



THE CANTERBURY TAILS

of animals

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This is dedicated to Oyeshí

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AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

FOR OLDER CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION (PROLOGUE)

A long time ago, many years before you were born, an assortment of different animals came together in a field near Canterbury, in the English county of Kent. Each of them told a story and everyone else kept very quiet and listened to what they had to say. They were told not to fight or try to eat each other, and they all obeyed this rule.

How did they all turn up there together? Ah, that would be telling! But perhaps you know. Please tell!

Here are the stories that they told each other, beginning with the first and ending with the last. Or shall we do it the other way around? No, I think we will do it this way, if you don't mind.

After you have read them all, say which animal you would like to be if you could.

You will need some paper and something to draw or paint with, and it might be useful to have a grown-up around too, because they would not want to miss out on all the fun, would they?

(Words in italics are addressed to the reader.)

TOMMY THE TOAD'S TAIL



Thank you for inviting me here today, even though I have to admit that I no longer have a tail. But I did when I was younger, that is, when I was a tadpole. In those days, I only had a head and a tail, just like the two sides of a coin. Of course, I wasn't shaped like a coin, more like...a tadpole. I didn't have any legs then, so I didn't play football. I didn't have any arms either, although they are usually called front legs in toad-talk, and that meant I couldn't play the piano or draw pictures, which was a great pity. My table manners were dreadful as you can imagine, but that didn't matter as there weren't any tables around where I grew up.

This didn't bother me as my brothers and sisters were in the same boat, or I should say, the same pond. To be frank, I don't remember much about my first few months of life. (*Can you remember when you were that young?*)

I've been told that when I was about twelve weeks old, I was much admired by an aunt of mine. She said I was a really cute little toad-let. That is the age when I finally got my front and back legs and when my tail disappeared. I was finally ready to leave the pond and explore the surrounding area.

The first things I had to do were to learn how to use my legs to get about, and find things to eat and to keep safe. I was very lucky. On several occasions I nearly became dinner for other creatures and once almost got run over by a car. Fortunately, I didn't get any nasty worm infections like a lot of other toads do, and put on a lot of weight as I grew bigger.

When the weather became cold in late Autumn, I found a nice comfortable hole to curl up in. I think it used to be a rabbit hole at one time, but they no longer used it as they had moved house. It was here that I settled down to have some deep sleep, and I mean very deep sleep - hibernation, as it is called by learned people. (*Did you know that when toads and frogs hibernate their temperature can drop to just above 0°, their hearts almost stop beating and they only need to breathe once every few minutes?*)

I was awfully hungry when I woke up in the warmer weather that came in spring, and I had to find lots of lovely insects to eat. *(Do you eat them too? Better not try as they might sting you.)*

My favourite food though is a caterpillar, but I'm quite partial to slugs too. Luckily, I have very good eyesight and smell since I hunt my food at night-time and swallow it whole because I don't have any teeth. Not a big problem as we toads never have to go to the dentist. *(Can you imagine that – a toad in the dentist's chair? I bet you couldn't draw that.)*

When I was nearly two years old, I became interested in girl-toads. But sad to say, they were not interested in me. They all went for bigger boy-toads and especially boy-toads with loud croaks. I've been informed that it is the same with human beings, especially in pop music. I was always a bit shy about croaking too loudly in case it woke up the neighbours. You have to be very careful when you don't know who your neighbours are, don't you. I did practice croaking, mind you, until someone once threw a bucket of water over me. I didn't mind the water, but the bucket nearly hit me.

As you can guess, my shyness made me very self-conscious and I felt bad about myself. I used to stare at my reflection in the pond and it filled me with despair. My skin was dry and lumpy as if I had warts. It's not always fun being young.

My back legs were short and dumpy and however hard I tried to hop, I could never master it and had to crawl about in a most ungainly fashion. No wonder the girl-toads didn't want to know me. My male friends were much more skilled at crawling about and all of them had really sexy croaks too. That's probably why they looked down on me! *(Can you croak like a toad?)*

In spite of that, though, I did manage to get around at my own pace and found a hole in the ground beneath some tree roots which I made my home during the day-light hours. It was quite a distance away from the pond I was born in, but I remembered how to get back there without any difficulty. We toads like to return to our place of birth every spring – it's like an annual pilgrimage for us.

The journey back to the pond can be quite dangerous. We are always aware that some animals and some birds might attack us on the way, and if we have a distance to go, we have to travel by day and night so as not to be late. It's a good job that our brown skin blends in well with the soil which helps us to hide from our enemies. We can also be poisonous to them, but some creatures have found ways to get around our defences, so we have to stay alert when we are not staying at home. We have to be especially aware of fast-moving traffic on roads too, particularly at night as car-drivers can accidentally run over us. I'm sure they don't do it deliberately. *(Will you be ever so careful when you drive a car? I hope so.)*

It was the third pilgrimage I went on to my pond that I saw her. I was a bit earlier than normal as I hadn't slept too well and I got there before everyone else. Well, not everyone. She was there and she was beautiful. Her skin was moist and smooth and she was quite a bit larger than me. What struck me most of all was that she had long graceful legs. You should have seen her hop around! So graceful!

“Hello,” I croaked, but she just ignored me.

I introduced myself. “I'm Tommy.”

With hardly any effort, she took an enormous jump and was gone. But the vision remained in my mind for a long time afterwards.

Some time afterwards when I was back near home, I came across my dotting aunt and I told her about my experience.

“Look, there’s something I have to tell you,” she said. “The lady you have seen is not a toad like us. She is what is known as a frog. I think you must have seen Fiona – she’s a well-known beauty queen amongst frogs.”

“What’s a frog?” I asked.

“A frog is like a toad, but different. You’ve already described some of the differences so you now know about them. I’m afraid that human beings like frogs, but alas, they don’t much like toads. A princess is said to have kissed a frog and it turned into a handsome prince. She would not have kissed a toad.”

“I wouldn’t want to be kissed by a princess,” I said. “It sounds revolting.”

“Toads, on the other hand,” my aunt carried on, “have had the reputation amongst human beings of being evil and horrible.”

“That’s not fair. I’m not evil or horrible,” I said. “I’m just me.”

“Never mind,” she said to comfort me. “Someday you’ll find a nice lady-toad who will give you lots and lots of children.”

After our meeting, I spent a long time practicing my croak. I even won first prize in a toad talent show for the best croaker of the year. I also put a lot of time in perfecting my crawl and was much envied in the area for the speed at which I could get around.

During the pilgrimage the following year I caught the eye of several young lady-toads and a few lady-frogs too. One of them admired the twinkle in my eye, although it was probably just a bubble from the water in the pond which made it look like that. We went on to have many children and now I’m a great-grandfather.

So I’d like to remind you all that it doesn’t matter how you look, it’s what lies behind it that is important. We toads are beautiful in our own way, just like frogs are, and every other creature. Be proud of yourself and take no notice of anyone who puts you down. Thank you for listening to me.

Postscript: I just finished writing this and went outside and when I moved a flower-pot a small frog leapt away. Or maybe it was a toad? What a coincidence! I wonder if the same thing will happen with the other stories?

HENRIETTA THE HEDGEHOG'S TAIL



Hi everyone. I'm Henrietta, or you can call me Hattie for short, as I'm not very tall. I have a reputation for being a prickly character, but it's not true. I'm easy-going as a rule, unless you physically attack me and then I have to protect myself by curling up into a little spikey ball. But don't worry. I promise I won't attack you.

So much of what Tommy the Toad said also applies to me. I wonder if we are related, although we don't look at all similar. But you don't always have to look similar to be related to someone. (*Who do you look like in your family, or is there someone else you closely resemble – a film star, maybe, or even the postman?*)

By the way, you may wonder why I am called a hedgehog. I don't look like a hog, which is another word for a pig, and I certainly don't look anything like a hedge. Well, many centuries ago, human beings thought that our noses looked like the snouts of pigs (what an indignity!) and we were often found beside hedges, where we were probably attending to the call of nature. We could just as easily have been called tree-hogs, bush-hogs or wall-hogs. I'm glad we're not called road-hogs, though. That refers to a bad driver. Given the choice I would prefer to be known as a rose-hog as they are my favourite flower – to smell, not to eat, I should add.

I've been told that when I was very young, I looked like my fellow brothers and sisters, in other words, my siblings. There were four of us in all if you exclude my dad, who only occasionally visited us. I had one brother and two sisters, and we were pale and had soft hair but no visible spines because they were covered over. The covering came off when my mother washed us and the spines gradually grew harder and multiplied. My mother used to say she was very grateful I didn't have any spines when I was born. That would have been really painful for her. But I've got hair on my tummy, even though, it's not as soft as it used to be back then.

