

Iti Fabvssa

Panther Month

This article is part of a series titled "A Year in the Life."

Focusing on the time period of around 1700, the series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month.

The information in these articles is taken from a book titled, "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge," which will be published by Choctaw Nation later this year.

This edition of Iti Fabvssa presents Panther Month.

Koi Chito Hvshi, Panther Month, roughly corresponds with December.

In late December, the sun reclines to its most southern position, bringing the winter solstice, followed by the coldest days of the year.

In the early 1700s, the planet was experiencing the Little Ice Age, but on average, the coldest winter temperatures in the Choctaw homeland may not have been much different from today.

One interesting Choctaw place name that does indicate cold weather is a stream located in present-day Green County in southern Mississippi, which was called **Okti Abeha**, Blocks of Ice Therein.

This name indicates that the weather did occasionally get cold enough even in the southern part of Choctaw country for ice to float in the streams.

The coldest part of the year is the time when fur-bearing animal pelts are at their prime.

Choctaw men and boys used the softly tanned pelts of ferocious animals, like panthers, for bedding. They believed that the prowess of these animals could be transferred to the sleeping person through the hides.

This is probably why the coldest part of the year in the Choctaw calendar included Panther month.

Canebrakes were the main winter hunting grounds. They provided shelter for fur-bearing animals, were the highest-yielding source of winter forage for deer and bison and were where black bear hibernated.

Not all of Choctaw country produced quality peltry. The southern-most regions, such as the lower Tombigbee River, were sufficiently warm enough that pelts from the animals there were thin all year.

Other regions of Choctaw country produced somewhat better quality peltry. Like the Owachito, or as an extension of it.

Hunters would set up temporary base camps, sometimes with their women and children, in places several miles from their village where they could easily access the swamps and canebrakes where pelt-bearing animals could be found.

Choctaw hunters were conspicuous for their skill in hunting panther. In the mid-1800s, and possibly before, beaver, fox and wolf were sometimes caught by trapping. Some of these species of animals were also probably shot with arrows.

After deer, black bear were the most important source of animal protein in the Choctaw diet. Many bears migrated into Choctaw country during late fall, to avoid colder temperatures to the north.

By December, they were at their fattest and moved slowly. Among all of the Southeastern tribes and Euro-American communities, Choctaw men were said to be the best at the dangerous job of hunting the bear.

Certain places were favored for bear hunts, such as **Nita Abi**, Bear-Killer, which was located south from the mouth of the Alabama River.

The most important resource that Choctaw people obtained from the bear was the fat. The fat was rendered into bear oil for transportation and storage.

Bear oil was used as a moisturizer for human skin, it was used in the hair and as a binder for face and body paint. It was also used to fry foods. The hides from black bear were tanned with the fur on for robes and blankets.

In the early 1700s, bison were an important food source for Choctaw people. In the southern part of Choctaw country, was a place called **Bok Yvnnvsh Foni Ka**, Bayou of the Buffalo Bones.

It was so named because the bones left from a bison hunt were still visible in the water long after. Choctaw hunters would have taken bison when the need and opportunity arose, but they may have favored the period from roughly December 15, to January 15, when the animals' winter robes are at their prime.

Groups of Choctaw men are said to have hunted bison on foot. Deer continued to be hunted in the winter when they were available.

By January, the deer rutting season reaches even the most southern bounds of Choctaw country. At this season, the fawns are independent of mothers, so the does could be hunted without jeopardizing the fawn population.

While Choctaw hunting parties were out and about during the winter, they took the opportunity to acquire additional resources that were rare or absent around the villages.

One of these was salt. They located good sources of salt by the large numbers of deer and other animals that came to lick it up. These included salt springs, **kvli hvpi oka**, and natural salt licks, **lukfapa**.

Such localities included Blue Licks in present-day Noxubee County, Mississippi, and Hvpi Bokushi, Little Salt Creek, located in present-day southwestern Alabama.

Water from the latter was so salty that three gallons, when evaporated, would produce one gallon of salt.

Editor's Note: For Iti Fabvssa stories you might have missed please visit ChoctawNation.com and click on History & Culture.