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THE ANNUAL CHURCHILL GOOSE HUNT

Indigenous and Inuit youth across Manitoba head to Churchill accompanied by mentors to participate in the traditional annual goose hunt.

By Chantal Marie Schromeda

Driving out to the isolated terrain near the Hudson’s Bay, traditional Northern harvesters and youth find a blind nestled behind rocky terrain and shrubbery - close to their strategically placed decoys in Churchill, Manitoba.

As flocks of thousands of geese fly overhead, traditional Northern harvester and Food Matters Manitoba’s (FMM) Community Project Coordinator, Myron Cook, takes aim towards the birds making their usual spring migratory trek to the north in search of familiar nesting and populating grounds, and shoots.

As the goose tumbles down, it is one of the over 300 birds accumulated over the week of the annual Churchill goose hunt - a week that Cook explains was quickly off to a great start.

“The days were really good for hunting from the get go,” says Cook.

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Youth harvesters waiting for geese.
Lawrence Saunders

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From May 14th to the 18th, Food Matters Manitoba (FMM) supported nearly 30 Indigenous and Inuit youth from across the province of Manitoba as they travelled to Churchill for a week of geese harvesting. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering wild plants, are important foundations of cultural identity in Indigenous communities, and these foundations are important for livelihood, nutrition, health, fitness, and the retention of traditional knowledge, according to the Assembly of First Nations. Goose hunting, in particular, is one of the most important components of the Cree culture, explains FMM's Executive Director, Demian Lawrenchuk. The youth are accompanied by experienced hunters during the week long harvest who mentor and help facilitate learning as they harvest and process the food to bring back to their communities, he adds. FMM builds upon the ancient goose hunting tradition as the hunters and youth are provided with accommodation, supplies, and equipment needed to hunt for the week - participating in the celebration of life and culture for Northern peoples, explains Lawrenchuk.

Geese hunting is a custom steeped in centuries' old tradition in Indigenous communities, while also playing an essential role in the establishment of Canada as a country.

“The massive annual harvests of the fatty calorie dense waterfowl was an essential component of the fur trade and the establishment of this country,” says Lawrenchuk.



Harvesting lead Lawrence Saunders.
Lawrence Saunders



Youth harvesters with some of the harvested geese. Myron Cook



Myron Cook and other traditional harvesters and mentors accompanying the youth. Myron Cook



As large ice sheets receded north into the Hudson Bay, the end of the last ice age opened up new land for the Cree in Northern Manitoba, he adds. The Indigenous peoples moved north into this region thousands of years ago, and life revolved around the seasonal bounties of food springing up throughout the region at predictable times and places throughout the year, he continues. This cycle determined the seasonal migrations of the original inhabitants - this practice, dating back thousands of years, meant families travelled to the Hudson Bay coast to meet the flocks of waterfowl during this peak of the spring migration, explains Lawrenchuk.

“This allowed for stockpiles of food to be stored that would feed the fur-traders and the newly established European communities throughout the year,” he says. It’s a tradition that signifies the Cree new year - a celebration of life as the earth wakes after its long winter sleep, adds Lawrenchuk. “The song of the geese and ducks let us know that soon the waterways will open and the medicines will wake up and begin to grow again,” he says.

Now, the tradition is being passed down to new generations.

As youth harvester in Makeso Sakahikan (Fox Lake/Gillam), Cameron Saunders, boards the overnight train headed from Gillam to Churchill, there was tangible excitement in the air amongst the youth and the accompanying harvesting mentors.

With the overnight train leaving the Gillam station by 11:30pm, some youth gather around their separating tables to play card games while others fall asleep to pass the time. Just over 9 hours later, Saunders woke to see the train had rolled into the destination - the Churchill station.

With belongings in hand, the youth harvesters and mentors check into their hotel, excited for what the week had in store.

The first harvesting day, Saunders explains he went to find a blind with fellow harvesters so they could start setting up their decoys with wind socks and silhouettes to attract the geese.

“We set up the decoys and shot about thirty of them,” he says. “We had a couple blinds set up and lots of geese kept coming in.”

