



## Nez Perce Legend Sites



### Nez Perce Stories

At the heart of every culture are the stories and places that sustain them as a people. The homeland of the Nez Perce or Nimiipuu is surrounded by landmarks that serve as backdrops to stories about coyote and other spiritual entities. Coyote was a teacher, trickster, or hero depending on the particular story. Traditionally, these stories were told by elders in the winter time to their families. These stories taught children about the landforms that surrounded them every day and helped them learn their language, history and culture.

### Ant and Yellowjacket

The legend of the Ant and the Yellow jacket represents the role of Coyote as a teacher to the people. The ants and the yellow jackets were friendly and shared resources but had occasional arguments.

One day, however, the leader of the yellow jackets was sitting on a rock eating a salmon when the leader of the ants walked by. The ant became jealous and said that he wanted the rock and that the yellow jacket should have asked for permission before sitting there. They then started fighting very loudly, which attracted the attention of Coyote. Coyote asked them to stop fighting but they

ignored him and continued fighting even more loudly. Coyote then turned them to stone right where they stood. The moral of the story is that this is what happens to people who didn't listen.

This site is located at the junction of Hwy 12 and Hwy 95. There is a pull off and an interpretive sign at the site. The ant and the yellow jacket can be seen as a basalt rock outcropping. If you look closely, you can see their mouths fused together from being turned to stone during the fight.

### Coyote's Fishnet

In autumn, the people go to buffalo country to get food for the winter. Coyote had forgotten about this annual trip and was in the Clearwater River fishing for salmon. Black Bear came upon Coyote fishing and asked why he was still in the area instead of heading to buffalo country. Coyote did not want to admit that he had forgotten to leave with everyone else, so he got angry at Black Bear for being nosy. In his anger, Coyote flung his fishnet up onto the hill on the south side of the

Clearwater River and grabbed Black Bear by the scruff of his neck. He then yelled at Black Bear for interrupting him and threw him onto the hill on the north side of the river. Coyote then left for buffalo country.

The Fishnet legend site is located approximately 7 miles east of Lewiston, ID. There is a pullout along highway 95 and an interpretive sign. Additional sites of interest in the area are also marked

### Heart of the Monster

Coyote was building a fish ladder at Celilo [Falls, Oregon]. He was busy at this when someone shouted to him, "Why are you bothering with that? All of the people are gone" "Well," said Coyote to himself, "then I'll stop doing this because I was doing it for the people, and now I'll go along too."

From there he went along upstream, by way of the Salmon River country. Along the way he took a

good bath saying to himself, "Lest I make myself repulsive to his taste," and then dressed himself all up, "Lest he will vomit me up or spit me out." There he tied himself with rope to three mountains. From there he came along up and over the ridges. Suddenly, he saw a great head. He quickly hid himself in the grass and gazed at it. Never before in his life had he seen anything like it; never such a large thing – away off somewhere melting into the horizon was its gigantic body. Coyote

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## Heart of the Monster Continued

shouted to him, “Oh Monster we are going to inhale each other!” The big eyes of the monster roved around looking all over for Coyote but did not find him, because Coyote’s body was painted with clay to achieve a perfect protective coloring in the grass. Coyote had on his back a pack consisting of five stone knives, some pure pitch, and a flint fire making set. Presently Coyote shook the grass to and fro and shouted again, “Monster! We are going to inhale each other.” Powerfully and noisily he drew in his first breath and the great monster just swayed and quivered. Then Coyote said, “Now you inhale me, for already you have swallowed all the people, so swallow me too lest I become lonely.” Now the Monster inhaled like a mighty wind. Thus he dashed right into the monster’s mouth.

From there he walked along down the throat of the monster. Presently Coyote arrived at the heart and cut off slabs of fat and threw them to the people. And now Coyote started a fire with his flint, and smoke drifted up through the monster’s openings. There was his fire still burning near the heart and now the monster began to writhe in pain and Coyote began cutting away on the heart, whereupon very shortly he broke the stone knife. Immediately he took another and in a short time this one also broke and Coyote said to all the people, “Gather up all the bones and carry them to his openings; pile them up and when he falls dead kick all the bones outside.” Then again with another knife he began cutting away at the heart. The third knife broke and the fourth, leaving only one more. Now the heart hung by only a very small piece of muscle and Coyote was cutting away on it with his last stone knife. The monster’s heart was still barely hanging when his last knife

broke, whereupon Coyote threw himself on the heart and hung on just barely tearing it loose with his hands. In his death convulsions the monster opened all the openings of his body and now the people kicked the bones outside and went on out.

They carved the great monster and now Coyote began dealing out portions of the body to various parts of the country all over the land; toward the sunrise. Toward the sunset, toward the warmth, toward the cold, and by that act destining and forenaming the various people; Coeur d’Alene, Cayuse, Pend Oreilles, Flathead, Blackfeet, Crow, Sioux, et al. And now Fox came up to Coyote, “What is the meaning of this, Coyote? You have distributed all of the body to faraway lands but have given yourself nothing for this immediate locality.” And he turned to the people and said, “Bring me some water with which to wash my hands.” They brought him water and he washed his hands and now with the bloody wash water he sprinkled the local regions saying, “You may be little people but you will be powerful. Even though you will be little people because I have deprived you, nevertheless you will be very, very, manly. Only a short time away is the coming of the human race.”

The Heart of the Monster site is located in East Kamiah off of Hwy 12. At the site, you can see the Monster’s heart and liver. There is audio available to listen to the legend and a short trail that leads to the Monster’s heart and an interpretive shelter. There are also bathroom facilities and water available at the site. In addition to being a legend site, this area was also used by the Nez Perce to cross the Clearwater River.

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## Additional Reading

Aoki, Hauro. *Nez Perce Texts*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1979.

Heady, Eleanor B. *Tales of the Nimipoo From the Land of the Nez Perce Indians*. New York: World Publication Company, 1970.

Phinney, Albert. *Nez Perce Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1934.

Slickpoo, Allen P. Sr. *Nu moe poom tit wah tit (Nez Perce Legends)*. Lapwai, Idaho: Nez Perce Tribe, 1972.