

about this book

In English, we learn to name our colours just as we name shapes or animals. Cree works differently. In Cree, verbs must change their shape to match the associated nouns (similar to French) which are classified as animate or inanimate. Because colour words in Cree are verbs (action words), we need to learn both animate and inanimate forms for every colour, and we need to know whether each noun is animate or inanimate. If a noun is plural, the colour verb must be plural too.

Another way of expressing colour in Cree attaches a special form of the colour word as a prefix to a noun. This happens in special cases where the colour is not just a description, but an important part of the noun itself.

The chart on the opposite page shows every colour used in this book in each of these three forms.

In each culture, people name the colours of the rainbow differently. In Cree, speakers may use the word *osâwi-* for yellow, orange or brown. They may use the word *sîpikho-* for blue, green, or grey. They may also create new colour words — as in the English language — by combining the colour words from the chart with each other, or by modifying them with *wâp-* (meaning ‘bright’ or ‘light’), and *kaskitê-* (meaning ‘dark’ or ‘black’).

If you talk to other speakers of Plains Cree, they may use different terms, or combinations of terms from the ones we use here, that are still correct. The colour words used in this book were selected by one particular speaker on one particular day: on a different day, even that same speaker may have chosen differently.

—Arden Ogg of the Cree Literacy Network,
with help from Solomon Ratt, Arok Wolvengrey and Jean Okimâsis

The Cree in this book is in the y-dialect spoken in Alberta and southern Saskatchewan, also known as *nêhiyawêwin* or Plains Cree.

The words are spelled using the same roman alphabet used to write this sentence, which is called “Standard Roman Orthography,” which is widely taught in the region.

Colour names — and even the names of plants and animals — may differ from one dialect region to the next.

pronunciation chart

There are seven distinct vowel sounds in Cree, three “short,” and four “long.”

Long vowels are written with a macron [ˉ] or circumflex [ˆ] accent.

They sound about like this:

SHORT VOWELS

- a as in about
- i as in pin
- o as in look

LONG VOWELS

- â as in father
- ê as in pay
- î as in keep
- ô as in boat

CONSONANTS

- p as in pin or bin
- t as in tin or din
- c as in chin or tsar
- h as in him
- k as in kin or grin
- s as in sin
- m as in me
- n as in no
- w as in will
- y as in yes

PREFIX FORM

- kaskitêwi-
- mihko-
- wâpikwanîwinâkosi -
- sîpikho-
- wâposâwi-
- nîpâmâyâ-
- kaskitê-osâwi-
- wâpiski-
- osâwi-
- askihtako-

ANIMATE SINGULAR VERB FORM

- kaskitêsiw
- mihkosiw
- wâpikwanîwinâkosiw
- sîpikhosiw
- wâposâwisiw
- nîpâmâyâtisiw
- kaskitê-osâwisiw
- wâpiskisiw
- osâwisiw
- askihtakosiw

INANIMATE SINGULAR VERB FORM

- kaskitêwâw
- mihkwâw
- wâpikwanîwinâkwan
- sîpikhwâw
- wâposâwâw
- nîpâmâyâtân
- kaskitê-osâwâw
- wâpiskâw
- osâwâw
- askihtakwâw

the names of the colours



Black Bear
kaskitêsiw
maskwa



Red Fox
mihkosiw
mahkêsîs



Blue Bird
sîpihkosiw
piyêsîs