We, hedgehogs, are also born blind and although we gain our sight within a short time, we rely more upon our strong sense of smell and hearing. I guess in time someone will invent spectacles for us to wear, but we don't really need them as there's nothing much for us to read, apart from a few road signs. (*Can you draw a picture of a hedgehog in glasses?*)

Sometime during my childhood, my dad got rid of my brother, and mom raised my sisters and myself as a single parent. However, she was a very good mother and took us out to hunt for food every night after we emerged from hibernating in early April. After one of my sisters got run over by a car, that just left mom, my sister, Hannah, and myself.

We lived in a nest made in a pile of leaves in the garden of an old man. He never picked up the leaves and they stayed there for years to rot down, as he had become very stiff and was no longer able to do any gardening. That suited us fine, as the pile of leaves was a very comfortable place to sleep for us.

In the area there was a lot to eat – slugs, worms, and fallen fruit when it was available, and all sorts of berries. Yum yum! We are what is called omnivorous animals – ‘omni’ means everything and ‘vorous’ means eating. In other words, we eat everything.

One night we were terrified when we came across a snake - an adder. Instead of leaving it alone, mom went straight up to it and bit it. She then told us to roll up into a ball like she did. Boy, was the adder mad - you’ve never seen a madder adder! He repeatedly struck out at mom until he had got rid of all his venom (poison) and then she killed it and we had adder-burgers for dinner. Not bad, but I prefer earthworms and apples, myself. They make a lovely pie, and it’s not nearly so dangerous getting hold of them to eat.

We were also very grateful to all the neighbours of the old man who used to throw left-over food onto their lawns. They thought they were feeding the birds, but in the evenings when the birds had stopped flying around, we used to go around all the gardens and find things the birds had missed and eat them.

In one of the houses there was a cat who was a fussy eater and the owner was always throwing cat-food onto his lawn which the cat didn’t want to eat, but we simply loved it. The cat didn’t mind us doing that and it completely ignored us. It may have been the sight of all our prickles which kept it away from us.

At different times before my first birthday I started losing my spines. That worried me. What would I be without them? Whoever heard of a hedgehog without spines? However, more spines grew back which were much harder. At the last count I had 6,000 of them. I may have more, but I fall asleep as I try to count them. (*Out of interest, how many hairs have you got?*)

I suppose it’s like when you lose your milk teeth and get new teeth to replace them (and I don’t mean false teeth.) Mom used to tell me that if children put their baby teeth under their pillow, the tooth fairy would bring them a present. I tried that with my baby spines and hid them under some leaves I was using for my pillow, but a spine fairy didn’t come and bring me anything – except fleas, and I would rather do without them. Maybe there isn’t such a thing as a spine fairy, but there certainly is such a thing as having fleas. (*Did you ever get anything from the tooth fairy? I hope it wasn’t a flea!*)

We had a happy life there until the old man died and soon a young couple moved in. They had a lot to do in the house – repairs, redecorating and changing the furniture. That didn't affect us at all, apart from the noise which accompanied it. Too much banging!

Then one day, my sister Harriet overheard the woman telling her partner not to be so messy. Harriet looked through the open door and saw that the house was spotless, not a thing out of place, everything neat and tidy.

"It's about time you did something about the garden," she overheard the woman say. "It's in a dreadful state."

The very next day the man came into the garden. He mowed the lawn and pruned the bushes and trimmed the hedge and threw all the cuttings onto the pile of leaves where we lived. We had to hurriedly repair our living quarters which had sagged as a result of the extra weight on them.

He called his partner to come and have a look at what he had done in the garden.

"You're not leaving that mess there, are you?" she said, pointing in our direction. "It's so unsightly. You should clear it all up and get rid of it."

We just had time to leave our home while he went inside his house to have a quick drink. When he came back, he was carrying a large shovel and a huge sack. He filled the sack with the new cuttings and then fetched another sack into which he shovelled the pile of old leaves until nothing remained of them.

The woman was very pleased about this and went out to a garden centre and came back with a holly bush which she planted where our home used to be.

"It looks so much nicer," she commented. "I really don't mind a few prickles as long as it is tidier down there."

The neighbours noticed that something was different too. They had been used to seeing us all parading through their gardens at about the same time every evening. Now we came and went at different times, vainly looking for somewhere new to live.

As if they had read our thoughts, there suddenly appeared several wooden "hedgehog houses" in each of their gardens, except in the garden belonging to the young couple. We tried each of them in turn, but in all of them the wooden floor and walls were too hard, and it was the wrong time of year for us to collect any fallen leaves to use as carpets. For the time being, at least, we didn't settle down in any of them.

This worried the neighbours who competed with each other to lure us into their own hedgehog house in their own garden. We noticed in one garden there were a lot more pieces of bread thrown onto the lawn. In another there were dishes of milk. The cat-owner was providing us with loads more cat food. And in yet another, where some children lived, we came across bits of chocolate and some nuts.

The offerings were gratefully received – we will eat almost anything, although fatty and sugary foods are not good for us. We can get fat too and that makes us unwell! The bread and milk, I remember, gave us all bad stomach ache. But it's hard to resist eating anything if you are a hedgehog.

The only food which was given to us that hedgehog doctors recommend is cat-food, so that's the garden we ended up in the most, belonging to the man who had the cat.

The neighbours kept an eye on their gardens to see if we were around. One of them put up a security light which came on whenever we were nearby and frightened the living daylights out of us. When it is dark outside and there is suddenly a bright light, we think it must be morning. So we go away and rest, and the light goes out and it gets dark and we think it's night-time once more - time for us to hunt for some food. Very confusing, I must say.

Others opened the curtains and let the light shine outside to see if we were there. Again, this is quite unsettling for us when they shut the curtains soon afterwards and it becomes dark again. Then there were the neighbours who shone torches on us and called out "Here, hedgie hedgie." Not something we like. We've got proper names too!

The only person who didn't bother much was the cat-owner who, like his pet, pretty well ignored us, apart from giving us extra cat-food, and that was mainly because his cat had temporarily gone off her food – something which worries all cat-owners – and he was having to throw more of it away.

But what about a new home for us, you may be wondering? It had to be near the cat-food so we hunted about in his garden for somewhere to take up residence. In his garden he had a disused coal-bunker, a small, brick-built building with a lid on top where the coal used to be put in, and a shutter on the front which could be opened to shovel out the coal. He opened the shutter, cleaned it up inside, and put a bit of old carpet on the floor for when his cat was caught outside in the rain. He called it his cat-house. The only thing is that cats are very independent creatures, and it was not her idea to have this house, so she never used it. But it proved to be a lovely new home for us. (*Can you draw it?*)

When the other neighbours got wind of where we had gone, there was a lot of ill-feeling towards him. They had spent a lot of money buying hedgehog houses from the shops. Some of them had little heaters in, and windows that could be opened for air-conditioning in the summer. Some had miniature swimming-pools next to them and some had solar lights that would come on to help us see better to get in or out of the house on dark evenings. But we did not want any of these additional features. We just wanted somewhere comfortable to go in the daytime.

Apart from the young couple who had bought the old man's house (and we would never dream of visiting their neat and tidy garden again), the jealous neighbours in the area were determined to do something about this injustice. Instead of wanting us in their gardens, they now did everything they could to keep us out. They no longer put food out for us and erected barbed wire fences around their gardens. Human beings can be very strange. Whether we liked it or not, we were now confined to the one garden.

Like us, the man's cat was none too pleased at being imprisoned in her own garden and took out its frustration on us by dropping dead mice and birds into the cat-house and digging extra holes in the ground for us to fall into. No-one spoke to the man anymore and he had threatening letters put through his letter-box.

He soon got fed up with this and sealed up the entrance to our new home one evening when we were out of it. We could not continue like this – the one garden alone did not contain enough food

for all three of us to survive on. There was only one solution: that was to dig our way out under the fence. The cat was pleased to see us go and helped dig the tunnel. (*Can you draw this?*)

Finally, we escaped and ended up in a neighbour's garden, surrounded as it now was by a huge barbed wire fence. We had dug one tunnel. We would have to dig another one and then another one; all of them at night-time so we wouldn't be seen. We eventually got out of all the surrounding gardens and found ourselves out on a country lane. Here there were lots of suitable places to live. But mom did not want any of us to be run-over and we kept on going until we came to a nice grassy field with thick hedges all around it. At last we could build a new home beside one of the hedges. Isn't that where we were always supposed to be? So we started a new life here and have been very happy ever since.

