



Fire &
Rescue NSW

Traditional fire stories



Crocodile took the fire stick

The crocodile took a fire stick with which to make a fire, for there was then none in the world. But every time he tried he broke the drill stick. Soon his hands were cut and bleeding and broken fire sticks lay about. Then the frilled lizard arrived. He sat down and continued work on a basket that he had started. The crocodile asked him to try making fire. The frilled lizard, who had fire sticks of his own in the basket, told the crocodile that he had been gripping the drill incorrectly, and then made fire. 'Waku (sister's son) of mine,' said the crocodile, 'it is a good thing you are my relative and it is a good thing that you made fire for us, for all people.' The crocodile took grass, lit it, and built a huge fire.

Finally, a myth from the Dalabon in Beswick Reserve shows how the crocodile selfishly guarded fire for himself only, until he was tricked by the rainbow bird who gave the fire to men.

The crocodile possessed fire sticks. The rainbow bird would ask for fire, but was knocked back every time. The rainbow bird was without fire. He had no light. He slept without a camp fire and ate his food of fish, goanna, lizards and mussels raw. The rainbow bird could not get fire because the crocodile was 'boss' for fire and would knock him back saying, 'You can't take fire!'

'What am I to do for men? Are they to eat raw food?'

'They can eat it raw. I won't give you fire sticks!'

The crocodile had fire. No man made it. The crocodile had had fire from a long time ago. Then the rainbow bird put fire everywhere. Every tree has fire inside now. It was the rainbow bird who put fire inside.

The rainbow bird spoke. 'Wirid, wirid, wirid!' He climbed into a tree, a dry place, a dry tree. Down he came, like a jet plane, to snatch the fire sticks, but the crocodile had them clutched to his breast. Again and again the rainbow bird tried.

'You eat raw food,' the crocodile told him. 'I'm not giving you fire.'

'I want fire. You are too mean. If I had had fire I would have given it to you. Wirid, wirid, wirid, wirid, wirid!' Down he came. He missed. He flew up. 'Wirid, wirid, wirid!' They argued again.

'I'm not giving you fire. You are only a little man. Me, I'm a big man. You eat raw food!'

The rainbow bird was angry. 'Why do you knock me back all the time?'

The crocodile turned around for a moment. Snatch! The rainbow bird had the fire stick! 'Wirid, wirid, wirid!' Away he flew.

The crocodile could do nothing. He has no wings. The rainbow bird was above. 'You can go down into the water,' he called. 'I'm going to give fire to men!' The rainbow

bird put fire everywhere, in every kind of tree except the pandanus. He made light, he burned, he cooked fish, crocodile, tortoise.

The crocodile had gone down into the water. The two had separated.

'I'll be a bird. I'll go into dry places,' the rainbow bird called out. 'You can go into the water. If you go to dry places you might die. I'll stay on top.'

The rainbow bird put the fire sticks in his behind. They stick out from there now. That was a long time ago.

Story courtesy of *Australian Dreaming: 40 000 Years of Aboriginal History* (1980)
comp. Jennifer Isaacs, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, NSW, p. 106

The Crow and the Eagle

Long ago in the Dreamtime, the crow was white. The crow and the eagle were the best of friends. They lived together in the same camp. When they got up in the morning, the crow used to tell the eagle, 'You go up to the hills and look for the big red hill kangaroo. I will go down to the billabong and see if I can catch some ducks for our dinner.'

The eagle went up into the hills and the crow went down to the billabong and caught lots of ducks! He had a hairstring tied around his waist and he used a long, hollow reed to breathe underwater. He'd jump into the water and sink below the surface. When the ducks were passing, he would grab them by the legs, one by one, and tuck them in the hairstring around his waist.

When he had enough, he'd get out of the water and make a big fire and start cooking the ducks. Every day he had a good feed there, then he would go back to camp empty-handed.

Every day the eagle came home and asked the crow, 'Have you any tucker for me?' And the crow would say, 'Sorry, I didn't catch anything today.' He always told the eagle to go up into the hills to look for kangaroo. Then one day the eagle thought, 'That crow is up to something! He's telling me lies.'

So he came back earlier than usual but he didn't go to the camp. No, he went to the billabong to catch the crow at his tricks. He saw the crow rushing around hiding the cooked ducks under some leaves.