Paying attention to the relationship between the birds and the wind is vital for a successful harvest.

The geese are like planes, explains Lawrence Saunders, lead harvester and mentor from Makeso Sakahikan (Fox Lake/Gillam). “The wind helps them land a lot better, so you got to adjust your decoys a lot of the time to see which way they want to come in and what works best for them.”

Oftentimes, this is a process of trial and error. “You’ll learn more each year in different areas you try hunting each year,” he adds.

Everyday throughout the harvesting week, as soon as the sun rose before 7 o’clock in the morning, lead harvester Saunders was dressed from head to toe in dark colours and warm gear with hunting equipment in hand and youth in tow. The harvesting days were long, with youth and mentors leaving as soon as the sun rose, and not returning until late into the evening.

“We’d usually leave just after 7am, and we’d send one of the guys back to Churchill to grab our lunch for the crew,” he says. “Then we’d stay out until 8 to 9pm daily.”



For youth harvester Saunders, the long days spent in Churchill were full of new and memorable moments, and personal accomplishments.

Mid harvesting week, the youth harvester went to the same blind early. Just after waiting for a couple of hours, the large flocks of geese began to fly in.

“I shot about 15 in the morning and in the afternoon it was slow for a little bit until evenings, and then I shot about 10,” he says. “That was the most memorable moment for me.”

As the harvested geese began to accumulate throughout the week, youth harvesters worked together to breast around 100 geese for their communities - a first for Saunders who was eager to pick up the new skill.

“We had two people breast, one person put the geese in garbage bags and two people put the breast in ziploc bags,” he says.

Seeing the youth learn new, valuable skills that will propel them forward as the next generation of harvesters for their community, that they were excited about, was inspiring to see, explains Cook.

“They learnt a lot on gun safety and hunting etiquette,” he says. “We for sure got our future hunters hooked to geese hunting.”

During the final harvesting day, youth harvester Saunders helped the rest of the crew harvest around 20 more geese in the morning before packing up and heading back to the Churchill train station.

“We went to the blind in the morning and it was pretty slow, but we shot about 20ish and then we had to pack everything up around 3ish, and then we bagged everything up and dropped them off at the train station,” he says.

Traditional harvesters and Northern mentors hope the excitement and feelings of accomplishment the youth felt during their week-long harvest continues - so the youth may provide for the communities in the future and pass along the traditional knowledge.

“I’m hoping that they continue this lifestyle in the years to come because they’re the future harvesters for the communities,” says lead harvester Saunders.



Geese accumulating during the harvest. Myron Cook



Lawrence Saunders' son with geese. Lawrence Saunders



Indigenous youth's participation in tradition is vital for their cultural identity and morale, according to a study published in 2000, by the Annual Review of Nutrition.

“The goose hunt is a major opportunity for youth living in remote communities to get the chance to travel and connect with the land, their peers and themselves,” says FMM’s Northern Coordinator, Morgan McCurdy. “This adventure gives them the opportunity to learn new skills and have fun while doing it.”

The week-long harvest is also an opportunity for youth from different communities to come together and form meaningful connections. Seeing the youth becoming friends throughout the week was a special moment for the harvesting mentors.

“The best part was seeing the kids go from strangers to becoming friends at the end of the trip,” says Saunders. “They were hunting with each other - laughing and making memories.”

McCurdy adds the involvement of harvesting mentors like Saunders has been detrimental to the week’s success.

“Without him on the ground, a portion of this trip wouldn’t run as smoothly as it does,” she says. “The time and dedication put into making sure everything is ready to go once they’re there is invaluable.”

The annual youth harvesting trip has gained traction within the past few years - attracting more participants, explains FMM’s Northern Programs Manager, Myles King.

“Gaining feedback from participants and support from funders, we’ve made this trip accessible for more youth and harvesters,” he says. “We also make sure the experience doesn’t stop in Churchill, as the processing and feasting is just as important.”

Upon returning home to Makeso Sakahikan, youth harvester Saunders got to work helping fellow community members Tegan and Jimmy breast and pluck geese caught during the Churchill harvest at their shop. Once the geese were ready, they were distributed amongst the community to share and enjoy.