Now you know why people complain that there are so few hedgehogs about. Sadly, many have been run over by cars. But for the ones that are left, they are simply not looking in the right places. (*Have you seen any hedgehogs lately?*)

SQUIGGLE THE SQUIRREL'S TAIL



Hi. I'm Squiggle. Now that's a funny name you might say. Well, when my dad was courting my mom, she ran in a very squiggly line away from him, and of course, he followed her. That's how I got my name which seemed very appropriate. Is there anyone else here who is called Squiggle? Wave, if there is. No? I guess I'm the only one then.

Just like Hattie the Hedgehog, I was blind when I was born. But I didn't have any fur or teeth either – I must have looked pretty helpless, which indeed I was. I was only half an ounce in weight (15 grams) and no larger than a child's finger, as were my brother and sister. It was late summer. Mom had already given birth to her first lot of babies, or to be accurate, her kittens or kits, or some say her pups, in early spring. At least in summer it was a bit warmer than back then, and there were plenty of things about to use to build a nest. But more of that in a moment.

Without any fur it was not too warm, so we had to snuggle down with mom and after about five days I grew some fur on my face, but had to wait three weeks to get any fur on my body. It was a wet and chilly summer that year and you can imagine how miserable we felt. But mom fed us and kept us warm. Mothers are good like that, aren't they. My eyes didn't open till I was about five weeks old. My teeth had also grown by then. Yet it wasn't until I was sixteen weeks old (four months) that I could leave home. I was now a teenager, as far as squirrels go, although it is more correct to say a juvenile.

Of course, I had a lot to learn still. How to climb down trees, for instance. We, squirrels, are unusual in that our hind feet can twist around to face the opposite direction. This makes it possible for the claws on our hind feet to grip the tree trunk better and allows us to come down head-first. Otherwise we might slide down the tree. You might have seen us stop for a short time in one position

to have a look round as we come down. We think that's really clever. But we do need to practice squirrel-yoga to do that.

Another thing we learn is where to find things like nuts to eat. That's why we, grey squirrels, like to build our nests in oak trees, as the acorns fall to the ground when they are ready, and we don't have far to go to pick up our food. It's like the corner-shop to us.

You may have seen us sitting up holding a nut with our front legs to eat it. Or sometimes we hold on to a nut as we climb up a tree. But when we want to store some nuts so we can eat them later, we have to hide them in the ground and remember exactly where we have hidden them. That's a good memory test for us. If a squirrel has a poor memory, he or she will go hungry.

Why do we hide our nuts? Easy. So that other squirrels don't steal them and eat them themselves. *(Do you ever have to hide your food? Does mommy know that you might have a stack of chocolate bars hidden under your bed? Do you know where daddy keeps his nuts? Only joking.)*

However, we are very cunning because we sometimes pretend to hide a nut and make it look as if we are burying it. That's because other squirrels might be watching. They may think that we have put it in the hole we've dug in the ground. But can you guess where the nut really is? It's in our mouth all the time. Oh dear! I've given away the secret – don't tell anyone. It's easier said than done, you know. However, we are born magicians even if we don't have any magic wands. Maybe I'm related to Harry Potter!

(Can you pretend to hide something and fool other people, when it is really somewhere else, say, in your pocket or up your sleeve? If not, you should get a squirrel to show you how it's done. We don't charge a lot – it's nut munch!)

I should add that it's not just nuts that we eat. We also eat tomatoes and strawberries, insects, birds' eggs, and the buds, berries and bark of trees, plus what is under the bark. We also like to eat things that people put out to feed the birds – sunflower seeds, corn and millet, but definitely not breadcrumbs. It's nuts though that really appeal to us, whether it's acorns, walnuts or hazelnuts, as long as they aren't salted – yuk!

I'm afraid to say that people don't usually like it when we eat the food that is given to the birds. Sorry. First come, first served is our motto. They also do not like it when we chew the bark off trees because it damages them. You see, we are rather addicted to the sweet stuff underneath the bark. I guess we have a bit of a sweet tooth. You may think that we are very naughty in some of the things we get up to. But I should point out that we have been praised for helping to plant new trees, when we forget to collect up all the acorns we have buried. So we do have our good points.

We also have to be able to climb up trees very quickly and jump from branch to branch, or tree to tree, like a trapeze artist, even after a heavy lunch. You never see us fall, do you? That's because we are professional athletes. You may have seen us in the Olympics, or perhaps not.

(Can you climb a tree? Be careful if you do. You may get stuck and have to be rescued by the fire brigade, which would be very embarrassing.)

There something else we can do that you can't do. We can break open a nut shell without using a nut-cracker. We have very sharp long teeth which enables us to do that. They are very different to your teeth, so don't try it yourself.

One of the most important things we have to learn is how to build a nest without any tools. You never see a squirrel with a hammer and nails, or a concrete mixer...or maybe you have? If you promise not to tell anyone, I'll tell you how it's done.

First, we have to choose a good tree – a fairly tall one with thick branches and near a ready supply of food, and I don't mean a supermarket. I mean, you guessed it, nuts. If there are any abandoned bird nests or holes in the tree trunk, we can use those, and that will save us a bit of building work. Otherwise we'll have to build a new nest. To do this, we have to find somewhere where a branch joins the tree trunk, about twenty feet (six metres) or more above the ground. We don't use a ruler – we just guess. (*Can you guess how far things are away from you by just looking?*)

Then we take up some twigs to the spot, fix them securely to the tree and weave them together to form the floor. Leaves and moss need to be firmly placed on top of the twigs to make it nice and comfortable. And then a round frame is built around this to form the walls and roof. More leaves, moss and dried grass have to be attached to the inside of the frame in order to keep out the wind and to make it more comfy.

The whole nest can be between six inches (15 centimetres) to two feet (60 centimetres) wide, depending on whether just one squirrel will use it, or a family. The main entrance is low down beside the trunk to get in and out of it easily and quickly and to keep out the rain. Some have another opening too for emergencies. The nest is usually finished in a day, but it does need constant upkeep after that, just like houses do. Obviously, there are no squirrel plumbers, electricians, builders, roofers, carpet-layers, refuse collectors, pizza delivery drivers or many other professions that people often need. We, squirrels, therefore have to do everything ourselves.

As it was autumn by the time I was able to leave home, my mother insisted that I knew how to make a good strong nest for myself, ready for the bad weather we get over winter. She was a good teacher and I learned the knack quickly, unlike some of my young friends who had to abandon the nests they were trying to build when they fell apart. It was a good job I was a good builder, as we like to have up to three nests each so we can find shelter wherever we are. We also need a spare one in case one of them gets infested with fleas.

(Now you know more about them, the next time you are in the countryside or a park and see a squirrel, find a big tree nearby and see if you can see its nest. I spotted one today when I looked up into the branches of an oak tree and saw a heap of old brown leaves covering a nest on top of a branch. It is now June and all the brown leaves on the trees should have fallen to the ground in autumn and blown away. So something must have collected them up and taken them there. I know it was a squirrel because he was sitting on a branch nearby and saw me and wanted a chat. He made the sound a bit like a duck quacking, but a lot softer. I wonder what he was telling me. Buzz off, I expect. Or perhaps he was telling me that he wasn't a duck! Maybe it was Squiggle?)

Well, I've given away a lot of secrets today, so I'd better be off before I get into trouble. Now where on earth did I bury that lovely big acorn? Was it here? Or was it over there, where I pretended to bury it? Life can get very complicated, even for a squirrel.

(Here's an interesting fact: did you know that the squirrel's nest in a tree is called a drey? That's dry with an 'e' in it. Notice that 'nest' and 'drey' have an 'e' in them. If you ever see many squirrels together - not just one, that is called a 'dray'. Both 'many' and 'dray' have an 'a' in them.)

For older children

This article has some information about red and grey squirrels for people in the UK:

<http://i-csrs.com/red-squirrels-decline>

HANNA THE HARE'S TAIL



Hello everyone. Sorry I'm late. I only live a short distance away so I left it till the last moment to leave. But I got held up at a zebra crossing – I don't mean a place where pedestrians can cross the road (a cross-walk in American). It was a real zebra in the road, which had escaped from a local zoo.

(People who live nearest to where they are going are nearly always later than those who live a long way away. Have you found that out too?)

Anyway, I'm here now. My name is Hanna and as you can see, I'm a hare. I'm certainly not a rabbit, although jackrabbits are really hares. I hope that doesn't confuse you.

We, hares, think of ourselves as Ferraris, whereas rabbits are model -T Fords (very old cars). We can run fairly long distances at up to 45 mph. Rabbits are slower, about 30 mph top-speed on average and they can't keep it up for long.

(The fastest human being – the Jamaican athlete, Usain Bolt, won the 100 metres race in 2017 at a speed of just under 28mph – that is half the top speed of a hare.)

