

How The Crow Got His Black Feathers

(Wurunjerri people – Kulin Nation, Victoria)

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Long ago, in the Dreaming, Crow was not the black-feathered bird we know today. His feathers were light, some say even white, and they shone bright in the sun. He was clever, sharp-eyed, and quick with his beak. But Crow was also mischievous, always watching for chances to trick others.

In those days, the world was cold and dark at night. The people and the animals had no fire. They shivered when the wind blew and ate their food raw. But far away lived the Fire People, who kept flames burning in their camp. They guarded their fire carefully and never shared it with anyone else.

Crow's plan

One evening, as the stars rose, Crow sat on a branch and watched smoke curling into the sky from the Fire People's camp. His eyes gleamed.

"If I could steal a burning stick," he thought, "the people would no longer freeze at night. They would have warmth and light. They would be grateful — and I would be remembered as clever."

He ruffled his pale feathers and laughed softly. "Yes. I will be the one to bring them fire."
So Crow waited and planned.



Approaching the camp

At dawn, while the Fire People still slept, Crow crept closer. He hopped quietly over the ground, careful not to snap a twig. The fire still smouldered, its coals glowing red. Crow stretched out his beak.

But just as he caught hold of a burning stick, one of the Fire People awoke. With a cry, the Fire People leapt to their feet.
"Thief!" they shouted. "Crow is stealing our flame!"

Crow's wings beat furiously. He seized the stick in his beak and soared into the air. Sparks flew as he carried it high above the treetops.

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The chase

The Fire People were furious. They grabbed their spears and their weapons and ran after him.
“Do not let him escape!” they cried. “The fire is ours!”

Crow flapped hard, but the burning stick grew hotter. The flames licked his feathers, and smoke trailed behind him. Still he held on.

He darted low, and sparks fell to the ground. Where they landed, grass and bark began to blaze. Soon, patches of fire spread across the plains.

The other animals looked up and gasped. “Crow is bringing us fire!” they cried. “Look! At last we will be warm.”



Crow’s feathers burn

The heat grew fiercer as Crow flew. The burning stick scorched his pale feathers, turning them dark. Smoke blackened his wings, and the smell of singed feathers filled the air.

Still, Crow did not let go. He flew on until, at last, he dropped the stick into the middle of the people’s camp. Flames leapt high, golden and bright. For the first time, the people gathered around a fire of their own.
They held out their hands to the warmth. They cooked roots and meat. They laughed with joy and thanked Crow for his courage.

But when Crow looked at himself, he saw that his beautiful feathers were no longer light. They were blackened and charred, and no matter how he preened, the soot would not come off.

The gift of fire

From that day forward, Crow’s feathers remained black. He was no longer the pale bird he once had been.
The people remembered what he had done. They told their children, “Crow was clever and bold. He tricked the Fire People and brought us fire, but in doing so he lost his bright feathers forever.”

And so the story has been told, that Crow, once pale, became dark because he carried fire in his beak to give warmth to the people. His cleverness gave a great gift, but it also left him changed for all time.