

Ceremonies, powwows work to adapt to rising global temperatures

by [Amelia Schafer](#)

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Oglala Lakota women from the Pine Ridge Reservation on June 24, 2006. (Photo by Hamner\_Fotos via Creative Commons)

As Shaylynn Bird danced across the arena under the hot midwestern summer sun, the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara and Oglala Lakota woman began to feel off.

Bird, who once won a 76-song iron woman competition at the 2024 Mandaree Powwow, began to see stars as she danced her 28th song in an Iron Woman special at the Mille Lacs Hinckley Grand Celebration Powwow in Hinckley, Minnesota, on

June 22.

Despite being in the top six, Bird did something unexpected; she walked off. The soles of her feet were burning from dancing on turf above hot concrete, and she didn't feel right.

"If I would've known what it (the competition) was going to feel like, I probably wouldn't have gotten out there at all," she said. "I've gotten to a point where I'm very in touch with my body, and I really try to listen to it."

Bird believes she was feeling the symptoms of [heat exhaustion](#), a condition that can lead to heatstroke, which can be fatal at any age and occurs when someone's body can no longer cool itself.

It's no secret that the United States is seeing warmer summers and within the first few days of the summer season, record temperatures overtook the Midwest and upper northeast.

For Native people, summers are a time of celebration. From sacred ceremonies to powwows, cultural activities draw many outdoors. While powwows began in the late 19th century, they didn't become widespread until around 1950 when soldiers began to return from World War II battlefields, and they grew even more during the 1960s civil rights era.

Back then, the United States only experienced an average of two heat waves per summer, [according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency](#). Now, the US is experiencing an average of six heat waves per season.

As summers get hotter and hotter, these outdoor celebrations are forced to adapt to changes that can put participants at risk.

One solution could come from learning from tribes like the 19 Pueblo tribes in the Southwest that are no stranger to dancing in extreme temperatures.

"Our dancers prepare before feast," said Arianna Chaves, San Felipe Pueblo and executive director of the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. "(In the days before) they're practicing, they're staying hydrated (to prepare) for that day."

At various points in the year, the Pueblos hold Feast Days. They're something the Pueblo people have done for centuries, the product of adapting to Spanish

colonization and merging traditional cultural ceremonies with Christian ones.

In July and August when many Feast Day celebrations occur, temperatures in New Mexico average 90-100 degrees fahrenheit. Chavez said her Pueblo provides plenty of water, water-dense foods like watermelon and oranges, breaks for dancers, and will allow women to put their moccasins on after the first dance.

“Traditionally, women do not wear moccasins when we dance,” she said.

But no matter what changes the future brings, the dances will continue.

“Even with the heat, it'll still be something traditionally that we do so and it's just really a spiritual journey for us, our dances,” she said. “It's more rooted in what we see and the importance of our commitment to our culture in these ceremonial dances.”

By making sure dancers are safe, organizers can ensure things go smoothly, she said.

Bird said dancers in Hinckley were told they could wear street shoes to help with the hot concrete around the arena. Organizers provided a cooling station, medical tent and plenty of water as Minnesota battled a heat dome throughout the region.

Despite the changes, the powwow was affected.

“The ground (in the arena) was turf, which is really nice to dance on normally, but when it's really sunny and hot (the ground) just becomes so hot,” she said. “I (still) have blisters on my feet.”

Regalia can add an additional five to 15 pounds of weight to a dancer depending on what style they're dancing. For example, southern women's buckskin dancers wear heavy, thick deerskin dresses, men's fancy dancers wear heavy bustles, when dancing in the heat it can be too much for even an experienced dancer.

Bird has been dancing her entire life. The 28-year-old is a marathon runner as well, and growing up in South Dakota she's familiar with hot summers.

“People will say things like ‘Our ancestors didn't wear sunscreen’ and that's true, but our ancestors didn't face climate change (like we are) and a thinning ozone layer,” she said. “There's some modern day things like sunscreen, that I think really

need to be taken more seriously, just because there's extreme dangers that come with sunburn and sun poisoning.”

As for powwows, especially competition powwows which aren't ceremonial, Bird stressed the importance of taking care of yourself and knowing your limits.

“At the end of the day we're all athletes out there,” she said. “Even professional institutions will cancel games or events if it's too hot, and powwows shouldn't be any different.” —ICT