When he came near, the eagle asked the crow, 'Have you kept any food for me?' The eagle started rushing about, looking here and there as if he was trying to find something.

Then eagle saw some grease on the hot ashes and around crow's mouth, where he'd been eating, and there was grease on the crow's hands. 'This fire has grease on it!' shouted the eagle. 'So that's what you've been up to. You've been hiding my share of the food, and telling me lies!'

Eagle got very angry, grabbed the crow and threw him into the hot ashes. The crow jumped out of the fire but the eagle kept on throwing him back onto the coals, until he was burnt black all over.

Some of the eagle's feathers were burnt too. That's why he's brown. The crow was punished for his greediness and that's why he's black today.

Story courtesy of *Tjarany Roughtail (Stories told be the Kukatja)* (1992) Gracie Greene, Joe Tramacchi, Lucille Gill, Magabala Books, Broome, WA, pp. 5-8

The Crow and the Magpie

Many years ago there lived two brothers who belonged to the Crow family, and although both brothers were liked by all who knew them, they couldn't get along with each other; they seemed to be always bickering and arguing.

When hunting for food Crow and Magpie would go in separate directions, because they knew that if they hunted together their quarrelling would reduce their chances of being successful in the hunt.

On their arrival back at the campsite at dusk, each would light his own fire and begin the task of cooking his evening meal.

The fortunes of each varied from day to day, but often Magpie would arrive home with much more food than Crow, and naturally Crow would be jealous, which would cause another of their arguments. Then the calm of the night would be shattered by Crow and Magpie shouting angrily as they hurled abuse at each other.

One evening their quarrelling was so intense and hateful that they came to blows. Crow challenged Magpie to come to the circle of light around the fire and fight. Magpie then attacked Crow and as they fought, kicking the dust and firesticks in all directions, Crow struck Magpie a stunning blow which sent him hurtling into the centre of the hot coals and ash.

Crow immediately felt sorry for what he had done because he could see that Magpie was seriously hurt, so Crow stepped forward and helped Magpie to his feet. As Magpie stood up Crow noticed that Magpie's glossy black coat was sprinkled with the white ash of the fire.

When Crow pointed this out to Magpie, he became very angry and told Crow, 'From this moment on I shall no longer accept you as my brother, but shall be the chief of a new tribe which shall forever bear my name.' This was the beginning of the Magpie tribe, who are just like Crows except that their feathers are, in places, ash white, whereas Crows are black all over. And this is why Crows and Magpies are never friendly to each other.

In the bush, even to this day, you will often see different kinds of birds feeding harmoniously together, but you will never see Crows and Magpies doing this. If some Crows are feeding on a dead animal they will not let any Magpies join them. The only thing the Magpies can do, if there are enough of them, is to attack the Crows and drive them off. And similarly, if Magpies are feeding on a carcass, the Crows will wait at a distance and not dare to join in unless there are enough of them to fight the Magpies and drive them away.

Story courtesy of *Aboriginal Legends from the Bibulman Tribe* (1981) Eddie Bennell and Anne Thomas, Rigby, Australia, pp. 19-20

The opal that turned into fire

How the Wongaibon obtained fire

In the faraway past there was no fire and the people had to cook their meat in the sun. It was noticed that two old women always had more tender meat than the others. They were Gimma the rat kangaroo, and Yummar the bronzewing pigeon. Their secret fire was shut in the nut from a needlebush and then stowed in a dilly bag. The two women went into the bush by themselves and cooked their meat, then hid the fire again. Everyone tried to find out what they did to their food, but the two old women were too vigilant.

Eventually, Bullur the night owl volunteered to watch them. His coat was the colour of bark and he could sit motionless while staring with his big eyes. He left the camp early and made a detour so that his tracks were hidden. Then he climbed a tree in a place that the women were known to frequent. They arrived soon afterwards and settled under the tree where the owl-man was watching. He saw them gather dead grass and sticks before they drew the needle-nut out of their bag. It only took a moment for the fire to come out of the nut and ignite their firewood. They placed a fat goanna on the hot ashes and one of the women waved her hands over the fire. This prevented the smoke rising and being seen by others. During the process she sang a quiet little song to encourage the fire to continue burning.