As you can see, our bodies are built for speed. We are bigger than rabbits but have longer muscular back legs and bigger nostrils so we can breathe more easily when we are running. You see, we really need to be able to run fast to get away from other animals, like foxes or coyotes, or birds, like buzzards or owls, that might want to catch us. Furthermore, our strong back legs enable us to jump more than 10 feet quite easily. We are also not bad at swimming. We would also do very well in the Olympics, don't you agree?

We have brown fur on our backs and white on our fronts and most of our tails. But you may notice that we have black spots on the tips of our long ears and tails. Do you know why? I don't know either. But rabbits don't have them and they've got shorter ears. Maybe it's so that we can

spot other hares more easily and not get them mixed up with rabbits – a bit like school uniforms. But really, we are not that stupid. In fact, we are highly intelligent.

We, hares, can do something that I doubt if you can do. We can move our ears independently which helps us to hear all round us. How about this - we can hear things up to 3km away, that is nearly 2 miles. That's pretty good, isn't it, but it can get annoying when there's something very noisy in the area, like a busy road.

(How far away can you hear? And can you move your ears independently, without touching them? Try it.)

Having long ears also enables us to lose heat when we get hot, for instance when running fast, because unlike human beings we can't sweat. You never see a hare buying deodorant, do you.

We also have excellent vision and can see everything around us, and we have a very good sense of smell too. We need such good vision, hearing and smell as we don't live underground in warrens, like rabbits do. Instead, we live in dips in the ground in fields. These are called forms. *(To remember that, you could say we live in forms on farms.)* We therefore have to be alert in case of danger. We even sleep with our eyes wide open. *(Can you do that?)*

We have different ways to communicate with each other. We raise our ears to show interest in something, and lower them to warn others about danger. If a predator, like a fox is spotted, we thump the ground with our back feet. If we are hurt or scared, we can squeal. A mother can make guttural noises – harsh, raspy sounds made in the back of the throat, to attract her children. *(Can you make any guttural noises? Give it a try. You might need to be able to do it when you are a mother! Or father!)*

Being a woman myself, or a Jill, as a female hare is called (a male is called a Jack)¹, I know a thing or two about being a mother. I'm three years old and last year I gave birth three times. The first time there were four babies, (which we call leverets). The second time there were three, and the last time, two. Nine leverets in one year may sound a lot, but sadly most of them did not survive for long because some were caught by predators and several others became unwell.

They were born with fur and with good vision and were very soon able to get about by themselves, unlike many other new-born animals, like rabbits. Each evening for a month, they returned to the area close to where they were born to be nursed. They were not allowed to come to the nest (pardon me, I mean 'form') in case any predators might find all of them in the same place. After the month was over, they all left the area to lead their own lives and find their own food: things like clover, wild grasses, weeds, winter wheat, sugar beet and the bark of trees.

When I said I was a hare, I expect some of you thought I must be a 'Mad March Hare'. This is really insulting to us. I am not crazy or annoyed, and I am a hare all year long, not just during the month of March. I presume that what people who say this are thinking about is what happens in the spring.

But first, I should mention that I am quite a sportswoman, as are all my lady friends. I can run extremely fast and I am very good at boxing. Yes, boxing – for us, hare-women, has long been one of our sports, as well as being a good way of defending ourselves.

We normally feed in the late evening and night and stay out of sight in the daytime, keeping ourselves to ourselves. We are not sociable animals like rabbits. But in the early spring we have a sporting contest, if you can call it that, in the daylight hours.

This is what happened to me last year. On crossing a field, I was chased by not one male hare, but many of them. Well, as any woman knows, if you are being chased, you run, and I was able to get away from all but one of them. I'm simply not interested in having a slow-coach as a boyfriend, so I was only attracted to the one who ran fastest and came closest to me.

But when he caught up with me, he wouldn't take no for an answer. So I stood up on my back legs and punched him and he punched me back and we had quite a fight. All around me, the same thing was going on with other male and female hares. It all got out of control as there were no referees. Still, no-one was seriously hurt, even though some hares did lose quite a bit of their fur. You have to stand up for yourself these days.² This is maybe how the expression Mad March Hares originated. (*Can you draw hares boxing each other?*)

In the end I gave in a few days later and he became the father of my new family.

Finally, something which some of you may find disgusting. We eat our own poo. Yes, we do. When we have to go, we leave behind either soft pellets or hard pellets (our droppings). The soft pellets contain a lot of nutrients (the things in food which are good for you). They are not completely digested when we eat them the first time. Once we have eaten them again and absorbed those nutrients, we leave behind the hard pellets, which is proper poo.

Why do we do this? Well, hares, like rabbits and pikas (conies)³ eat mainly grass, which consists largely of something called cellulose. People are not able to eat grass because they cannot digest cellulose. But we, hares, can. After we have chewed the grass, some of it goes to a special place⁴ in our bodies. Here it is mixed with yeast and bacteria amongst other things, which can turn the cellulose into a kind of sugar. Yum yum! After four to six hours after eating, this is passed as soft pellets, which look a bit like a bunch of grapes, which we then immediately eat again because they taste nice and are good for us. How disgusting, you might think, but this is the normal thing for us to do.

Human beings are built differently from us and do not need to do this.⁵ Never even try! Thank goodness, you might say. Besides which, if you tried eating grass you would probably be sick or have diarrhea and the grass would do you no good at all. But for us, hares, grass is good.

Well, I must hop off – I'm getting hungry just talking about eating. Enjoy your food and I will enjoy mine...again.

¹ Sometimes, female hares are called does and males are called bucks.

² see hares boxing on this video: <https://youtu.be/xA5InBddIV4>

Some notes for older children

³ These animals are called lagomorphs.

⁴ The cecum, sometimes spelled caecum, is situated between the small and large intestines.

⁵ Animals which are called ruminants, for example, cows, sheep, goats and deer can eat grass because they have four compartments to their stomach. In the first two chambers – the rumen and reticulum – the cellulose in the grass is fermented and broken down by microbes, mainly bacteria. Then the food is regurgitated, in other words, sent back to the mouth to be chewed again to break it down more. This is when they are said to be chewing the cud. After that, it returns to the stomach and goes to the other two chambers and the intestines where it is digested. Horses, which are not ruminants but eat grass have a cecum which allows them to digest the cellulose in grass and absorb the nutrients from it without having to re-eat it, unlike lagomorphs. For more information on horses' digestive system, see <https://www.equinetheory.com/horse-digestive-system/>

FREDDY THE FOX'S TAIL



Hello, has she gone already? She looked very tasty, but she's no need to worry about me. I'm getting on a bit, four years old now, and I've got a bit of arthritis in my joints. It can be painful when I move and I'm not as sprightly as I used to be.

I'm an urban fox now – a bit of an old 'dog', as we males are called. That's very appropriate as we are quite closely related to dogs. Just don't throw a ball and expect me to run after it. Balls don't interest me in the slightest. You can't eat rubber balls. But if I saw a rabbit, I would chase it, that's for certain. Oh, maybe that's why she left so quickly. She ought to know that I can tell the difference between hares and rabbits. Hares are much too quick for me to catch. (*Can you remember the difference between them?*)

I'm a real country bumpkin at heart. I was born and grew up in the countryside. We shared a badger's sett or 'den' as it is called in Britain, with a badger family. The badgers did not need all of their accommodation, so they let us use part of it. Down the hole there was a long tunnel leading to our living-room which also served as our bedroom, with several other tunnels going from there back to the surface. This provided us with other ways of escaping if this was ever necessary. You can never be too careful.

Of course, we don't have beds like human beings – we just lie on the floor, by which I mean the earth underneath us in the den. I'm told that badgers like to lie down on leaves in their bedrooms, the same as hedgehogs. Not us.

The badger, our landlord, who let us move into his den was really disgusted at the way we kept it. Badgers are so house-proud – everything kept clean and tidy, unlike us. *(Is your mother ever disgusted at the state of your bedroom? The next time she tells you to tidy it up, tell her you are really a fox!)*

I loved the quietness and the fresh air in the country. When I was old enough, I left home and laid claim to a large territory for myself – several fields of grass and crops, an area of woodland and plenty of ditches to hide in and keep an eye on things around me.

To begin with, everything went well. I found enough to eat and enjoyed myself, although I did get quite lonely at times. But then I began to have problems in finding food when the local farmers got rid of some of the hedges and filled in the ditches so he could plant more crops.

One day, my brother, Frank, visited me. He lived in a city some distance away and was having a holiday in the area. He told me that there are many more opportunities for getting food in the towns. He said there are ready-made items of food that people throw away in litter bins, dustbins, and even just lying on the ground – fried chicken, half-eaten beef burgers and pizzas, and chips. He hadn't a clue what these things were, but they tasted good to him.