Youth with her harvested geese. Myron Cook



Lawrence Saunders sitting with some of the youth.
Lawrence Saunders



Plucking geese at the shop. Cameron Saunders



“The geese had to be singed and we had to take out the guts out of the rest of those geese, and bagged them up and gave them to the band,” he adds.

While the harvested geese provide communities with a traditional food source, the geese also exemplify important lessons for the youth, explains Lawrenchuk.

Leadership, community, learning how to work together, and sacrifice are all essential skills the youth need for their individual and communal success, he adds.



Harvesting mentors with harvested geese for the community. Myron Cook

Despite some unfavourable windy and wet weather conditions during a few mornings, mentors Saunders and Cook say the harvesting trip was a success and went off without a hitch.

Returning home with new skills, memories, and some new friendships, youth and mentors alike are looking forward to next season’s traditional harvest.

It’s a tradition that Lawrenchuk explains he’s proud to be able to continue supporting.

“It’s an honour to be able to continue this tradition of who we are and how we survive,” he says.



Some of the crew - youth and harvesting mentors in Churchill. Lawrence Saunders





COMMUNITY STORY SPOTLIGHTS

FAMILY FEEDING THE COMMUNITY

Food Matters Manitoba's Community Project Coordinator, Myron Cook, brings his niece and nephew on harvesting trips to provide for the community and pass along the traditional way.

By Chantal Marie Schromeda

Over the spring, Food Matters Manitoba's Community Project Coordinator, Myron Cook, brought his niece and nephew out onto the land for separate harvesting trips in Kisipakamak (Brochet) to provide traditional and healthy food for the community.

Cook says both harvesting trips with his niece and nephew went very well. "Walleye were moving in a lot more compared to earlier checks," he says. "Caught some nice sized whitefish as well, and my partners did real well helping me considering its their first time lifting nets."

Northern pike, walleye, mariah, whitefish, and red suckers were all harvested and shared amongst the community of Kisipakamak.

Cook and his family weren't the only ones enjoying their time together on the ice providing for their community.

"It was very nice to see other families enjoying time on the ice, fishing," he says.

Cook explains all of the fish was distributed to community members, nothing went to waste.

The harvesting trips were an opportunity to not only provide for the community, but an opportunity for Cook to pass along traditional knowledge to his niece and nephew.

For Cook, seeing that cycle of tradition and education while spending time with family is a special feeling.

"It's a real good feeling being out with family checking the nets, passing down whatever knowledge I can knowing this tradition will keep on going for years to come," he says.



Myron (right) and his nephew harvesting fish. Myron Cook



Fish for the community. Myron Cook



Myron's niece holding a fish. Myron Cook



COMMUNITY GARDEN PROVIDES ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Planting season is underway in Kinosao Sipi (Norway House), and community members are working together to provide the greater community with healthy food.

By Chantal Marie Schromeda

Planting season is underway this spring for the community of Kinosao Sipi (Norway House), and traditional harvester and Food Matters Manitoba's Northern partner, Lester Balfour, has been busy with fellow community members planting the community garden.

"We're busy with planting seeds for the garden," he says. "Helping the elders with the planting."

According to a study in 2012, by Fieldhouse and Thompson regarding Northern food insecurity in Manitoba, community based action, like community gardening, has the potential to significantly enhance the access to affordable and nutritious food in Northern communities. Thereby improving food security, healthy living, and preventing chronic diseases.

So far, Balfour says cucumbers, carrots, sweet peppers, and potatoes have been planted, with more plans in the works for further planting.

The food grown in the garden is intended to feed the greater community of Kinosao Sipi, and for Balfour, seeing the community getting involved by growing healthy foods and working together is inspiring.

"It's great to see more and more people starting to garden," says Balfour.



Planting vegetables for the community. Lester Balfour



Seeds sprouting. Lester Balfour



Potatoes growing. Lester Balfour



ONE YEAR AS A YOUTH HARVESTER

Sidney Castel, youth harvester in Sherridon, reflects back on his time spent as a youth harvester for his community over the past year.