When the goanna was cooked, the fire was put back in the nut and both women ate a hearty meal. Bullur's mouth watered and his pangs of hunger were hard to bear in silence. Later in the day they returned to the camp and Bullur did the same by another route. He reported what he had seen to the elders, who decided to hold a special corroboree and invite the two fire-women. They hoped that the women would become so absorbed by the performance that some smart fellow would have the chance to snatch the fire-bag.

All performers were on the corroboree ground and the leading figures were trying to create great amusement, but it did not work. Gimma and Yummar sat stolidly with the precious bag held between them. It seemed to draw their attention more than all the display and hilarity that was happening in front of them. Famous dancers from a neighbouring group tried to amuse the two old women without success. The pelican, Wirraia, and the magpie, Kurruwur, did some farcical acts but were equally useless.

The elders considered this project was important and they asked another group to send their most laughter inducing players. Two very comical characters arrived: Billir the black cockatoo, and Kulu the shingleback lizard. Eventually Kulu danced along on the point of his tail, defecating as he did so. This made some impression on the women, but they still remained self-possessed. Then Billir jumped amongst the performers with his lower bowel protruding and excreta mixed with blood ran down his tail. The two women found this sight irresistible and broke into uncontrolled laughter.

This was the perfect moment for Girriki, the sparrow-hawk, to grab the bag and he ran a short distance before upsetting the contents on to the ground. Fire was released and spread in all directions with Girriki urging the flames to travel faster. By his special power, he produced a whirlwind which increased the spread of the flashing flames. As it blazed along, he put some into every tree in the forest, both soft and hardwood. That is why the people were able to obtain fire by rubbing the two kinds of wood together. Ever since that corroboree, the black cockatoo has reddish stains on the feathers underneath the tail, evidence of the glare from the flames. This also appears on the back and head of the sparrow-hawk.

There are several species of rat kangaroos in Australia. Girriki, the sparrow-hawk, is also known as collared-sparrow-hawk; Yummar, the bronzewing pigeon, is *Phaps chalcoptera*; and a needlebush is *Hakea acicularis*.

Miranen would have heard about the arrival of fire towards the end of the last century, from the Wongaibon, their territory was south of the Darling River (Mathews, 1906). Cobar, which was in their country, contained many historic relics.

The origin of fire

Bandicoot had the monopoly of fire, enclosed in a nut, always carried and hidden from others. People envied him because his meat looked better than theirs, which only gained warmth after lying on a rock in the mid-day sun. They also noticed that his spear barbs were neatly attached with gum and his weapons were extremely well finished. Pigeon and Sparrow-hawk were told to follow him when he was hunting and noticed smoke rising from his camp. This was a strange sight, so they approached him silently and unexpectedly. Bandicoot rushed to stow his fire in the nut, but Sparrow-hawk was a fast moving fellow and grabbed some of it. He set fire to every tree in the vicinity, and the people have had their share since that day.

Miranen did not mention who told him this story, but it came from Western Australia, a long way from Wongaibon country in New South Wales (Mathews, 1906). The similarity of storage in a nut and quick action of the sparrow-hawk suggests some common origin with the Wongaibon story. Gum, one of the best adhesives, had to be warmed in a fire before being used and warmth made wood more pliable for constructing tools or weapons.

How the Kamilaroi acquired fire

Crow was the first person to know the value of fire and his people wondered why blood was not visible around his mouth after eating meat. They could not avoid these dribbles themselves and became very suspicious. His only reply to their questions was that he kept clean because he cut up his meat finely with a stone knife. They did not believe him and invited him to a corroboree where some humorous men were going to perform. Although there were a lot of excellent dancers, Crow did not seem very interested.

Shingleback and a partner danced while singing rather a rude song, and their behaviour was bad enough to attract a bored or sleepy person. While the lizards were performing, excreta was trickling down their legs and if they gave a special jump there was an additional discharge. Crow was engrossed, so Sparrow-hawk quickly grabbed the bag containing the fire and ran away with it. Crow rushed after him and the fire was jerked out of the bag during the scuffle between the two men. The dry grass and leaves were ignited while Crow tried to put out the fire by stamping on the flames. This did not succeed, so he rolled on the burning grass, but all attempts to regain possession of his fire were hopeless. It spread over the country, and all people had their share for cooking and other purposes since that day in the past.