Plus, there is a lot of fruit and plenty of berries in people's gardens. In addition, there are lots of mice and rats about, he said. We eat virtually anything. We're not fussy eaters.

What's more, in towns and cities, you don't even need to hide any surplus food away for times when there isn't any fresh stuff – something which we always have to do in the countryside. Apparently, there's lots of food the whole year round in towns and cities, if you know where to look. *(Where do you think he could find food that had been thrown away in the town or city where you live?)*

I had a long think about what he had said and because I was getting hungrier and hungrier, I made up my mind to make my way to the nearest town to see if it was true what he had said.

The next morning, I set off. It wasn't long before I had to cross several busy roads and a railway line. That was not easy and was very dangerous. After I crossed the railway line, I ended up in a field and suddenly heard some horses running in my direction, accompanied by some dogs which were barking noisily. Instinctively I ran for cover as I knew this must be a hunt, something which my parents had told me about, although I had not personally ever encountered one. It was very scary. I found an abandoned hole to go down and stayed there until it was quiet again and safe to come out. Well, at least I thought the hole was abandoned until I nearly tripped up over another fox on the way out.

"Hello", he said. "Nice of you to drop in on me."

I had a good look at him.

“Why, if it isn’t Uncle Ferdinand,” I said.

“Well, no, it isn’t. I’m your Uncle Finley.”

“I do beg your pardon,” I replied, noticing that he was wearing a kilt. Of course, it must be my Scottish uncle, Finley McFox from Fife.

“Is this your home?” I asked him.

“Aye”, he said.

“Are there often fox-hunts in this area?”

“Quite frequently, so I just stay home and wait till they’ve gone by. Gives me an excuse to have a nice rest down here and have a wee dram of whisky, especially on a rainy day like this. The huntsmen must be mad to be out in such weather. Anyway, where are you off to, young Freddy?”

I told him I was going to town and he showed me the right direction to go in.

“Good luck,” he said, “At least you won’t have to worry about a hunt charging down the high street of the town. Can you imagine what that would do with the traffic? It would really ‘fox’ the drivers having to cope with that!”

I bade him farewell. It may have been my imagination but I swear I heard the sound of bagpipes behind me shortly after I had left him. I shouldn’t have been surprised – he was known to have many talents. (*Can you draw a picture of a fox in a kilt playing the bagpipes?*)

It was now starting to go dark, and in the distance, I could make out the lights of houses casting a glow into the sky. Before I reached the houses, I came across a small fenced-off area in which there was a low wooden building. I didn’t have to guess what it was as my nose told me straight-away that there were chickens inside. It must be what we call a hotel for hens, I thought.

A notice on the fence stated that they were free range chickens. Free! That’s one word I can recognise. It starts with an F, just like my name, so I’ve learned a lot of words beginning with an F. If only I could get through the fence, I would help myself to a free one. I walked all around it but could see no way to get in and eventually gave up. Remembering what my brother had told me, I was not that upset... Why go for an uncooked one when I might find a meal of freshly cooked chicken without any difficulty?

I made my way along the deserted suburban streets, guided by the smell of food coming from the restaurants in the centre of town. Sure enough, at the back of one of them I came across some black bags filled with left-over food, some of it still warm. I reached out, and as my claws touched a bag, it ripped open and the contents spilled out: lumps of chicken, duck and beef in a thick sauce which I’d never come across before. I tasted it. It was very hot, far too hot for me, but

not unpleasant. I'm sure I could get used to it, given time. But that night it just made me want to...you can guess! (*Can you guess what kind of restaurant it was?*)

"Don't you like curry, then?" said a voice close to me.

It was a female fox, a vixen. She was obviously used to the hot food and tucked into it.

"I come here every week," she said, "but you do have to be careful not to make too much mess or the people might not leave the bags here anymore. That's why I don't come here more often."

She told me her name was Fiona and she lived in the suburbs.

"It's a good life here and there are a lot of foxes who have moved to the town. But I've got fed up with all the male foxes who spend all their time hanging around the football ground. There's usually a lot of stuff to eat after a match. I am convinced though that they really go just to watch the game."

"That may be true, even though I don't know what football is. I come from the countryside where the only thing people do with their balls is to throw them for their dog to run after. Oh, I should have introduced myself. My name is Freddy."

"Where are you living now, Freddy?" she asked.

"I've not got anywhere to live here yet. I've just arrived."

"Well, come over to my home. There's plenty of room."

"That's very kind of you," I said, and followed her back to the suburbs.

On the way back, we were approached by two male foxes. The loud noises they were making indicated that they had been to the football match and had found some spilt beer which they had lapped down.

"Who are you?" they said to me. "And where are you going with my girl-friend?"

"This is Freddy", said Fiona, "and I'm not your girl-friend! Freddy has just arrived in town and I've offered to put him up at my home. So please let us by."

The two drunken males made threatening sounds and blocked our path. Suddenly one of them struck out at me. I quickly stepped aside and he missed me. At that, the other male tried to attack me but ended up bumping into his mate, knocking them both to the ground. They got up and rounded on me, but they were no match for me as I was stone-cold sober and very fit after all the exercise I had been getting during the long walk. I fought them off and nipped at their heels as they scampered off.

"This is what happens when they have a beer," said Fiona. "They think they are Super-fox, but they are really weaklings. Anyway, thank you for seeing them off. My home is just around the corner from here."

She led me into the garden of one of the houses. I was expecting to see a hole in the ground, but Fiona pointed to a shed.

“That’s where I live, under that shed.”

When we got up to it, Fiona showed me a small hole that was almost hidden by a bush and led under the shed floor. To get in was a tight squeeze, but inside it was very spacious and perfectly dry.

“The only thing is that you have to be careful not to make any noise in the daytime when the owner of the house is about, and you do have to make sure no-one sees you, but it’s an ideal situation otherwise.” *(Do you have a shed in your garden? Maybe there’s a fox or another animal who lives underneath it.)*

I spent the night there and the next night and the night after that and so on. Fiona was glad to have some company and felt safer with me there. After a while, she indicated that she would like to start a family. So it was then that earlier this year she gave birth to four young ones, kits as they’re called. Blind, deaf and toothless, it took nearly a fortnight before their eyes opened and their teeth started to appear.

Fiona couldn’t leave the home for a month after they were born as she had to look after the kits and feed them. It was therefore up to me to do the “grocery shopping”. Fortunately, by this time I knew where to go to get the food and did the rounds of the town’s restaurants, the park and the neighbours’ gardens. Every day she would give me a shopping list – some Chicken Biryani, Daal, and a few Papadums, a lot of nice berries and a diet Coke. On the weekend we would always have mouse for dessert – chocolate mouse, if possible.

“How can I carry everything back,” I said.

“You’ll have to find a basket, or better still, a shopping trolley,” she replied.

I had no idea how I was going to push a shopping trolley, even though there were a few abandoned ones I discovered. *(Can you draw a picture of a fox wheeling a shopping trolley?)*

Word soon got round that Fiona had given birth and her sister, Freda, came to live with us to help out. Her offer to fox-sit for us came in useful after the kits were a month old when they were able to eat solid food, so both Fiona and I could both go out and bring back fresh supplies.

It was getting rather crowded under the shed by now and I found a nice hidden spot to spend my time in when I wasn’t hunting around for food. Besides which, all that Fiona and Freda could talk about was babies and it got rather boring for me, being a dog fox.

The first time in ages that I saw my cubs again when they came out of the den, it must have been about a month after they were born. I could hardly recognise them – they had grown a lot and were the splitting image of...me. Well, of course.

I must admit that Fiona and I did argue about what to call them. We both agreed on Ferdinand, Freya, and Frances. But when Fiona insisted we name the youngest one Philip, I protested.

“We are foxes,” I said. “Their names must begin with an F.”

“But the Ph in Philip is pronounced as an F,” she said.

“OK,” I relented. “We can call him that, but it must be spelled Filip.”

She accepted that and I was happy about that we had come to an agreement.

It was great to see them playing together, although they were a bit rough at times. I suppose I was too at that age. I was told that playing helps us foxes to learn skills that we need when we go hunting. But that only really applies to the countryside. In town you just collect up what you want and take it home with you, just like your parents when they go shopping, except that we don't pay for anything. That sometimes makes me feel guilty. Thereagain, we do get rid of a lot of mice and rats which would eat all the left-over food otherwise. (*Which do you prefer – foxes or rats?*)

A few months later, I thought it would be nice to take my family back to visit my relatives in the countryside. Fiona's sister would not come as she was scared of the dark, having lived all her life in the town. She also liked all the noise and bustle in the town as it made her feel more at home. It was a relief to me that she didn't come with us!