By Sidney Castel

Last year Food Matters Manitoba was looking for several youths to become full-time community youth harvesters. I decided to join the community food initiative. This meant I would get to hunt and gather in the Ancestral/Traditional Territory of the Kiciwapa Cree Nation.

In the last year, I travelled to many different locations to hunt and gather. Floyd North, my grandpa, was my guide and teacher. His extensive knowledge of the history, culture, language, and practices of the land, were great life learning experiences.

I learned the ancient trail systems used by our ancestors. I learned the importance of being prepared and safe when out on the land. I travelled to many locations throughout the Kiciwapa Territory.

We opened portages to new locations (Lakes) by clearing trees and willows off the trail that hadn't been used for awhile.

I learned to stay off river and creek ice because it's thinner because the water is flowing. I learned that otters show you where unsafe ice is. I learned that it's easy to get lost in the bush if you don't pay attention to direction and you don't mark your way. I learnt where and when to pick medicine and to use its Ithinew (Cree) name. I learned that hunting and gathering requires patience and determination for success.

The Goose and Ducks have arrived so it's time to hunt.

I look forward to the upcoming year. I will get to hunt and gather all summer in my boat.



Sidney holding fish that will be harvested for the community.
Sidney Castel



Northern landscape. Sidney Castel



Pulling nets for the community of Sherridon. Sidney Castel



BISON HARVEST RECONNECTS YOUTH WITH TRADITION

Students from the Kelsey School Division in The Pas participated in a land based learning opportunity by harvesting a bison for the community.

By Cheryl Antonio

On April 8 and 9, 2024, 17 grade six students from Kelsey School Division visited Round the Bend Farm and participated in a bison harvest. Several staff also attended to be good helpers. Knowledge keepers and elders were also on site.

The elders and knowledge keepers opened the event with guidance, prayer, and smudge. Throughout the two days, much story sharing was done by the elders and knowledge keepers in their own special way. In these unique formats, youth have a much easier time relating to the lessons as well as remembering them.

Everyone loaded up into a farm trailer and farm owner, Shawn Sexsmith, pulled them out to the bison enclosure behind the tractor. Once they had their bison, it was hung onto the front of the tractor and they went back to the farmyard.

All were involved with the giant task ahead of skinning, gutting, and butchering the animal. Much was learned about the body parts and the uses of each. Nothing goes to waste.

Throughout the day, everyone was invited to visit the pigs and piglets, the chickens, chop wood, add to the fire, and enjoy good food around the fire pit.

Each student cut and packaged meat to take home to their family. Some of the meat also went to the school in preparation for a feast.

It was a great land-based learning opportunity for all who attended with many academic twists. Everyone was included and everyone felt proud at the end of the day.



Students standing next to the bison.
Cheryl Antonio



Skinning the bison. Cheryl Antonio



Students harvesting the bison. Cheryl Antonio



Packaging the meat. Cheryl Antonio





ARTIST OF THE SEASON

VANESSA WILLMS

“FOREST FARE”

WATERCOLOUR PAINTING ON HOMEMADE PAPER, 2023.



NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

“Lobster mushroom, blueberries, and spruce tips inspired by a foraging experience last year near the whiteshell.”





FEATURED RECIPES

HONEY BASIL CHICKEN THIGHS

LAURA HARRISON

“ An easy chicken thigh option with a longer cook time so you’ve got time to make sides. ”



Photo courtesy of thefancynapkins.com

recipe on page 13. . .

SPRUCE TIP ICE CREAM

THE PAS HELPING HANDS 4-H CLUB

“ This ice cream has a subtle citrus flavour that is extremely enjoyable. ”



Spruce tip ice cream. Cheryl Antonio

recipe on page 15. . .



HONEY BASIL CHICKEN THIGHS

Author: Laura Harrison



Photo courtesy of thefancynapkins.com

Basil Honey Baked Chicken Thighs

An easy chicken thigh option, with a longer cook time so you've got time to make sides or maybe even fold laundry!