Crow's gleaming white feathers were saturated with blackness and that colour has always remained. The slight white rings under a crow's eyes show where severe scorching had occurred. Severe burns to a dark skin often cause a permanent white patch or scar, a result known all too well by Aborigines, for whom burns were probably the most common accident. One of the best cures was liberal application of pelican oil which was in plentiful supply in the body of each bird.

Story courtesy of *The Opal that turned into Fire* (1994) Janet Mathews (comp), Isobel White (ed.), Magabala Books, Broome, Western Australia, pp. 36-38

Water-rat and fire

There was a time, which lasted many ages, when man lacked the most valued gift that mankind has ever known, the gift of fire. Strange to tell, it was discovered by Water-rat of all people! Before his epoch-making discovery, men lived a miserable existence, eating food of every kind raw and shivering in their makeshift shelters on winter nights.

Amongst those who suffered in this way were Water-rat and his wife. Life went on pleasantly enough in summer, but in winter, after spending some hours foraging for food in the billabong where he lived, Water-rat would creep through the tunnel that led to his burrow, soaked to the skin and feeling as miserable as only a Water-rat can feel.

The only way he could get any warmth into his flesh and bones was to snuggle close to his wife, an attention she failed to appreciate. And this was not the only thing she complained about. Their home was too small, especially now that the family was increasing. In summer it was hot and stuffy. In winter a dank wind blew through the tunnel from the billabong, penetrating every corner.

'We need a larger home,' she kept saying. 'Why don't you make another tunnel with a room at the end where the wind won't whistle round it? I can't keep anything dry where we are. When you come in from food gathering, water gets everywhere and makes puddles on the floor. Look, there's mud everywhere you've been walking.'

Water-rat was disinclined for the hard work entailed in digging a tunnel and constructing an annexe to his burrow. It was all very well in his courting days, when he was young and strong, but now he was older and most of the day was taken up in feeding a brood of young Water-rats.

Constant nagging by his wife at last drove him to it. From then on he was the one who did most of the complaining. The further he got from the soft soil of the bank, the harder it became, and full of rocks. When he came to the roots of a tree, he was ready to give up, but his wife pointed out that it would be a pity to waste all his work.

One day he backed out of the tunnel in sudden alarm.

'A strange thing has happened,' he said. 'I was gnawing at the root when my teeth slipped and I bit into a stone. There was a flash of light. What do you think could have happened? What could it have been?'

'Imagination,' his wife said shortly, thinking it was only an excuse to stop work. It was not imagination, for as he went on with his work, the same thing occurred several times. On each occasion it was when his teeth closed on a stone.

'It's a very strange thing about the lights that come and go so quickly,' he said one night. 'I can't understand it. One of the lights fell on my paw today and it was hot. It burnt my fur. I could smell it. I wonder what it is.'

The sparks struck from his teeth had set him thinking. 'If I could make them last longer instead of dying as soon as they are born, we could light up our burrow and make it warm,' he told his wife.

He thought about it for a long time. One night he dreamed that the burrow was flooded with light as though the sun was shining inside it, and that bright red and yellow spirits were leaping up from a pile of sticks on the floor. Strangest of all, his wife and children was holding their paws out to the leaping spirits, and steam was rising from their fur. A word came into his mind. It was the word that Water-rats afterwards used for Fire when it raced through the bush and sent them scurrying into their burrows.

When he woke he wondered whether there was some way of summoning the fire spirits. He remembered that the tiny baby spirits that were born and died in an instant appeared when he bit accidentally into a rock. Back in the dark tunnel he clamped his teeth against a stone and once again a spark appeared. Holding a stone in his paws, he struck it against a rock face and a shower of sparks flew out.

'They die too quickly,' he thought. 'Is there a way to make them live?'

Night after night he experimented in the burrow, striking one thing after another against stones he had dug out of the tunnel.

'I wonder if there's another way,' he reflected. He looked round. In the corner were two pieces of wood that had been floating on the water of the billabong. They were quite dry. One was flat, the other was a stick, pointed at one end. He set it upright on the wood and twirled it between his paws. Presently a tiny wisp of smoke rose from the flat piece of wood. He scattered dry grass on it and kept on turning the stick in his paws, pressing it against the base piece.