We set off one evening but it was not easy-going for me. I had developed arthritis in my back legs and walking was quite painful at times. When we arrived back in my former home it all looked different. A lot of the fields were gone and new houses and roads had been built there. Disappointed not to have met all my relatives, we turned around and made our way back.

And who should we meet up with near the railway line? Uncle Finlay. He was practising 'tossing the caber'* – a long pole, although in his case it was only a couple of feet long.

“I might need to defend myself against the huntsmen,” he told us.

I didn't think that would really work, but left him to it. The exercise was doing him good at least.

And so we arrived home and to celebrate we all went for a Vindaloo curry. It was good to be back. The man with the shed had missed us. And we thought he didn't know about us! He put a lot of food out for us in his garden and showed us photographs of the cubs he had taken which had won him a prize in a competition. What's more, he had even erected a veranda over the hole we used to gain entrance to our home under his shed. It was an old broken umbrella, but still did the trick.

What could we do to return the favour, we wondered? Then it struck us. We could bring back some food for him whenever we went shopping. So I always leave a dead rat or the carcass of a chicken outside his back door now. He certainly won't starve and hopefully will continue to feed us too. Now that's what I call a good arrangement!

- Tossing the caber is one of the Highland Games in Scotland. See this video:
<https://youtu.be/xb0FU8rSisU>

DIANA THE DEER'S TAIL



Hello, I'm Diana the Deer, or if you like, you can call me Di the Doe. I'm a fallow deer as you can tell by the white spots on my brown back. Don't worry: they're not contagious. I'm perfectly healthy. This is just the way we look. We are technically known as 'dama dama', at least that's how some people refer to us when we chew the bark off some of their trees.

We, fallow deer, are regarded as newcomers to this country. We came over to England from France with the Normans after the Norman Conquest in 1066. It's not that they liked us, even though we were deer to them. They just wanted to hunt us for sport. But many of us escaped from the deer parks and you can find us now throughout the country. (*Have you seen any fallow deer?*)

We get on well with other types of deer, such as red deer and roe deer, but we don't often meet them. These deer have been here much longer than us. But human beings insist upon calling us 'non-native' deer, unlike these other deer. It makes us feel inferior. I wonder how many human beings have been here for nearly a thousand years! No-one would dream of calling them non-native.

I'm now three years old. When I was born, I was just a foot high (30cms) and had to stay with my mother, who was all by herself at the time until I was a month old, and then we joined the herd of other lady deer. I never did meet my father. Most of the year, the males, which are called bucks, live in separate herds from the females, called does. (*Would you like to be in a group of just females or males? Or would you prefer a mixed group?*)

It was summer when we met up with the herd. We were in a clearing, eating lots of fresh green grass and herbs, and occasionally we would grab a handful of leaves from the trees at the edge of the woods.

I asked my mother who my father was. She told me he was a big buck called Buster.

“He had such a powerful voice,” she told me, “and had absolutely huge antlers. Many of us women were attracted to him. In fact, several of these fawns of your age who are here along with us now are your sisters.” *(Young deer are called fawns.)*

“Were there any other bucks around?” I asked.

“Yes, of course,” she replied, “but Buster locked horns, or rather antlers, with them and chased them off.”

Autumn came and my mother started getting that maternal look in her eye.

“Wouldn’t you like another brother or sister?” she said and disappeared. She was gone for several weeks and when she got back, I noticed that she looked bigger. She kept getting larger until one day she wandered off again and when she caught up with us again, she was accompanied by a young fawn. I could see that she had lost a lot of weight since I saw her last.

When summer arrived the following year I too began to long for the sound of tiny hoof-prints. This feeling grew in intensity until late Autumn. One day, we heard a great bellowing and saw an enormous buck marking out his territory with his antlers. A lot of the women deer were swooning at this and allowed themselves to be rounded up by him.

“Oh, look at those antlers,” said one of the does. “I bet you he can pick up all the TV networks on those.”

(I should inform you that deer don’t watch television themselves, but they have heard about it. In fact, some deer friends of Di’s were once filmed and appeared on a television programme. In case you are wondering about the purpose of the antlers, they are used to push away other bucks and to attract the does. Can you draw a deer with big antlers? If you were a girl deer (a doe), would you be attracted to a boy who had big antlers or smaller ones?)

I have to admit that I was simply not attracted to this buck. I was looking for a buck who would be kind and gentle and would make me laugh.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said my mother, disapprovingly. “It’s survival of the fittest we have to think of, and that means the biggest hunkiest buck you can find. That’s what we women want.”

But I was not persuaded by this.

Amongst the bucks was a quiet unassuming young buck with much smaller antlers but with a lovely walk. I fell for him immediately. I tried to get nearer to him, but the big buck cut me off and prevented me from reaching him.

I made my way through the mass of swooning females and managed to escape into the woods beyond them. I tried to wink at my favourite buck, but he didn't see me. Upset by what was going on, I returned to the clearing which I knew well and waited for the other does to come back.

When they made their appearance, they shooed me away. Even my mother acted as if she didn't want to know me.

Alone, I went off to find a place of my own. It was very lonely for me, and I kept dreaming of coming across the young buck who had attracted my attention. I think I did see him on one occasion when he was with a lot of other males. But he was not interested in me and to be honest, I no longer had any romantic feelings towards him at the time. However, we could still be friends, I thought. But it was not to be. I made my way back to the female herd. My mother and the rest of the does by now had forgotten about the incident and they allowed me to join them once again.

Autumn of the following year eventually arrived. The bucks were again marking out their territory and groaning loudly. Buster, the big buck who had rounded up most of the does the previous year was nowhere to be seen. Rumour had it that he had died, the result of an accident with a car. In his place though was my deer friend, Brian. But I could hardly recognise him. His antlers were much larger now and he succeeded in chasing off all the other bucks.

I should have been delighted at this, but no. Instead of his lovely quiet voice was a raucous cry and rather than appearing gentle and kind, he was throwing his weight around.

All the ladies fell for him, but not me. I was horrified and again ran off. After walking many, many miles, I came to a park and caught sight of another herd of does. They welcomed me and asked if I could represent them at this gathering here today, which I am doing.

Have I given up on finding the right buck? I suppose I have. But at least in the park there is plenty of food which human tourists leave behind, in addition to the normal food. Anyway, not all of us want to end up as mothers and I am happy for the moment just being by myself. Thank you for listening. *(There's nothing wrong with you if you don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend.)*

BEN THE BEAVER'S TAIL



Thank you, Di. Unlike you, I really am a newcomer to this country. I was brought here very recently from Canada, along with my family. People realise that we, beavers, can be very useful to them by doing what comes naturally to us: building dams. I think we are the animals which should be called 'dama dama', rather than deer. I will tell you why.

We like to live beside rivers so we don't have to go far to have a drink or clean our teeth or have a bath. The river is our kitchen, bathroom and swimming pool. But first we must make some changes to the river, otherwise we might get swept away if the water is flowing too quickly. That means we have to build dams.

First, we must chop down some trees that grow by the riverside. We munch through their trunks with our sharp teeth. *(Bet you couldn't do that! Better not try – you could break a tooth and it might be very painful.)*

Mind you, our teeth, unlike yours are fortified with iron which makes them very strong. The iron also makes them yellow – but that is nothing for us to worry about. We don't have to smile when we are being photographed, as none of us knows how to use a camera.

Chopping down the trees is said to encourage new growth in them (something that is called 'coppicing'). Instead of one trunk, lots of new trunks grow up in its place and a lot of insects are attracted by this. This in turn means more food for birds and other creatures, so there's a lot more wildlife around and a lot more company for us.

When the trunk of a tree is nearly munched all the way through, it falls down and we can chew off some of the branches, pick them up in our mouths and swim with them down-river to where we want to build our dam. The different branches are laid down on top of each other and kept in place by heavy stones and mud from the river-bed which we bring to the site. By making a long line of branches, we create a dam, which is like a wall in the river. The whole family is involved in helping out when we do this.

When the dam is complete, other branches with nice tasty leaves are stored under the water and secured to the dam so that we can get to them easily in bad weather when the ground may be covered in snow. We eat the leaves as well as the bark of trees.

Although we don't have any difficulty in walking, we find swimming is better suited to us and we have webbed back feet and a flat, scaly tail which makes it easy to do. We can also stay underwater for up to fifteen minutes at a time, even if the surface of the water is frozen over. *(What do you prefer – walking or swimming? Do you think you could hold a branch of a tree in your mouth as you swim?)*

The dam we have built creates a deep-water pond behind it, which floods part of the woodland surrounding the river, and allows us to reach fresh supplies of leaves and the barks of trees without having to go by land. This could be dangerous if there are any bears or mountain lions about.

