

Hidden Treasure/Historical Truth  
Animal Lore of the Oglala Sioux  
By Katherine Bone

Among Native Americans, the Oglala Sioux believed strongly in animal lore and the supernatural. Being closely tied to nature and all living things, observances of animal behavior were incorporated into everyday life creating a belief system that protected 'the people' from all forms of personal and public disaster. In a sense, animals were witnesses of human frailty and bestowers of strength to all who sought their power. Whether by vision quest, sun dance, ceremonial celebration, or song, animals imparted special powers to those who sought them, and molded the Oglala lifestyle.

The bison was the chief supernatural animal and deemed to be chief animal over all the earth. It provided food, shelter, and warmth. To the Oglala, who observed bison habits for lengthy periods, much was learned about protection, moral values, and Mother Earth. These lessons were applied from birth. And at the time of death, dead were wrapped in buffalo robes and placed on high scaffolds to aid their spiritual journey back to where life began. Since buffalo and the earth were thought to be one, the body was returned to the all-encompassing arms of that which created life, *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Spirit.

As buffalo were believed to radiate feminine power, virtues such as chastity, productiveness, and hospitality, were expected of women. Great care was used in protecting women and celebrations were established to honor a young girl's entrance into womanhood. One of these ceremonies was modeled after the buffalo itself. For when a calf is born during winter, the cow blows a red substance over her newborn to seal in body heat. Consequently in the Buffalo Ceremony, a medicine man dances in a circle and blows red dust onto a young girl to bless and sanctify her journey into womanhood.

Elk were singled out for strength, speed, and courage. The animal's ability to maneuver massive antlers through dense foliage astounded the Oglala. And yet, reverence of this animal went even further. Beauty, gallantry, and protection, became emblems of the elk. Its ivory teeth were valued above all else, for even into old age, these teeth remain after all others have been damaged or lost. Ivory teeth symbolized long life, were gifts to children, and decorated women's clothing.

Oglala took notice of the elk's sexual prowess. They admired the Blue Elk's ability to attract females with one single matting call and created a *love flute* to use for their own purposes. Thought to bestow amorous medicine, this flute was practically impossible to resist when played for the opposite sex. By watching the elk and mimicking their matting ritual, Oglala captured, within a flute, the sexual charm needed to attract the woman of their choice. They learned about relationships between men and women, and the supernatural power called into being at creation.

Deer were highly prized animals and their hides were in great demand. The animal's swift nature, ability to hide and endure thirst for long periods, amazed the Oglala, especially when conjured to appear during certain ceremonial songs. Yet, the deer had a double nature that made men wary. While thought to aid men on their quest through life, deer had a dark and dangerous allure. A deer had the ability to change form, to appear as a young woman, lead men astray with intoxicating perfume, and then unexpectedly return to original form. Mocked men were often driven to kill and for that

reason, met an untimely end, or were driven insane unless the temptation to kill the deer was resisted. If a man walked away from the deer completely unscathed, he was seen by other members of his tribe to possess great power and self-control.

The bear was chief of the underground supernatural forces, masculine in nature as opposed to the buffalo's feminine. Representing knowledge and the earth in frightening contrast, the bear demonstrated supremacy and fearlessness, particularly noted because of the bear's habit of digging underground for roots and hibernating during winter. Oglala men sought bear power fiercely. It was believed that women should have nothing to do with bears because of this.

Since bears dig for roots and herbs, and also eat berries found above ground, bears were thought to be chief healers among animals. If a man dreamed of bears, he too, was expected to behave aggressively at one moment and ill-tempered the next, as well as peaceful, filled with knowledge of herbs and medicines. A man who dreamed of bears was fearless but exemplified unusual kindness, imitating the bear's contrary nature.

The badger was associated with curing and warfare because of its enormous claws and unyielding combat techniques. Like the bear, the badger symbolized strong medicine, but because it was smaller than the bear, this medicine was only used for children. The badger was stubborn and never backed down before a foe, which prompted warriors to form Badger Societies who emulated the badger in battle.

The skunk was another inflexible animal. With its own particular brand of combat, the skunk paralleled the courageous, determined badger's ways, and had its own mysterious appeal. In fact, the skunk's skin was said to line the heels of Dakota chiefs during battle, emphasizing self-assuredness, warning all there would be no retreat.

The wolf's speed and wisdom were held in great esteem. Oglala scouts wore wolf hides, prayed to the great hunters for advice, and scrutinized everything a second time just like their animal counterparts. Observing the pack gave men perspectives on hunting, the habits of man, and an attainable unity of the tribe. The wolf's supernatural power was highly prized and brandished by the Wolf Society to protect the tribe during times of war.

While the fox was as relentless as the wolf, it was gentle. Unlike the Wolf Society, the Kit Fox Society focused more on policing camp and hunting. Because the fox also dug in the earth, the fox had the power to reveal locations of herbs needed by the medicine man. The fox also shared expertise on how to swiftly escape enemies. It taught men how to travel through dangerous territory and to understand courage under fire.

To the Oglala, there was no real distinction between living or supernatural beings. All were believed to be joined together by the earth and created for a single purpose. Animals (the four-leggeds), birds (the winged ones and two-leggeds), and crawlers, taught about life. Oglala learned from childhood that all beings depended on one another or perished, because they believed, and still believe, all are a cog rotating in the wheel of life. Animal lore, like many legends and folk lore passed down throughout time, taught the Oglala about life. And through animal study, *the people* learned to live in unison with the world.