






Songlines

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been muttonbirding for countless generations. This ongoing practice has inspired many works of art, including a re-imagining of a traditional songline.



CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Histories and Cultures

CONTENT AREAS

-  History
-  Geography
-  Economics and Business
-  Technologies

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

-  Intercultural Understanding
-  Critical and Creative Thinking

KEY CONCEPT

Songline: Within the animist belief system of Indigenous Australians one of the paths across the land (or sometimes the sky) which mark the route followed by localised “creator-beings” during the Dreaming. The paths of the songlines are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance, and painting.

Wikipedia

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › cultural practice
- › migration
- › tradition
- › resources

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the cultural significance of the mutton bird to Tasmania’s Aboriginal people?

This printed material is **to be used with Muttonbirding – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Muttonbirding resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

It brings me home – when I go muttonbirding.

Wendal Pitchford, 2017

Muttonbirding is a valuable tradition of Tasmanian Aboriginal people going back thousands of years. Today, for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, the practice holds the same spiritual and cultural significance that it did for their ancestors.



Muttonbirding on Big Dog Island | Image: Dncstrct Pty Ltd

A Highly Valued Resource

The following extract from *Return to the Islands* tells about evidence of mutton bird bones being left by Aborigines at least 6600 years ago. Muttonbirding is a very ancient cultural practice.

We do know that about 6600 years ago Aborigines were hunting mutton birds for food. These Aboriginal muttonbirders left some mutton bird bones in a cave on Hunter Island. At that time Hunter Island was joined to the North West Coast of Tasmania and bands of Aborigines could easily travel to its coastal mutton bird rookeries.

Return to the Islands 1984: 24

Untitled print | Image: Artist – Alan Mansell





Mutton-bird Egging on Mount Chappell Island (1893) | Photographer: A.J. Campbell Source: Museums Victoria

James Backhouse observed in his journal entry of 1833 the delight and joy of Aborigines when they could go to the coast and the islands to gather mutton birds.

The Aborigines have been in high glee at the prospect of a speedy termination of their voyage. I went on shore... with three of the women... to collect mutton birds and their eggs, which are now in season. A plentiful supply of both were soon obtained.

To their great joy they [the Aborigines] were all put on shore on Green Island, where they had a feast of mutton birds and their eggs.

Extract from James Backhouse's journal, Monday 3rd December 1833 when describing his visit to the Furneaux Islands.

Plomley 1987: 260

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › For how long have Tasmania's Aboriginal people been harvesting mutton birds?
- › Why is the mutton bird a highly valued resource for Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

Songlines of the Mutton Bird

Dyan Summers captures something of the spiritual significance of the mutton bird for Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the following song extract.

*When the moon fell away from the face
of the earth
It left the moon-bird behind
I want to sing the song of the moon-bird
to you
So your family will sing you back home...*



Songlines of the Moonbird –
Written by Dyan Summers

[https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=tAugRUk43qc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAugRUk43qc)

The *Songlines of the Moonbird* is an animated version of Dyan's poem sung by Ronnie Summers illustrating the enduring connection Tasmanian Aboriginal people have with mutton birds.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How does this song capture the significance of the moon (mutton) bird for Tasmanian Aboriginal people?
 - › What do you think is meant by the 'songlines of the moonbird'?
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An Abundant Food Source

Patsy Cameron wrote in her book *Grease and Ochre* that the mutton bird was pivotal to the food gathering practices of the clanswomen.

The arrival of the mutton birds to *trouwunna's* shores each year coincided with the change in season that saw the revitalisation of the land and announced the coming of warmer weather and longer days. For just a few days each mid-September the birds appeared as if they were falling out of the sky.

Whether the Coastal Plains people had some concept of the great distances that

yolla travelled as they migrated around the Pacific Ocean on their way to Bass Strait is not known. Nonetheless, for up to eight months of the year, mutton birds were available as a food source and their abundance made it possible for the clanspeople to remain on the coastal plains throughout the year.