Beside the lake, we build our home, or lodge, as we call it. This is a huge mound, made of branches and vegetation and extends down into the water. There are usually two entrances to it which are both under the surface of the water so we can come and go without being seen.

People believe that what we do has several benefits. It helps to prevent flooding down-river and preserves areas of water when there is a draught. That is why they are reintroducing us, beavers, into countries like Britain. And that is how I have come to be here today.

But the difference between Canada, where I grew up and Britain is that there are few wild areas left in this country. I discovered this personally.

I come from a big family. There were ten of us in all. We had to build extra lodges like the mounds I've just described, plus some additional housing created by digging tunnels into the river banks. I say river, but actually it was only really a stream. Being the oldest offspring, it was decided that I would have to find somewhere else to go as it was getting too crowded.

Off I went down-stream until I came across a river which the stream was flowing into. Instead of continuing on towards the direction of the sea, I went up-river for quite a distance. It was a bit off-putting that in places the river-bank was covered in concrete, so I kept going until I came across more familiar muddy riverbanks with a few alder trees, weeping willows and cherry trees growing close to the water's edge.

This seemed to be the perfect spot. Being by myself, however, I had a lot of work to do without any help. Nevertheless, I persevered and in a short time had built a small dam. The water backed up and produced a nice pond for me and I set to work in building a lodge beside the pond. I was hoping that a female beaver might come along at some time, so the lodge had to be big enough

for two. When I had spare time available, I added some extra rooms to it to accommodate a family that I was hoping I might have one day.

Things were looking good. I laid in a supply of food under water, plus some near the lodge on the ground, since I knew that would be safe there, as there are no bears in this country which might threaten me on my way to collect the food.

Of course, there is always maintenance work to do when you have a home, especially when it rains hard, and that is what happened soon after I had arrived there. Every night I would have to go out and add more branches and more mud to my dam which was threatened by the fast-flowing water after the heavy rains.

It was a great joy to me when a lady beaver did come by one day and we took a shine towards each other. She admired my handiwork with the dam, but the lodge was not completely to her liking and together we had to make several adjustments, which obviously involved chopping down a few more trees. There was also an additional mouth to feed – her's - so more stocks of food were needed and therefore more trees had to be chopped down. But in spite of the additional hard work, I was happy beavering away – it comes naturally to us. (*Do you enjoy working hard? How many dams have you made?*)

Unfortunately, there were people who were not happy with what we were doing. The course of the river had been deliberately 'channelled' or canal-ised, which explains the concrete added to the river banks in places in order to keep it from changing course. This was important to human beings as they had built new estates of houses not far away, and the waterway was used to drain the land.

Several officials visited the site and frowned a lot, muttering utterings we did not understand. When they left, we were very glad.

No long afterwards, an angry man and woman appeared.

"What have the little devils done?" he said to the woman. "All this land is flooded. It has destroyed my bank of daffodil bulbs and my precious trees have been chopped down. We must get rid of the blighters."

Suddenly, we heard the sound of a machine which turned out to be a bulldozer which was heading towards us. We had no option but to leave the lodge. But before we fled, we opened up holes in the dam. All the water that had built up behind it rushed out and the whole dam collapsed. The water swept the man and woman off their feet and the bulldozer was soon engulfed in thick mud and could not move. (*Can you draw this?*)

We swam down-river to the junction with the stream and then went up the stream to my parents' home. We told them all about our experience and they allowed us to stay there, provided we built our own lodge.

I am happy to say that there have been no disturbances by human beings in this area. In fact, I am told that human beings here appreciate what we have done. We are a bit confused by this. But it just goes to show that people and beavers are totally different. Instead of keeping their supply of food under water in the drains, they keep it in the house, and then have to get in their

noisy, dirty, smelly cars and drive to shops to get more. Just wait until bears are introduced into this country. They're sure to attack them when they get out of their cars and then they'll soon change their ways and learn from us, beavers.

This is a lovely video all about beavers <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyNA62FrKCE>

You may also like this one <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DggHeuhpFvg>

HERMIONE THE HARVEST MOUSE'S TAIL



Hello there. Can you all see me. I'm only tiny, just under 3 inches (75mm) long and my tail is the same length - and that is when I'm standing up on my back legs and not crouched on all four feet as I am doing now. If I could just find a dandelion or a thistle, I could climb up it and you might see me better.

Not many of you will have seen me anyway, as we keep to ourselves. We have a brown back and white underside, so it's not easy to spot us in a field full of crops, like wheat. This is to our advantage as there are many animals who would fancy eating us for their meal, such as weasels, stoats, foxes, and cats, not to mention birds, like owls, hawks, crows and pheasants.

Would you believe that human beings didn't give us an official scientific name – 'Micromys Minutus' - until the eighteenth century because we hadn't been discovered before then? 'Micromys' means 'small rodent' and 'minutus' means, you've guessed it, 'minute', as in 'really tiny'. Maybe scientists in the big cities were unaware of us, but I'm sure people in the countryside had come across us before then. We were certainly aware of them and had a name for them – 'Humanus Giganticus!'

We are very proud of our tails, which human beings have described as 'prehensile'. That word means the ability to grasp something by wrapping it around an object. We don't call it that – to us, it is just a normal tail. We use our tails to hold on to a stalk when we going up or coming down it in case we slip. In addition, this is useful because we can carry things in our front legs while using our back legs and tail to do the climbing. *(Don't you wish you had a prehensile tail? You could climb trees more easily and carry a couple of footballs at the same time. I don't know why you would want to do that, but that's beside the point.)*

I'm now fourteen months old and have had two litters, that is sets of children, this year. I may have another litter before the end of the year. Who can tell, apart from the male harvest mouse who catches my eye. There are about six pups, which is what baby harvest-mice are called, in each litter. I'm only pregnant for about three weeks and after giving birth the young pups are fully independent in less than a fortnight after that, even though they often choose to stay in the nest

with us for some time. But as it gets very crowded then. When the next litter comes along we have to build a new nest.

You would think that with this number of babies the country would soon be over-run with us, harvest mice. But as I said earlier, we do have a lot of enemies and we only live to be about eighteen months old.

I mentioned the nest. We make it out of stalks of grass, cereals or reeds to form a round ball between 2 and 4 inches (5 to 10 cm) in diameter. The grass is shredded by using our teeth and then the strips that result from this are woven together. This can be a foot (30 cm) or more from the ground, sometimes a lot higher.

(Excuse me for asking, but why doesn't your mother weave grass stalks together to build a nest for you? It would be much cheaper than buying or renting a house. For her birthday, why don't you give her a clump of grass and see if she can make a nest.)

So what do we do all day, you might ask? Well, in the daytime we keep out of sight and sleep if we can. Then at dusk and dawn, and sometimes in the daytime during the summer, we climb up and down the stalks and stems and eat the grains, as well as seeds, insects and berries and occasionally moss and fungi. We also like to just climb up and down for the sake of it – it's great fun and good exercise. Exercise is just as important for us as it is for you.

We also sit around admiring the view. Well, to be honest, it's more likely that we are sitting around keeping an eye and an ear out for any of our enemies. We have very good hearing and can hear any rustling sounds 7 metres away – that's approximately twenty-three feet, which usually gives us enough time to hide away from any dangers. Unfortunately, our hearing doesn't help when we are spotted by birds flying overhead, like owls, hawks and crows. They are our enemies.

It's not just animals and birds which are a danger to us. There was a time, so my ancestors said, when there were lots more hedges and smaller fields than there are now. But a lot of these hedges where we sometimes made our nests have been taken away to make bigger fields. That would not have been so much of a problem, as in theory that would mean more stalks to climb up and more food for us.

Along with this, though, the traditional way of harvesting crops used to be with horse-drawn carts and scythes. A scythe is like a round knife with a handle, and looks like a question mark without the dot. The farm workers would cut the stalks with the scythe near the ground and toss them into the cart. Harvesting the whole crop therefore took a long time and it was very tiring work for them to do. We knew that it was possible to get out of the way when we heard the horses' hooves and the men's voices.

Nowadays, people use big machines called combine-harvesters which move much faster and can harvest the crop much quicker. I can't tell you how many of my ancestors have been killed by these machines. At least they are noisy and that gives us a chance to make our escape. But if you are in the middle of a big field when a combine-harvester comes your way it can be difficult to get

away fast enough, especially for us, as our bodies are designed to climb up and down stalks rather than to run along the ground. That's much more difficult for us.

