and then scooping them into his mouth.

Chipmunk watched him come closer. He was talking to himself and chewing at the same time.

“Look at me!” he said as he turned a huge log over. “I’m the strongest of all animals. I can do anything!”

He scooped up more insects and sucked them into his mouth.

Chipmunk popped her head up. “Is that so?” she called out. Bear stopped and looked around. Chipmunk jumped out of her burrow and faced him.

Bear stared down at her. “Yes, it’s true”, he said. “All you other animals are afraid of me!” Chipmunk twitched her whiskers. “Can you stop the sun from rising in the morning?” she asked.

“I haven’t tried” said Bear, “but I’m sure I can do it. Tomorrow morning, the sun will not rise. I, Bear, have said so!”

He lay down facing east and made himself comfortable in the grass and leaves.

Chipmunk scurried back into her burrow, laughing to herself about how wrong Bear was.

Bear sat there all night without sleeping. Then birds began to sing and light glowed in the east.

Bear stood on his hind legs and raised his front paws towards the light. “The sun will not rise today”, he commanded.

Chipmunk came out of her burrow to watch.

The sun rose, and Bear was upset. Chipmunk giggled behind her paw, saying “the sun is stronger than Bear!” Then she ran around singing “the sun came up, the sun came up!”

Bear started to get angry, and Chipmunk kept running and singing “Bear is angry, the sun came up!”

Chipmunk rolled on the ground laughing. Bear stooped over her and held her down with one paw. “If I can’t stop the sun from rising, you won’t live to see it set”, he growled.

Chipmunk squeaked up at him “oh Bear! I shouldn’t have made fun of you. I deserve to die. But before you eat me please let me say a prayer to the Creator of all things!”

“Be quick then” said Bear. “Get on with it!”

Chipmunk tried to wriggle under his paw, but it was crushing her. “Oh Bear! Your paw is so heavy and you are pressing so hard. I can’t breathe enough to say my prayer. Please could you lift your paw just a little bit?”

Bear grunted and lifted up his paw just a bit. It was enough.

Chipmunk wriggled free and raced to her burrow.

Bear swung his paw at her and missed, but his long claws scratched her head and along her back, as she escaped.

Chipmunks now have stripes that look like these scratches.

They remind us what can happen if one animal makes fun of another.