

**N**ative American tribes are very diverse. Cultural teachings, philosophies, and social dynamics differ greatly from one tribe to another. Even within one tribe, stories and teachings may vary from region to region.

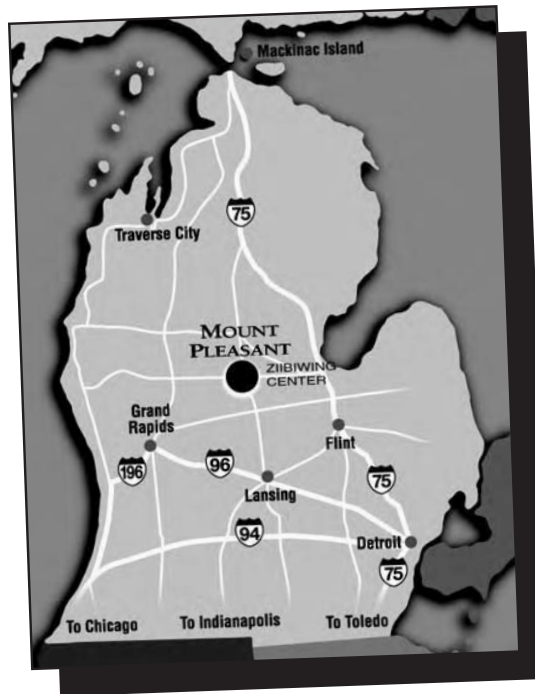
The teachings shared in our Kinoomaagewin Mzinigas (Little Teaching Books) may be presented differently in other areas.



**ZIIBIWING CENTER**  
of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways

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# Wiigwaas

(Birchbark)



Part 5 of a series of  
*Kinoomaagewin Mzinigas*  
(*Little Teaching Books*)

## Nenaboozhoo and the Birch Tree

Long ago our Anishinabe spirit-uncle, named Nenaboozhoo, was making bows and arrows for hunting. His grandmother told him that he needed to get some feathers from a baby thunderbird, the bird that lives at the opening of the clouds.

Nenaboozhoo climbed the highest cliffs he could find and he found a thunderbird nest that had babies in it. Nenaboozhoo turned himself into a rabbit so that the adult thunderbirds would take him to their nest to play with their babies. Nenaboozhoo was there in the nest with the baby thunderbirds for a long time and the babies were cruel to him, throwing him around the nest and pecking at him. After the adult thunderbirds flew off to look for food, Nenaboozhoo turned back into himself and clubbed the baby thunderbirds and pulled out their feathers.

Nenaboozhoo took off running with a bundle of feathers, but soon the adult thunderbirds returned finding the lifeless bodies of their babies. The enraged thunderbirds flew after Nenaboozhoo with thunder rolling from their beaks and lightning flashing from their eyes. The thunderbirds nearly caught Nenaboozhoo with their sharp claws. Just as they were swooping down on him, Nenaboozhoo came to a hollow birch log which he quickly dove into for protection. The thunderbirds gave up their attack knowing that they could not get to Nenaboozhoo through the birchbark. After the thunderbirds left, Nenaboozhoo came out of the log and proclaimed that the birch tree would forever protect and benefit the people. Nenaboozhoo made short marks on the birchbark to commemorate the sharp claws of the thunderbirds that almost killed him. The thunderbirds put "pictures" of their babies on the bark so that the sacrifice of their children would not be forgotten.



## Wiigwaas (Birchbark)

### - A Special Gift to the Anishinabek

Wiigwaas has amazing properties that made it a very important resource for our ancestors. One of the most important uses of wiigwaas was as a covering for our wigwams (lodges). Large panels of wiigwaas, lashed down over the sapling framework, provided a protective barrier from the elements. Prior to European contact the Anishinabek made all of their cooking vessels and storage containers from wiigwaas. By sewing the seams with basswood cordage or thin strips of cedar bark, these containers could be made water-tight.

Many centuries ago our ancestors recorded many of our teachings, such as the Seven Prophecies, on wiigwaas scrolls. These same sacred scrolls are still looked after by spiritual leaders in the Midewiwin (from the heart) Society today.



## Wiigwaas Jiiman (Birchbark Canoe)

One of our most ingenious inventions was the wiigwaas jiiman (birchbark canoe). Our people traveled great distances, largely through the lakes and river systems. The wiigwaas jiiman made this extensive travel possible. Our ancestors applied keen engineering and crafting skills to building these beautiful canoes. Wiigwaas jiimanan



were amazingly durable and stable, capable of carrying immense loads, yet even the largest canoes were light enough in weight to be portaged over land.



## Gathering Wiigwaas

Anishinabek learned how to gather wiigwaas in ways that minimize the damage to the tree. Although the bark from a fallen birch tree can be taken at any time, the best time to harvest from a live tree is in the spring when the bark is the thickest. We have great respect for this tree that has given so much for the people. Whenever we harvest wiigwaas we make an offering of semaa (tobacco) and give thanks to Gitche Manido (Creator or Great Mystery) for this wonderful gift.