

## Myths and Legends about the Northern Lights

<b>Category</b>	Yarn
<b>Time to allocate (mins)</b>	10
	<p>The northern lights have, and in some ways always will be, surrounded by myth and legend. Even the modern day solar scientists openly admit that there is so much that is still not understood – continuing to fuel appetite for stories passed from generation to generation.</p> <p>Although the first written account of the aurora is thought to date back to 2,600BC in China, it is a cave painting from southern France from 30,000BC which is believed to be the earliest surviving record of the phenomenon.</p> <p>The northern lights were given their scientific name in the 17th century, the aurora borealis. There is, however, some dispute as to who should be credited for this with some claiming it was Galileo Galilei in 1616 and others believing it to be a French mathematician, Gassend, in 1649.</p> <p>The aurora borealis remains a source of wonder for those who see it, and is explored to this day by scientists striving for a better understanding of the phenomenon. However, many myths about the magical lights remain, woven deeply into the cultures that held them, and serve to provide a fascinating insight into our past.</p> <p>The Sámi people traditionally lived in a vast Arctic area of northern Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia. With an unparalleled proximity to the northern lights a number of legends to explain the phenomenon were passed through generations.</p> <p>Believing that the lights were souls of the departed, Sámi believed in behaving solemnly and respectfully whenever the lights were in the sky. Bad fortune awaited anyone who showed them disrespect so many people chose to keep their families indoors when the lights were on display.</p> <p>It was also believed that if you whistle a tune under the lights, it would summon the spirits closer and closer, until you were whisked away.</p> <p>The Scandinavian name for the aurora translates as 'herring flash' as it was believed that the dancing whirls of green light were a reflection of huge schools of herring in the sea.</p> <p>Whenever the lights were visible, fishermen were expected to be blessed with good catches of fish.</p> <p>According to Swedish legend, a winter with frequent displays of the northern lights served to predict a good yield of crops the following year.</p> <p>In Norwegian folklore, the northern lights were thought to be the spirits of old maids dancing in the sky and waving at those below them.</p> <p>According to one popular Finnish myth, magical arctic foxes sweeping their tails across the snow and spraying it into the sky is the real reason for the spectacular light show. In fact, the Finnish name for the northern lights even translates as 'fox fires'.</p>
<b>Story</b>	

Norse mythology connected the aurora borealis with war. It was believed that the lights appeared when sunlight reflected on the shiny shields of the Valkyries who were racing across the sky on the way to their resting place, Valhalla.

Old Icelandic folklore believed that the northern lights would ease the pain of childbirth. It was not all good news for mothers though – it was also thought that pregnant women looking at the lights would give birth to cross-eyed children.

In Greek mythology, Aurora (or Eos as she was known in Greek mythology) was the sister of Helios (The Sun) and Selene (The Moon). Eos was believed to wake before anything or anyone else.

The northern lights were believed to be caused by Aurora riding her mighty chariot across the sky to announce the arrival of Helios, opening the gates of heaven to bring in each new day. Boreas, the mythical Greek north wind god, was believed to cause the northern lights dance.

In China, the lights were believed to be the fiery breath of dragons fighting in the sky.

In Scotland, it was believed that the lights were clans at war and that blood spilled in violent battle was the true cause of the red lights common in the area.

The Fox Indians of Wisconsin saw the northern lights as a bad omen believing that they were the ghosts of slain enemies. The Makah Indians believed the lights were caused by dwarfs lighting bright colourful fires.

The Algonquin Indians, however, believed that after their god, Nanahbozho, created the earth he travelled to the far north where he builds great fires, the light from which reflects southward to remind people of his everlasting love.

The Eskimos of Labrador in North Eastern Canada believed the northern lights to be torches lit by the dead who were playing soccer in the heavens with a walrus skull. The Eskimo word for the northern lights is aksarniq which literally translates as 'ball player.'

In North West Canada, the Eskimos of the lower Yukon River believed the lights were the beautiful dances of animal spirits.

In Estonian mythology, the northern lights are said to occur when a celestial war or wedding is taking place. The lights are the reflections of the sleighs and horses drawing the parties. Another Estonian legend connects the aurora to whales playing in the sky.