Patsy Cameron 2011: 35

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

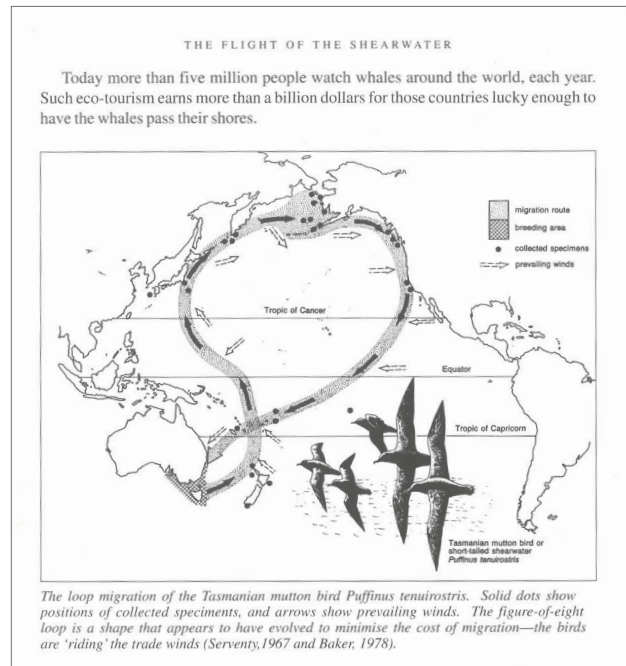
- › How important was the mutton bird to Tasmanian Aboriginal people?
 - › How did people make adaptations around the availability of mutton bird?
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Migration Journey

The 'moonbirds', as Patsy Adam Smith refers to them, returned to their nesting rookeries each year from their annual migration to the Aleutian Archipelago during the Northern Hemisphere summer. Their migratory journey ended after 12,000 kilometres of circumnavigating the Pacific Ocean when they arrived each spring on the many offshore islands and coastal margins around *trouwunna*.

The Coastal Plains clanswomen watched for the signs of impending arrival of these incredibly energetic seabirds later to be known as mutton birds, which coincided with the flowering season of the 'lightwood tree', as the daylight hours grew longer and the blossoms appeared on the trees, the clanswomen would have anticipated the birds' return from their journey to the moon and back. Where else would they have gone?

Patsy Cameron 2011: 35



The Path of Migration of the Mutton Bird

Serventy 1996: 18

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What is the migration pattern of the mutton bird?
- › How and why do you think the mutton birds return to the same place year after year for nesting?

A Versatile Resource

Patsy Cameron tells us that George Augustus Robinson, while undertaking the so-called Friendly Mission (1829-1834), noticed the prevalence and abundance of the birds and the versatile way in which the clanswomen used the birds for food, warmth and medicine.

As Robinson noted in 1830, the adult birds, numbering tens of millions, filled the sky and darkened the surface of the sea as they arrived in September to prepare their burrows for egg laying.