With a shock he realised that the baby spark spirits were gathering in the grass. He blew on them and suddenly, in the smoke, the flame spirits came to life. Water-rat had discovered the secret of fire. There was great rejoicing in the burrow that night. The family was sitting round the fire, warming themselves and watching the dance of the shining spirits. Every night the family went to sleep warm and well fed, for they had also discovered the art of cooking food.

But as summer came, the Water-rat woman resumed her complaints. 'It's so smoky inside that I can hardly breathe,' she said. 'Why don't you take the flame spirits outside?'

As the days were growing longer and warmer, Water-rat agreed. Taking his apparatus on to the bank, he kindled a fire. He was glad when his wife appeared satisfied with an outdoor meal.

As night fell, wide-eyed animals of every kind gathered round, watching the flame spirits. Water-rat saw the reflection of the flames in their eyes and hastily extinguished the fire.

In time the animals became bolder. They saw how much better food must be if it were cooked by the spirits of the flame that provided heat as well as light. They begged Water-rat to give them some of the fire. Water-rat at heart was a very selfish animal. He kept the fire to himself and his family and refused to tell the secret to anyone.

The other animals tried to take it from him by force, but Water-rat was too wily. As soon as he saw them coming, he poured water on the fire. They resorted to stealth. Animals of every kind tried to steal the fire. Tortoises crawled through the long grass, large animals like the kangaroo jumped out unexpectedly, small birds flew past trying to snatch a piece of the fire, but all in vain. When every attempt had failed, the animals ventured to approach Eagle-hawk, who was usually too proud to associate with earth-bound creatures. They told him what they wanted and asked him to help.

'Yes,' he said reflectively. 'I have seen this fire of Water-rat and wondered what it was. From what you tell me, it could be very useful. You've been going about it all the wrong way. Leave it to me.'

He soared up into the sky on his powerful wings until he was lost to sight; but he, the great Eagle-hawk, could see the ground far below and everything on it. He saw Bower-bird building its mound, the waterlilies floating on the billabong, Brown Snake gliding through the grass stalking a small animal, and Water-rat coming out of his burrow and swimming across the water.

With spread wings he floated down through the air and fell like a thunderbolt on the startled Water-rat. Sharp claws dug into his back and Water-rat felt himself being lifted up, far from the earth. It was a frightening experience for an animal of land and water. Even more frightening was the thought that Eagle-hawk would feed him to his fledglings. He begged to be released, promising anything that Eagle-hawk wanted if only he would return him to earth.

'If I open my claws, you'll return to earth more quickly than you want, Water-rat,' Eagle-hawk said with a touch of humour. 'There's nothing you can give me that I want, but you can do something for your fellow animals down below. You know how much they want to share the fire you've discovered. Promise me you'll give it to them and I'll set you down by your own home. But if you try to cheat and keep the fire to yourself you'll come with me for another journey in the sky. That journey will have a different ending. I'll drop you like a stone.'

Water-rat was only too anxious to make the promise, and for fear of what might happen he kept it faithfully.

The gift of fire has been known to men for so long that most of them have forgotten that it was first discovered by Water-rat; but selfishness is not quickly forgotten, and Water-rat has never been popular, either with men or animals.

Story courtesy of *Aboriginal Myths, Legends and Fables* (1993) A.W. Reed, Reed, Chatswood, pp. 198-202

The Shared Secret

Two men went hunting with their mothers. While the men caught ducks and plovers on the plain, the women collected lily roots and seeds from water pools. The women possessed fire, but sought to keep it secret from the men who were ignorant of firemaking. The women cooked their food while the men were away, and on seeing them returning, hid the live ashes in their vulvas. The men asked where the fire was. The women denied that there was a fire and a row broke out, but the women gave the men cooked lily cake, and after they had eaten cake and meat, they all slept. Then the men went hunting and the women cooked.

