

# How Wíṭṭap̄ Got His Red Breast

## A NORTHERN SIERRA MIWOK STORY

A long time ago, the world was dark and cold and the people had no fire. Wíṭṭap̄ (Robin) learned where the fire was and went on a far journey to get it. After he had traveled a great distance, he came to the place and stole it and carried it back to the people. Every night on the way, Wíṭṭap̄ lay with his breast over it to keep it from getting cold; this turned his breast red. Finally he reached home with it and gave fire to the people.

Then Wíṭṭap̄ made Hi'éema (Sun) out of it, but before doing this he put some into the Úunu (Buckeye) tree so the people could get it when they needed it. From that day to this, all the people have known that when they want fire they can get it by rubbing an Úunu stick against a piece of dry wood; this makes the flame come out.

## HELPFUL VOCABULARY

Wíṭṭapí	‘Robin’
Hi’éema	‘Sun’
Úunu	‘Buckeye’

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Why did Wíṭṭapí’s breast turn red?

Why did Wíṭṭapí put fire into the Úunu tree? Would it be hard for people to get fire otherwise?

Have you heard other stories about how people got fire? What do they have in common?

## ABOUT THIS STORY...

This story was told by a Northern Sierra Miwok person to C. Hart Merriam, who published it in a book of Miwok stories in 1910. Merriam did not publish the storyteller’s name or any other information about them except that they told the story “in the mountains near Mokelumne River”. This was common practice at the time, unfortunately. Additionally, Merriam only published an English version of the story with some individual Miwok words.

This story resembles others told by people throughout Central and Northern California about how the early people obtained fire. Typically, an animal is sent to a far-off land to steal fire, though the animal varies across versions of the story.

For example, Tom Cleanso, a Nisenan man and brother of SSBMI Matriarch Pamela Adams, says that Falcon sent two little mice to steal the fire. William Joseph, a.k.a. Bill Joe, a Nisenan speaker from Amador County, says that Field Mouse and Deer went together to steal the fire, while Lizzie Enos, a Nisenan speaker from the Auburn area, says that Hummingbird stole it. In another version told by a Plains Miwok person to C. Hart Merriam, Hummingbird stole the fire and kept it under his chin on the return journey, burning himself.

Crucially, in all versions, the people obtained fire through the help of their animal relations.

If you have questions about the story, please contact [language@ssband.org](mailto:language@ssband.org).