

THE EIGHT ABORIGINAL SEASONS IN MELBOURNE

Europeans of course see seasons as four equal periods of three months, spring, summer, autumn and winter. However, anyone living in Melbourne can tell you our weather is much more variable than that. We can have four seasons in one day. Aboriginal people had a much more sophisticated understanding of Melbourne weather and more particularly, what they needed to do at certain times of the year.

There were eight Aboriginal seasons in all in Melbourne, but some seasons were only four weeks in length. Others were two or three months, but these were all lunar months of 28 days each. The Aboriginal calendar therefore had 13 months of 28 days, and the New Year started at the summer solstice on December 22.

It is quite surprising how closely their seasons are tied to these lunar months, but in reality the beginning and end dates of Aboriginal seasons were rather rubbery. This was because each season was dependent on a number of environmental signals, like the migration of particular birds or the flowering of particular plants.

To show this close meshing of the lunar cycle with the seasons in Melbourne and the activities associated with each of the eight seasons, the following brief summary is offered.

Beginning on December 22 the first season occupied the first two lunar months until February 15. It was referred to as 'Hot North Wind and Fix the Fishtraps Season'. It was heralded by the flowering of Coranderrk, the Christmas Bush. The Woiwurung word for 'hot north wind' is Mallee because that is where it comes from. At this time women kept their newborn babies near the coolness of the water and time was spent fixing the fish traps after the damage caused by the October floods and before the coming eel harvest.

'Eel Harvest and Inter-Clan Business Season' was the second season and it occupied the third lunar month from February 16 to March 15. This was a time when mature eels began migrating downstream to make their way to the Coral Sea to breed. Being much smaller than the females, the male eels begin migrating a fortnight earlier. The males are not hunted, but messages are sent out that the harvest will begin in two weeks. Many people from other clans therefore visited during this period of feasting, so this was when matters of trade, justice and environmental management were decided.

The fourth lunar month from March 16 to April 12 is a time of late summer electrical storms and heavy downpours. It was therefore an indoors time when pelts accumulated from the previous season of feasting are turned into rugs and cloaks. This was therefore the 'Thunderstorm and Rug Making Season' and it ends with the first morning dew.

Although rainfall in Melbourne is quite even across the 12 months except for about double the normal in October, the 13 lunar month calendar reveals a rain shadow period in the fifth lunar month from April 13 to May 10. That is, most of the rain in April falls in the first half of the month, whilst most of the rain in May falls in the second half. This then is the 'Morning

Mist and Burning-off Season'. It was a time of burning off in many areas of Australia, but particularly southern and eastern Australia.

This was then followed by the 'Cold West Wind and Artefact Making Season' which occupied the next three lunar months from May 11 to August 2. This was again a more indoors time when women's pregnancies were advancing and time was particularly spent in educating children and preparing the older ones for their coming initiation.

The end of this season was signalled by the flowering of silver wattles. The ninth lunar month was also a one-month season occupying August 3 to August 30, and was the 'Morning Frost and Bark Harvest Season'. Due to the sap now rising in the trees, this was a time when bark harvesting was easiest and new canoes could be made before the October floods.

The arrival of Darebin the Welcome Swallow and the hatching of butterflies marks the start of 'Regeneration and Women's Business Season'. This occupies the tenth and eleventh lunar months from August 31 to October 25. Through the contraceptive properties of the kangaroo apple, Aboriginal women were able to plan all births to occur in this period and so be in tune with nature.

The final season occupied the twelfth and thirteenth lunar months from October 26 to December 21. This was the 'Yam Harvest and Men's Business Season'. Yam cultivation and harvesting was very much the responsibility of women, so now that their birthing and initiations were out of the way, it was back to the grindstone. This was the time for the men to conduct their own initiation ceremonies before the heat of summer returned.