The weather was very hot. The uneaten remains of the birds went bad. The men brought a fresh supply and again saw the fire burning in the distance. A spur-winged plover flew to warn the women, who hid the fire as before. The men arrived, they argued, the women denied the fire. The men said, 'We saw a big fire; if you have no fire, which way do you cook your food? Has the sun cooked it? If the sun cooks your lilies, why does it not cook our ducks and stop them from going bad?' There was no reply to this. So they slept.

In the morning the men left the women and went away by themselves. After a great deal of effort they discovered they could make fire by rubbing sticks together. They then decided to turn themselves into crocodiles and so they fashioned crocodile heads, pierced their lungs so that they could breathe underwater, practised swimming, and then hid the heads and returned to camp. Again they saw fire in the distance and again the plover gave warning. The women wanted to know what the men had been doing, but the men said nothing at all. Late in the afternoon the women set their nets for fish. In the morning they went to draw in the nets, but the men had arrived first and turned themselves into crocodiles in the water. They hung onto the nets so that the women could not pull them in. When the women felt under the water to see what made the nets heavy, the crocodiles dragged them under and drowned them.

The men threw away their sticks and spears and everything that they had and changed themselves completely into crocodiles. They then dived into the water where they have lived ever since.

Although the crocodiles knew about the fire sticks, they were very clumsy at actually lighting a fire, as another myth from north-eastern Arnhem Land shows.

Story courtesy of *Australian Dreaming: 40 000 Years of Aboriginal History* (1980) comp. Jennifer Isaacs, Lansdome Press, Sydney, NSW, p. 105

The Kanatgurk and the Crow

Five women called the Kanatgurk were once the possessors of fire, but would not share it. One day Waang the crow tasted a cooked yam from their fire and liked it so much he resolved to steal the fire. By a trick he put snakes in some anthills as the women were passing to frighten the women, as they carried their fire sticks along. Some coals fell from the sticks to the ground; and pouncing on one Waang carried it to the top of a tree.

Bunjil then gathered all his people around the tree and they shouted to Waang for fire. Waang became scared and flung fire down to them. Bunjil's young men were angry and threw fire back up at him and since then all crows have been black. They also set fire to Waang's country and the conflagration was so great that Bunjil had difficulty in putting it out. He placed some large rocks at the head of the Yarra to stop the fire spreading there; two of his young men were burnt and are now two rocks at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges.

The Kanatgurk were swept up into the sky, where they are now the Pleiades; still glowing at night as they carry fire at the end of their digging sticks.

Kulin Tribe, Victoria

Story courtesy of *Australian Dreaming: 40 000 Years of Aboriginal History* (1980)
Comp. Jennifer Isaacs, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, NSW, pp. 107-108

The Fires of the North

On the northern coast of the continent, including the western coast of Arnhem Land, people believed that their land had extended far towards the north in the past. They thought that they could have walked across to the far distant northern lands. A tremendous fire had taken possession of this country and then surging waters came down to control the great blaze. Water covered a large expanse of country and separated Australia from the other land mass. Although the waters had given everybody protection, the Aborigines considered it their duty to keep the fire alight because great evil would result if it were completely extinguished.

Miranen read in June, 1887 of inquiries by an explorer, David Lindsay, made at the request of the South Australian Government, then responsible for this northern region. David Lindsay travelled along the western part of Arnhem Land, exploring and following the coast. He was always told that the fires were kept alight by a neighbouring tribe but noted that the cliffs had a red and burnt appearance.

This belief is of particular interest as our knowledge of prehistory shows that the world passed through a succession of Ice Ages. The great sheets of ice made the sea level considerably lower than today and much more land was exposed. Aboriginal people have been in Australia for approximately 50 000 years. It was 25 000 years ago that this region entered the last Ice Age. With the subsequent melting of the ice which began some 10 000 years ago, the sea rose close to its present level and much less land was exposed. Between 8 000 and 6 500 years ago, the last bridge towards the north was covered by these rising waters. Torres Strait Islands and Papua New Guinea were separated from the mainland. This myth could have dated back to this period and explained to the people why much of their land was then covered with water.

Story courtesy of *The Opal that turned into Fire* (1994) Janet Mathews (comp), Isobel White (ed.), Magabala Books, Broome, Western Australia, pp. 36-38

Crow (Waa Wahn)

Crow holds a very important place in the mythology of the Australian Aborigines. To many he is a moiety ancestor and those belonging to his moiety are called 'Crow people'. The area of Perth where I live was once the land of the Bibbulmum, who belong to this moiety, and the Crow is still held in respect to this day.