Ingredients

- Approx 1.5 kg bone in skin on chicken thighs (or skin off if you prefer!). This is about 8-10 thighs
- Salt and pepper to season chicken
- 1/2 cup honey
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 cloves garlic minced
- 1/2 teaspoon dried basil
- Breadcrumbs optional

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees F
2. Generously season chicken thighs with salt and pepper (bonus points if you use seasoning salt)
3. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil
4. In a small saucepan, on medium-low heat add 1/2 cup honey, 2 tablespoons butter, 2 cloves garlic (minced) and 1/2 teaspoon dried basil and mix until melted - but not super runny
5. Remove saucepan from heat
6. Dredge each chicken thigh into the honey mixture and place onto prepared baking sheet
7. If you have chosen to use breadcrumbs, dredge each chicken thigh into your breadcrumbs before placing them onto the baking sheet
8. Bake for 30-45 minutes, or until the internal temperature of your chicken reaches 165 degrees F



SPRUCE TIP ICE CREAM

The Pas Helping Hands 4-H Club

SPRUCE TIP ICE CREAM

By Cheryl Antonio

Each June, we harvest new spruce tips on Father's Day to make a very unique but addicting ice cream. This ice cream has a subtle citrus flavour that is extremely enjoyable.

Spruce trees have needles that attach to the branch singly whereas a pine is always attached in groups of 2 - 5.

You want to make sure you are picking spruce tips. The spruce needles are sharp, it's a good idea to wear long sleeves! Mosquitos can also be an annoyance!

In the spring, you can clearly see the tips on the spruce as they are a bright, fresh color. Be sure to harvest them while they are still closed, they don't taste as good once they are opened.

Watch for the tips beginning late May, depending on where you live. We live north of the 53rd parallel and can harvest anywhere from late May to mid-June.

The tips are very easy to harvest. All you have to do is lightly pinch them off and put them in your container.

Try to stay away from the highway or road where they might be sprayed with chemicals or coated with car exhaust.



Harvested spruce tips. Cheryl Antonio



The finished spruce tip ice cream. Cheryl Antonio

continued on next page...



SPRUCE TIP ICE CREAM

The Pas Helping Hands 4-H Club



Student checking the spruce needles. Cheryl Antonio



SPRUCE TIP

Ice Cream

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup spruce tips
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1/2 cup sugar
- dash salt

Directions:

- Thoroughly wash the tips.
- Lightly chop the spruce tips in a food processor or by hand.
- Mix together the chopped spruce tips, the heavy cream, and the whole milk and allow to infuse in the refrigerator for 8 - 12 hours.
- Strain the spruce tips from the cream mixture.
- Add the sugar and salt to the cream mixture and mix thoroughly until the sugar is dissolved. Work quickly so that the cream mixture remains cold.
- Pour into an ice cream maker, and churn according to manufacturer's instructions for 20 - 25 minutes. If you do not have an ice cream maker, you can put it in the freezer and stir it every 30 minutes until it is the consistency you like.





FEATURED COMMUNITY MEMBER

VIVIAN LIN

Food Matters Manitoba would like to give a special shoutout to Vivian Lin, the devoted teacher and community member in Tataskweyak (Split Lake) who is committed to the school's garden program.

You may recognize Lin - she was previously featured in last season's edition of The Northern Sun for our feature on Tataskweyak's school garden program.

Currently, the school is closed due to water issues. However, over the spring, another grow tower had been set up on the high school side of the school. In addition, students brought lettuce home to their families, and nutritious salads were prepared by Lin to accompany the children's hot breakfasts on multiple occasions.

Lin's inspiring devotion to health and education is infectious. It's because of the perseverance of passionate individuals like Lin that the school garden program has continued to thrive.

In lieu of the school closure, Lin held a community giveaway for the plants. She's hopeful teachers and students will be able to return to harvesting fruits and vegetables at the school soon.



Vivian making salads in the kitchen for the children with lettuce from the school garden. Vivian Lin

THANK YOU VIVIAN!!



FOOD MATTERS

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