Patsy Cameron 2011: 36

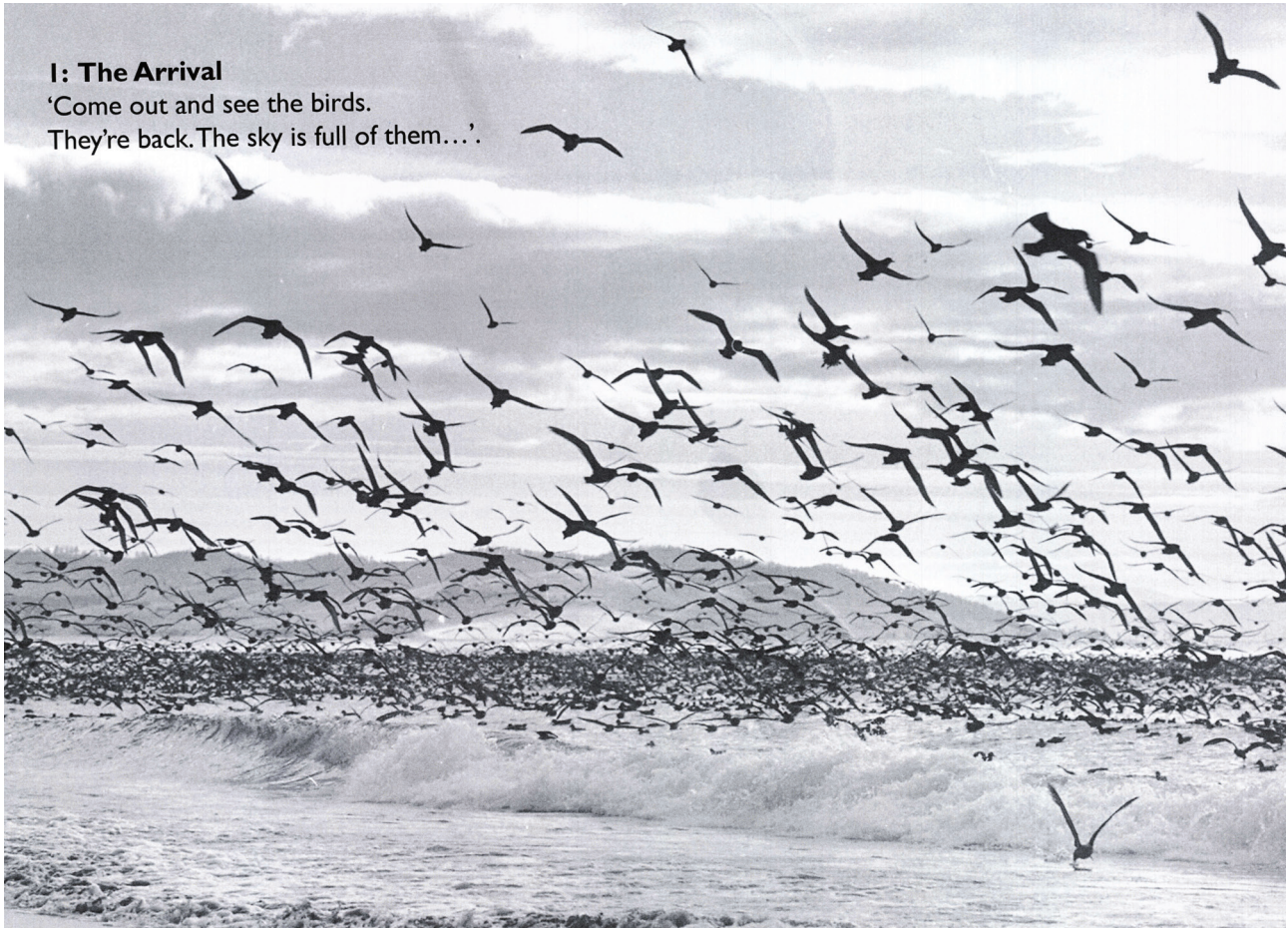
Robinson observed the clanswomen's versatile use of the birds for food during the long season that the birds visited the islands and coastline of *trouwunna*.

In late November the eggging season provided an abundance of eggs. The eggs were collected by the clanswomen in great numbers, and they also trapped considerable quantities of adult birds throughout late spring and early summer. This was followed by the fledglings, so the clans were provided with a highly nutritious and oil-rich resource from mid-spring until late autumn.

Patsy Cameron 2011: 36

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What are some possible products from the mutton bird?
- › How could these products be used?



I: The Arrival

'Come out and see the birds.
They're back. The sky is full of them...'

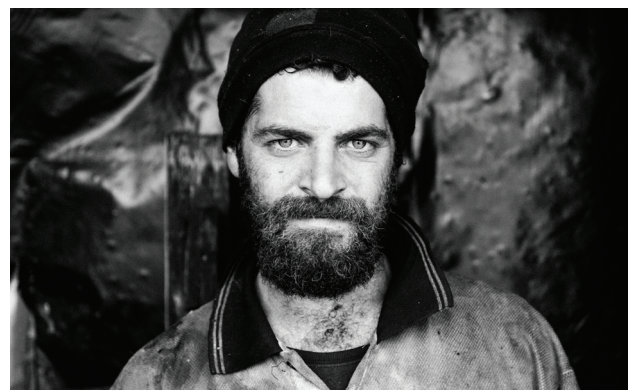
The Arrival | Return to the Islands, 1984

Today's Birders

Today's birders talk of a great love – a spirituality – and a connection with mutton birds and birding.

When birdin's comin up, that's where we're gunna be.

Reen Burgess



Billy Mahar | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How do today's Aboriginal muttonbirders maintain the special connection to country and identity that was demonstrated by the clanswomen?
- › How are today's birders "keeping country alive"?

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