

The Northern Lights

The Northern Lights are a natural display of coloured light in the night sky caused by particles from the sun interacting with the Earth's atmosphere and magnetic field.

The Northern Lights can be seen in Siberia, Scandinavia, Iceland, the southern tip of Greenland and northern Canada and Alaska. The lights can seem like rainbows of green, yellow, blue and violet swirls and squiggles, moving slowly, speeding up, never the same, always moving and flowing like a colourful kaleidoscope in the sky.

Explorers long ago sometimes believed they were travelling to the ends of the earth. They heard stories which said far beyond the sea, at the edge of the world, there was a bottomless pit and over it, a narrow, dangerous path that led to the heavens. The sky was a great dome arched over the Earth with a hole in it, through which the spirits passed. Only the spirits and the Raven had travelled this pathway. And the spirits that lived live there lit torches to guide the feet of the new arrivals. These torches were the Northern Lights.

They have had many names. Perhaps the best known is Aurora Borealis, a name given by a famous astronomer Galileo. Aurora meant the light of dawn and Borealis northern.

The Finnish name was Revontulet and that meant Fox Fires... Hidden in the far northlands where the snow fell without stopping and the winds moaned and howled, there once lived an arctic fire fox. There was only ever one fire fox in the world at a time, it was special. Greedy hunters longed to catch this magical creature because they had heard a story that whoever could capture the fire fox would have pockets full of gold. But the fox was too fast and as it ran its bright red, bushy tail would sweep up flakes of snow into the sky. The snow reflected the moonlight and made the sky bright and filled with light. And the fire fox would run so fast and so far, it could run over the tops of the mountains and the trees. As it ran, its fur scratched against the trees and sent up sparks of light that seemed to set the skies on fire. The Northern Lights.

In North America, some First Nation people believed that the Northern Lights were spirits that were so happy they were dancing, and as they danced round and round and round so the lights whirled and twirled and twisted too. Others believed the aurora was the dance of animal spirits, deer, seals and salmon. Further north, many Inuit tribes had a myth of the northern lights as the spirits playing ball using a walrus skull. The people of Nunivak Island had the opposite idea, of walrus spirits playing ball with a human skull.

In Sweden, it was thought the Arctic Seas were so full of fish that moonlight that fell onto the water was reflected back into the sky by the shiny scales of the fishes and that light became the Northern Lights.

But to others they were not so beautiful, but seen as something awful and terrifying!

Inuit elders warned their naughty children to behave, and would frighten them by saying when the lights disappeared completely from the sky they would take bad children with them. The First Nation people of Wisconsin, would gaze at the lights and believed they were a sign that war would come. They thought the lights were the ghosts of their fallen enemies who, restless for revenge, tried to rise up to fight again.

One explorer reported that the Greenland Inuit could hear the lights making sounds...a whistling, rustling, crackling. They said the sounds were the spirits running across the frost hardened snows of the sky. If you whistled back, it was said, the lights would come closer, turn and twist and dance and shine just for you. And in Lapland they believed if you shouted at the lights, they would brighten but they might also burn your hair or even carry you away, up into the sky with the lost spirits, where you would dance forever in a glowing rainbow of light. So instead of shouting they advised whispering.... Or they would protect themselves by clapping. This made the lights retreat higher and higher into the sky and the people would be safe from them.

The Algonquins of Ottawa and Ontario in Canada had a story of Nanahbozho, the creator of the Earth, who travelled to the far northlands. He built huge fires, and the Northern Lights were the reflection. The people far below understood the fire to be Nanahbozho's way of telling his people that he remembered them and was watching over them with love.

Why not see if you can find another story of the Northern Lights and tell it to someone you love tonight...?