

How Coyote Put Fish in Clear Lake

Pomo Indians living around Clear Lake love Coyote because he gave them fish. Here is the story of the way it happened:

Once long ago a terrible drought came over the land. Indians danced and danced for the Keeper of Rain, but nothing happened. Medicine Men sang chants for rain, but no rain came.

Lakes dried up. Creeks dried up. Rivers dried up. Hawks flew with beaks open in the hot sun, their throats aching with thirst.

Blue-jays scolded from the tops of sun-scorched trees because there was no water.

Frog's throats were too dry to croak.

Then came more trouble! A great swarm of noisy brown grasshoppers arrived. So many grasshoppers came in a great cloud that they shut off the sun and the sky was dark. They rubbed their wings and feet together and made a "Zing-Zizz" that frightened Indian babies.

Grasshoppers "Zing-zizzed" all over the land and ate up grass so the Indians couldn't collect seeds to grind into mush which they called *too*.

Indian babies cried for food. Indian fathers and mothers went hunting for game and nuts and berries. But the berries and nuts had dried up. Deer had gone away. There were no fishes because lakes and rivers were all dry.²

Coyote was roaming the land, hunting for food and just one tiny sip of water for his hot, dry throat.

"If this dryness keeps up and Sun is so hot," said he,



"my whiskers will wither and blow away and my tail will get singed and I'll look a fright."

When he saw the skinny, starving Indians and their hungry babies he forgot about his own troubles. Coyote loved Pomo Indians and their children.

"There must be something to do about dry times—to bring food," he thought. "Great Spirit wouldn't want us all to be thirsty and hungry."

He sat on his haunches one day and looked high into the sky. He looked so high that his neck stretched out six inches longer than it usually was.

Coyote asked Great Spirit: "Please, won't you send us on earth a drink and some food?" And he waited for Great Spirit to whisper the answer back into his big yellow ear.

"Eat grasshoppers," Great Spirit told him. "They're very good to eat, even if they do make brown spots of juice on the grass and keep zizzing all the time."

"Ugh!" Coyote complained, "Grasshoppers don't sound like a good meal to me!"

"Grasshoppers are juicy," Great Spirit whispered back. "You can't tell by just looking at a thing how good it tastes. I sent grasshoppers to earth. I never send anything that cannot be useful one way or another. Eat them and see!"

Coyote shook his head. Grasshoppers looked very hard and bony to him. "They'll scratch all the way down," he grumbled.

"Stop thinking about your own stomach!" Great Spirit said. "You love the Indians. They are hungry and thirsty. You want to help them, don't you?"

Coyote had to admit that the cries of Pomo children kept him awake nights and made his heart ache.

"Then eat grasshoppers for *them*, if not for yourself," Great Spirit told Coyote. "Miracles happen when beings do things they don't want to do—for the sake of others."

Just then Coyote heard the pitiful cry of an Indian boy who was thirsty and hungry.

He took a great breath and held his long nose with one paw, while he grabbed for those zizzing grasshoppers with the other.

Quick, down went those scratchy grasshoppers into his gullet. Coyote gulped a great gulp and swallowed them whole.

They weren't so bad after they were down and they did make his empty stomach feel better, but they scratched and tickled his insides.

"Take more grasshoppers!" Great Spirit urged. "The more you eat the more seeds will grow for Indian mush."

Coyote made a face, took a great breath, and grabbed pawful after pawful of grasshoppers and swallowed them whole until his stomach felt tight.

The grasshoppers did a lot of wiggling inside him. He looked around and found a few more grasshoppers. He thought of Indian children and their hunger for mush—but he just couldn't eat any more grasshoppers.

"I've done the best I can for Indians by eating grasshoppers so that grasshoppers can't keep eating seeds," he told Great Spirit. "I just can't swallow one more."

Great Spirit whispered back to him. "You have done well, Coyote. Never mind the few zizzers that are left. Look over your shoulder now at the dry spot where

Clear Lake used to be."

Coyote was so full of grasshoppers that it was hard to move the least bit. But he wiggled and he groaned and twisted. Finally he managed to look over his left shoulder.

There—in the middle of the dry hole that had once been a lake—was a damp spot, a little bubbling spring! "Now, go and dig at that spring," Great Spirit told him. "As you dig, more water will come—enough for all Pomo Indians."

"But I can't move!" Coyote complained. "I'm too

full of grasshoppers. They're scratching my stomach." "Thinking of your stomach again!" Great Spirit said sadly. "You don't love Pomos as much as I thought you did—or you would bestir yourself to bring them water and food."

Just then Coyote heard an Indian baby, Kulot, cry out for food and water.

He thought about that hungry Kulot and forgot his heavy stomach full of grasshoppers. He kept thinking how many people would be helped if he could get to the spring and dig.

So, he slid along on his stomach. He pushed hard with his legs. He strained every muscle in his back and slowly inched nearer and nearer to the little spring.

Whenever Coyote thought of himself he couldn't move. But when he thought of the poor Indians, he could move faster. New strength came to him as if there were a mysterious spring bubbling up inside his own body.

"That's how miracles happen," Great Spirit whispered. "I knew you had a big heart, Coyote—a heart big enough to forget yourself for others."

Coyote was cheered on. He wiggled. He squirmed. He pulled. He pushed with all his might toward the spring. Finally at sundown, after much wiggling and pushing and squirming, Coyote reached the spring. Feebly, he began to dig.

As he dug with his front paws, strength came into them so he could dig more. Soon water flowed fast in a great stream and he took a drink.

He wanted to run to the Indians and tell them, "I've found *water!*" But his stomach was heavy and he was



tired from all the work he had done.

"I must — I *must* go tell the Indians," he groaned. "Poor Pomos need water." He pulled and tugged, but his legs wobbled so he just couldn't run. He could take only one or two steps before he sank down exhausted. "I see your headache for the Indians. I will tell them and send them to the water," Great Spirit whispered. "You have done your part well, Coyote."

Soon Indians came to the water — Indian boys and girls and men, and women carrying babies. They all drank and felt better. The ache left Coyote's heart.

When the Indians had gone back to their tule huts and all was quiet, Great Spirit came close to Coyote.

"Now, for the magic," he whispered. "Watch what happens to those few grasshoppers you couldn't eat."

Coyote kept very still and watched. He saw the grasshoppers come to the little shining lake he had dug so Indians could drink. The grasshoppers flew over the lake with a zizzing sound. They saw their reflection in the water. With a quick dart they all jumped into the lake and turned into beautiful shining fishes!

"Now, Coyote, you see what an unselfish heart can do," Great Spirit said tenderly. "It can bring both food and drink to hungry and thirsty people anywhere.

And that is how Coyote started the fish that swim in Clear Lake today.