Crow often is a trickster character, in sharp contrast to his more sombre moiety counterpart, Bunjil the eaglehawk. A Koori myth from Victoria tells how Crow stole fire from the seven women guardians. In the Dreamtime only these seven women knew the secret of fire and refused to divulge how it was made. Crow decided that he would get their secret. He made friends with the women and found out that they carried fire at the ends of their digging sticks. He also found out that the women were fond of termites, but afraid of snakes. He buried a number of snakes in a termite mound, then told the women he had found a large nest of termites. They followed him to the spot and broke open the mound. The snakes attacked them and they defended themselves with their digging sticks. This caused fire to fall from the sticks. Quickly, Crow picked up the fire between two pieces of bark and ran away. Now Crow in his turn refused to share fire with anyone. Every time someone asked him, he mockingly called out, 'Waa, waa.' He caused so much strife that even he at last lost his temper and threw coals at some of the men who were pestering him for fire. The coals caused a bushfire in which he supposedly was burnt to death, but the eternal trickster came to life and the survivors heard his mocking 'Waa, waa' echoing from a large tree.

The Woiwurong Koori people's elders told a similar myth of how once there were seven young women called the Karatgurk who lived on the Yarra river where Melbourne now stands. They lived on yams which they dug out with their digging sticks, on the end of which they also carried live coals. They kept the fire to themselves. They cooked their own yams, but gave raw ones to Crow. One day Crow found one of the cooked yams and tasted it. He found it delicious and decided to cook his yams from then on. The women refused to give him fire and so he decided to trick them out of it. He caught and hid a lot of snakes in an ant mound, then called to the girls that he had found a large ant mound and that the ant larvae tasted much better than yams. The women ran to the mound and began digging into it with their sticks. The snakes came hissing out and chased them away, screaming. But then the women turned and began to hit out at the snakes with their digging sticks. They hit so hard that some of the live coals were knocked off. Crow was waiting for this. He pounced on the live coals and hid them in a kangaroo skin bag he had prepared. When the women had killed all the snakes, they came back to look for the coals. They could not find them and decided that Crow had taken them. They chased him, but he flew out of reach and perched on the top of a very high tree.

Bunjil saw what had happened and asked Crow for some of the coals, as he wanted to cook a possum. Crow offered to cook it for him and when he had done so, threw it down to Eaglehawk who saw that it was still smoking. He tried to blow it into flame,

but failed. He ate the possum and while he did so, the Koori people gathered around and shouted at Crow to give them fire. The din scared him and at last he flung some live coals at the crowd. Kurok-goru the fire-tailed finch picked up some of the coals and hid them behind his back and that is why these finches have red tails. Eaglehawk's shaman helpers, Djurt-djurt the nankeen kestrel and Thara the quail hawk, grabbed the rest of the coals.

Then the coals made a bush fire which burnt Crow black. It also spread over his country and Bunjil had to gather all the Kooris to help put it out. He placed some rocks at the head of the Yarra river to stop the fire spreading that way, and they are there to this day. His two helpers were burnt and became two rocks at the foot of the Dandenong Range. The Karatgurk were swept up into the sky where they became the Pleiades, the stars representing their glowing firesticks.

Crow is perhaps one of the most attractive and entertaining of the ancestral beings. He lived and passed on in mirth. Towards the end of his stay on Earth, he was travelling down the Murray river when he came across Swamp Hawk. Crow decided to play a trick on the bird. He planted echidna quills in the deserted nest of a kangaroo rat and got Swamp Hawk to jump on them. One of the interesting things about many of Crow's tricks is that they benefit the person he plays them on, and in this case Swamp Hawk was pleased, for the quills grew into his feet and he found that he could catch kangaroo rats easily.

Crow continued on his journey and became caught in a storm. The rain lashed down and he felt cleansed by it. It was then that a voice was heard. It was Biame the All-Father. He took the old Crow up into the sky where he became the star Canopus.

Story courtesy of *Aboriginal Mythology* (1994) Mudrooroo, Thorsons, London, pp. 35-36