

## THUNDERSTORM AND RUG MAKING SEASON

When I started researching the Aboriginal seasons in Melbourne a few years ago there was a lot of fragmentary information, and also some misinformation. This misinformation was mainly caused by people having tried to equate Aboriginal seasons with the four traditional European seasons.

For instance the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, who took up his appointment in 1839, had even translated an Aboriginal word for 'Autumn'. It does not take much thought to know that this was patently ridiculous.

Australian trees are not deciduous, so there are no 'Autumn leaves'. Apart from this, the nominal three month period from March to May in Melbourne has a number of different weather patterns in it. Any three days in Melbourne has, let alone three months.

What I did know however, was that Aboriginal seasons were related to what you had to do in a particular season, not just the prevailing weather. I also knew that Aboriginal people worked by a lunar calendar, although there is precious little information recorded about its workings, apart from the year starting on summer solstice.

The season about which there seemed to be the most knowledge was the 'Eel Harvest and Inter-clan Business Season' in 'late summer'. However there was some confusion about when eel harvest actually started and finished. The strongest consensus though, was that it went from the middle of February to the middle of March.

The next easiest season to identify was 'Burning-off Season', which in southeast Australia went from mid-April to mid-May.

When I looked at the lunar cycle, starting at the summer solstice on December 22, it consists of 13 months of 28 days. So the third lunar month goes from February 16 to March 15. This was a neat fit with the key eel harvest period.

The fifth lunar month from April 13 to May 10 was also a neat fit for the burning-off season. Nobody had suggested that the eel harvest went for two months, so the question arose, was there a missing season that occupied the fourth lunar month?

When I looked at the weather records for this fourth lunar month period from March 16 to April 12, it seemed to have its own particular pattern. This is when there are frequent high west wind electrical storms, accompanied by heavy downpours. It seemed obvious that people would want to get home from the eel harvest season before these storms.

No doubt there were plenty of warning signs in animal behaviour that would have alerted them to the coming storms. I remember being told that before cyclone Tracey struck and devastated Darwin in 1974, all the Aboriginal people left town. When asked why, the reply was: *'When the ducks left, we knew we should too'*.

With this possibility of a new season, I spoke to a few Elders. Bill Nicholson in particular thought it made sense of a lot of seemingly random facts. Male eels began migrating in early February two weeks before the much larger females, but the males were not hunted. This was when the message was sent out that eel harvest would begin in two weeks' time.

The host clan then set about building smoke houses and catching game, so that cured meat would be available for their guests, when they arrived. At the conclusion of the eel harvest and before the first storm struck about mid-March, the visitors made their way home. Life over the next four weeks, during the period of thunderstorms and heavy downpours, was mainly village bound.

It was therefore during this time that the pelts that had accumulated over the eel and inter-clan business season were stitched together as rugs, cloaks, carry bags and suchlike. This applied for all clans, whether hosts or guests.

The work involved also included the art work decorating the leather side of the pelts. The decorated leather side of a possum-skin cloak was worn on the outside, thus giving a waterproof protection. The soft fur was therefore worn on the inside, giving warmth and comfort against the skin.

It was a matter of some amusement to Aboriginal people when European photographers always asked them to turn their coats inside-out and have the fur showing for the photograph.

The first signals for the end of the storm and rug making season and the start of the cool dry autumn burning off period, were the nesting behaviour of possums and tunnelling behaviour of wombats. From this time on wombats would be seen during the daytime either renovating their burrows or just sun baking.

However the actual commencement of the burning off season in mid-April each year only began with the advent of the first morning dew. Its arrival was the signal that this moisture would facilitate the slow, cold-fire burning of the accumulated dry grasses. These smouldering cold fires meant that there was no danger of the flames igniting the tree canopies and causing the eucalyptus fireballs of Australian bushfires.