Iti Fabvssa Crane Month

This article is part of a series titled "A Year in the Life." Focusing on the time period around AD 1700, the series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities our ancestors were up to during each month. This information is excerpted from a book soon to be published by the Choctaw Nation entitled "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge."

Watonlak Hvshi, Crane Month, roughly corresponds with February. This month may have gotten its name from the vast flocks of birds that came into Choctaw country during the winter.

Written descriptions from the period particularly note the appearance of ducks, geese, bustard and passenger pigeons. From today's perspective, it is easy to miss how significant these flocks of migratory birds were to our ancestors. For example, one Choctaw town was named Hanka Aiola, Where the Canadian Goose Cries, because of a beautiful, tree-rimmed pond located next to the village that seasonally attracted flocks of birds.

On a larger scale, the passenger pigeon was perhaps the most numerous bird species on the planet 200 years ago. After nesting in the Great Lakes region during the summer, immense flocks headed south for winter. Described as the greatest natural wonder on the continent, these migratory flocks were so large they darkened the sun for two days at a time as they passed overhead at a speed of 60 miles per hour.

During the winter, passenger pigeon roosts were a meat source of almost unlimited potential in the South. At these roosts, millions of passenger pigeons came together at night to rest after a day spent flying over the landscape in search of nuts and other food. Their numbers were so great they often broke the branches of the trees with their weight. Pachanusi, Where the Pigeons Sleep, was a notable passenger pigeon roost in Choctaw country.

Choctaw men and boys hunted the sleeping birds that perched on lower branches of such roosts. The technique was blunt but efficient. Arriving at night, aided by someone carrying a torch, the hunter simply clubbed as many sleeping birds as desired and let them fall into an open bag. Choctaw people also caught birds with snares, hushi isht hokli, or shot them with blowgun darts.

Besides migratory birds, the turkey also made a significant contribution to the diet. The season for hunting turkeys was the cool part of the year when they were relatively fat. Like their Alabama neighbors to the east, Choctaw hunters probably acquired turkeys as they roosted in trees or by stalking them with a decoy.

Choctaw women contributed to the winter diet by digging edible wild roots, including laurel greenbrier and American groundnut. In abundant years, these root plants made up a relatively smaller portion of the diet, but in years of poor crops and poor hunting, they served as a staple until the land began to turn green in the springtime.

During the cold parts of really bad years, communities sometimes turned to starvation foods like longleaf pine roots and yellow jacket larvae.

On days of suitable weather, during mid-to-late winter, the men and women who were already back in the villages began working to prepare agricultural fields to be planted later in the spring. These activities began with the appropriate dances. Choctaw workers cleared brush for the fields using fire – a process known as bylli. Large trees were removed through a slow, patient technique known as iti chant abi. First, men girdled and killed the trees by chopping through the bark all the way around the tree's base using stone-bladed axes. These girdled trees would be left to rot and fall to earth or to stand and dry out. Workers would return to the spot a year or more later, gather fallen limbs and brush, and cut down new saplings. They would pile this material at the bases of the standing dead trees and set it on fire. The fire would burn through the dry wood and fell the trees. Sometimes, parts of the fallen dry trees would be hauled off and used for firewood. Most of the rest would be burned on the spot. If new saplings popped up while the field was in use, workers would cut them down, pile them on living roots, and burn them. They would repeat the process until the roots quit sending up saplings. Ultimately, the traditional Choctaw method of clearing a field put a great deal of rotten wood, ash, and charcoal directly into the soil where it acted as a fertilizer and moisture-retainer. In the coming months, this would be crucial to the new crops.

