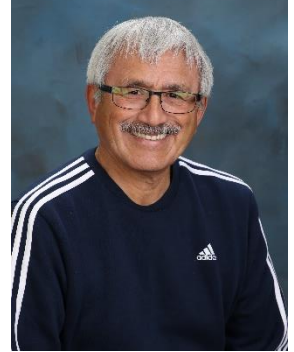


N'INOXSOLA

Elders in Residence Program
Indigenous Education Comox Valley Schools



Bryce Mercredi
'Visiting Mooshoom'



The ptarmigan migrated from the tundra in early winter and would feed on the willows: hence the name "willow ptarmigan". They were a source of food for indigenous people in the winter. They are a smaller version of the grouse family which turn white in the winter. When it started to get dark they would drop into the snow until they were buried. This is where they slept, the snow was their blanket.

We used to hunt them for food. Our mooshoom was no longer capable of tramping in the bush for these birds as he was quite restrictive in moving around. However, this didn't stop him from enjoying this treat. Instead of shooting the birds, he would string his net through the willows and wait for the ptarmigan to get tangled in the net then he would collect them. This saved on buying ammunition for his gun.

Over the course of the winter, we would visit him about twice a month so that we could take his dogs for a run. When the dogs saw the harnesses coming out of the shed, they got very excited, barking and jumping. The sled had to be tied down so that they couldn't take off before all the dogs were hooked up.

When they were all harnessed and my brother jumped in the sled and I would be in the back, mooshoom untied the rope, and we hung on tight.

Mooshoom lived on a hill overlooking the lake and there was a trail that wound down to the lake. We would be flying down this trail when the lead dog decided to take a dump. Of course he stopped and the five dogs behind would crash into him and the sled would be on top of the dogs. We would then have to pull the sled back, get the dogs straightened out and away we would go. Then the second dog decided he had to take a dump and we went through the same process. They never took their dumps at the same time. It became more and more difficult for the remaining dogs to do their business. The last dog always had to do it on the fly as he couldn't stop the five dogs in front of him.

This happened every time we took the dogs out. They would run flat out for about a mile before settling down to a brisk trot. They could cover about ten miles per hour on the lake, because the snow was drifted by the wind and packed hard. It was a little slower in the bush.

If there was no trail in the bush then you had to put on snowshoes and break trail for the dogs, as the snow was soft and powdery.

After a run of about three hours the dogs were getting tired and it was time to go home. They knew the shortest distance to go home. Once at home, the dogs were unhitched and tied up to their houses. The harnesses were put away then the dogs were fed frozen fish.

After visiting with mooshoom we trudged back home, sometimes in the dark.



Willow ptarmigan note the feet which allows them to walk in deep snow without sinking