

The Race to Coso

Contributed by Steven Foster

Not so long ago, just the other day in fact, it was decided that there would be another big race between the people. The contestants would start by the ocean over by Hearst's Castle and race once again across the Range of Light to Coso Hot Springs. This time there would be no distinctions made between the ground and sky animals. Birds, insects, animals, and the heavenly bodies could pick either side. Coyote would be the leader of one team and Wolf would lead the other. All agreed ahead of time that the winners would push the losers into the fire at Coso. Mud Hen would be judge and fire tender.

The people began to choose up sides. Eagle preferred to be on Wolf's side because Wolf was a big-shot medicine man. Mallard and Frog were Coyote's aunts, so they stayed loyal to him. Zebra-Tail Lizard and Bear went over to Wolf. Stink Beetle and Mouse chose Coyote. Chuckwalla, Badger, Scorpion, and Kingsnake went for Wolf. Bobcat, Owl, and Rattlesnake went over to Coyote. At first, Sun stayed neutral. Then he made up his mind and took Wolf. Roadrunner pretended to go over to Wolf, but then joined Coyote's side. Soon all the animals were on one side or the other. When the runners lined up by the swimming pool at San Simeon, Coyote noticed that Stink Beetle was packing a bundle of reeds. "Get rid of those damned reeds!" he yelled. "They'll hang us up!" But Stink Beetle wouldn't listen. He was hoping to make himself a quiverfull of strong arrows. The others were travelling light. Bear had shed his coat. Rattlesnake had thrown away his rattles. Scorpion had told her babies to get down and walk on their own eight feet. Chuckwalla had been fasting for weeks and looked like a scarecrow. Only Stink Beetle was packing extra weight. The gun went off. With a yell, the runners started out. All but Coyote. He had fallen asleep, the victim of Wolf's sorcery. Frog noticed his plight and hopped back to help. She jumped over him and peed. "Wha . . . what's that? It's raining!" said Coyote, waking up. The other runners were already far ahead. Wolf was leading the pack. Bear was second. Kangaroo Rat was a distant third. Coyote ran to catch up, Frog hopping in his tracks. Before long, he overtook Stink Beetle, who was having a hard time running with all those reeds on his back. "I told you, get rid of those damned reeds!" yelled Coyote, as he blew by with Frog on his tail.

All the animals were doing their best. Bat was having a hard time in daylight. Owl too. Scorpion kept crawling under rocks to rest. Quail couldn't make up her mind which way to go. Zebra-Tail, the fastest of the lizards, could only go where there was hot sand. Sun kept on coming. Great Blue Heron was a fine runner, but she had to stop and peck at the mud. Hummingbird was so fast he scorched the air, but had to pull in frequently for gas. On the west side of the Range of Light, Coyote caught up with Badger, who had a blister on his big toe. It was very cold. Without his coat, Bear froze his fanny off. He turned into a cave to hibernate. Rattlesnake's blood ran as slow as molassas. Chuckwalla, frightened by a low-flying jet, puffed up and got stuck in a crack. Poorwill stumbled around in the cold like a drunk. Everybody was happy to get across the divide and down into the warm valley. Wolf was still ahead, but Coyote was coming on strong. Frog and Roadrunner were tied for third. Dragonfly, the dark horse, was moving up. Eagle had fallen back, sidetracked by something Vulture found. Mallard was finishing moderately strong, considering his sprained ankle. Fox was nowhere to be seen. Wolf looked back and saw Coyote right behind him. "Go to sleep Coyote," he said. Coyote fell dead asleep in his tracks. Frog, who was hot on Coyote's tail, saw it happen, but she was going too fast to stop and help. Roadrunner, colliding with the sleeping Coyote, actually flew through the air for a few yards and came down in a heap. Frog was closing in on Wolf. The Coso Mountains loomed ahead. Wolf thought he was an easy winner. Every time he looked back, Frog hopped out of sight. The only runner Wolf could see was Stink Beetle and his pack of reeds. Wolf eased off a little. "I'm way ahead," he thought. He didn't see Frog on his tail. All he had to do was cross the river and he was home free.

He began to swim across. That's when Frog came up alongside. "Go to sleep, Frog," said Wolf. Immediately, Frog rolled over, belly up. Wolf pulled himself up the other side and shook his coat. He trotted toward the finish line. Up ahead he could see Mud Hen waiting for the winner. But who was that waiting beside her? It couldn't be. It was. Stink Beetle had already crossed the finish line, having floated easily across the river on his raft of reeds. So Stink Beetle won. And because he was on Coyote's side, Coyote's people won. The other side had to jump into the fire. But where was the fire? "Look over there," said Mud Hen, pointing to a high electrified fence. GEO-THERMAL ENERGY -- KEEP OUT said the sign. The people didn't know what to make of this. Bewildered, they watched trucks roar by and men in hard hats tending rows of silver steam pipes and valves. Later that night, all the people crept under the fence through a hole dug by Badger. They wandered through a wilderland of hissing steam vents and wells, keeping away from the mercury vapor lamps. But the place was eerie. Nobody was watching where they were going. One by one they fell over the edge of a cliff into a vat of boiling mud. Sun was the last to fall in. Next day, morning didn't come. Coyote woke up from his sleep and looked around in the darkness. He couldn't see anything. Where were the racers? Where were Wolf and Mouse and Eagle? "Hey you guys," he called out. "Where are you?" There was no response. "Come on!" he yelled. "I know you're playing a trick on me. Come out!

Don't leave me all alone!" No response. It started to rain. Coyote began to worry. He knew his friends must be somewhere. They couldn't just disappear. He started to work medicine to make them reappear. He ran around in circles in the dark, chanting "Hut, hut, hut, hut," and said every prayer he knew. He wandered to and fro, over here, over there, close, then far away, calling to his friends. After a while, he began to howl. -- Retold from an account by George Collins, Big Pine Paiute