Another problem for us is the pesticide which is used on the crops. This is harmful to us and can kill us. The practice of burning the stubble, what is left after the stalks have been cut, is yet another danger we face. This is all bad news for us and we are becoming quite rare.

To end on, did you know that we, harvest mice, do not grow a thicker coat of fur in the winter, unlike lots of other animals? If we did it would get very heavy when it rained and we would be unable to climb up the stalks to get our food. Instead we have a thick layer of fat under our skin to keep us warm.

(If you are over-weight, you could always tell people that you have a lot of excess fat because if your hair got too heavy in the rain, you would not be able to move. Unfortunately, you would not then be able to visit your granny's - you know, the one who gives you lots of goodies to eat.)

If you want to see some adorable pictures of harvest mice, look at this:

https://www.boredpanda.com/cute-harvest-mouses-dean-mason-photography/?utm_source=duckduckgo&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=organic

OSWALD THE OTTER'S TAIL



Hi everyone. I'm Oswald. If you think I'm a weasel, a stoat or a polecat, you are mistaken. I am an otter, although these other animals are all distantly related to me. Scientists call this the 'mustelid' family, just as your own surname tells you what family you belong to. All it means is that we mustelids all have long bodies, short legs, short round eyes and thick fur. If you happen to look like this, welcome to the family. I'll give you a raw fish for a Christmas present.

We keep to ourselves and prefer to sleep during the daytime and do everything else at night-time or when it is dusk or dawn. Human teenagers are often very similar, we've been told! We all eat meat although sometimes on rare occasions we have to eat other things too.

We, otters, are different from the other animals I mentioned because we love water and like to live near rivers or lakes, or the sea in some cases. But I'm a river otter myself and live beside the Great Stour River. A channel from it flows through Canterbury itself.

Unlike harvest mice and many other animals, we don't have much fat under our skin to keep us warm. What we have, instead, is very thick fur – as much as a million hairs per square inch.

(As you know, a square inch is pretty small. With a pencil or biro, draw a square an inch wide by an inch high. Then see how many dots you can put in the square. Well, did you manage to put a million, or a thousand, or even a hundred or less? Imagine a million – 1,000,000 dots. Each one represents a single hair, so that's an awful lot of hairs, isn't it?)

The hairs connect with each other and in the space between them they trap a little bit of air. Together, the bits of air combine to form a layer of air that surrounds us, so water never actually touches our skin and we stay warm and water-proof. This means that we frequently have to groom ourselves by cleaning our fur when we are out of the water, as bits of mud or dust and dirt in our fur would disrupt this layer of air. If that happens, we sometimes have to blow into our fur to replace the air that has escaped.

Our fur actually consists of two layers – short soft hair and longer hair above that, which protects the shorter hair. It is lucky that we don't have to go to the barbers or hair-dressers to have it cut. That would take such a long time.

Being water-loving animals, we like to eat fish and we have to eat a lot of them to be healthy. When this is not possible, especially in the winter, we eat crabs, frogs, insects or small birds or animals and some plants too. Fish must have clean water to survive. If the water in the river is polluted by harmful chemicals, such as pesticides which come from fields of crops and end up in the water, then the fish keep clear, and likewise we go elsewhere. This was the case in Britain for the last century until fairly recently. Now we have come back, even to rivers which pass through cities as the water is much cleaner nowadays. *(By the way, have you ever seen an otter?)*

I was born near the river in the countryside in what is called a 'holt' – that's a set of tunnels we build beside the river-bank which starts low down under water and then goes up into an underground chamber which is nice and dry. To make it more comfortable, some grass or hay is laid down on the floor.

I was one of four children (pups). My mother was pregnant for a long time, but unlike human beings, she was able to delay giving birth until the weather was nice and there was a lot of fish about to eat.

When I was about two months old, I learned to swim. Well, I had to as my mother threw me into the water. I soon learned! We have webbed feet – our paws are all connected by a thin layer of skin. We also have a long tail which we can use as a rudder. When we are underwater, our nostrils and eyes close to prevent water from getting into them. We then go by our strong sense of smell. Underwater, we can hold our breath for up to eight minutes. This is useful for us in catching fish. Boy, do we love fish. *(Do you? We've heard that you eat fish and chips. How do you catch chips? I've never seen any chips swimming in my river.)*

We can swim slowly by paddling along using all four legs. Or if we want to go faster – up to 7 miles per hour (11 km per hour) underwater – we can move our whole bodies up and down like a wave. That's called undulating. Sometimes we like to keep most of our bodies out of the water which helps us to go fast to get away from something, but that isn't so much use when we are pursuing a fish.

We do spend quite a lot of our time on land too. We're not just agile swimmers, we can also run at speeds of up to 29 miles an hour (47 kph). *(How fast can you run?)*

However, if the ground is slippery after it has snowed, we may choose to slide along instead – just like you do when you go skating, except that we don't wear skates. *(Can you draw an otter wearing skates or riding on a toboggan?)*

It was fun when I was growing up and my brothers and sisters had such fun playing around. We loved to chase each other around or perch on the banks of the river and then slide into the water. It was great fun playing with stones too. Some people think we can juggle with them, but I'm not so sure we can actually do that, but it might look as if we can to someone who is not an otter. (*Perhaps you could teach me sometime.*)

After about a year, I was fully grown up and was three-foot long (a metre) and had a long tail. Now I was able to fend for myself and wandered off further down-river towards the city. This seemed to be a wonderful place for me to live. There was plenty to eat here and the water was still surprisingly clean. There were also lots of ready-made tunnels I could sleep in that were not muddy, but made of some solid man-made substance. The only thing I had to watch out for was when people were holding fishing-rods as I didn't want to swallow the bait or get tangled up in a fishing net. But I soon learned to steer clear of these hazards. The fishermen were glad to see the back of me as we were both trying to catch the same fish.

My stay in the city came to an end one day when I got near what I believe is called a garage. From here some diesel oil had been spilled into the water and I could see the oily film on top of the water.

My mother had warned me about this stuff. She had an uncle who had once been caught up in an oil spill and it had killed him. It had got onto his fur and as a result the air in between the hair had been driven out and his temperature dropped and sadly he died.

"Oil soils," she used to tell me. "Spills will give you the chills. Get away quickly."

And that is what I did and swam back up-river. Luckily, I found another territory all of my own.

You may wonder if I have a girlfriend? The answer is that I don't yet. I am still only two years old. Maybe next year I might, but at the moment I'm not particularly interested in lady otters. They used to be known as bitches but for political correctness reasons they are now called sows. Male otters, like me, are called dogs or boars. I don't like being a boar, so I call myself a dog.

Well, that's my story. Thank you for listening to me and if any of you are ever my way, come and see me...and bring a spare fish.

PIPPA THE PIPISTRELLE (THE WIFE OF BAT'S) TAIL



Hello. Nice to see you all – I don't usually bump into any of you in normal life, in fact I don't bump into anything at all. But I may have seen some of you when I've been flying overhead.

I am what is known as a common pipistrelle bat. Isn't that a lovely word! Say it slowly PIPISTRELLE. Apparently, it comes from an Italian word meaning, wait for it... bat. So I am presumably a bat bat, but certainly not a batty bat! I'm officially described as being common, but that just means that there are quite a few of us about, although fewer than there used to be.

There are also soprano pipistrelles which have a higher voice to what we have. I suppose you could call us altos in a musical sense. They are also a bit different from us in other ways, so I won't mention them again.

(Are you a soprano or alto, or maybe you have a lower voice, such as a tenor or bass?)

My husband was hoping to come today, but he was too busy following the cricket. He is a bit strange and thinks that he is a cricket-bat. However, crickets are too big for us, pipistrelles, although there are some other bats which do eat them.

We, pipistrelles, are tiny – our heads and bodies are less than two inches long (just over five cm) with a tail of nearly one and a half inches (a little bit over three and a half cm). However, we do have wings that measure nearly 10 inches (25 cm) from tip to tip. Our bodies are covered in brown fur and we have a black face and wings. *(Have you ever seen a bat – a pipistrelle or any other kind?)*

Our favourite food consists of tiny bugs like midges, moths, flies, gnats and mosquitoes – that sort of thing. We have to eat a third of our body weight every night, which works out at about 3,000 bugs. Believe you me, that’s an awful lot. It’s been estimated that it is equivalent to a human being eating 137 sandwiches a day! (*How many sandwiches a day could you eat?*)

A lot of the things we eat are caught and eaten in mid-air so we can find the next tiny morsel to eat immediately afterwards. If you miss one bug, you know another one will be along soon.

How do we find our food? For a start, we have good eyesight and can see in the dark much better than you can. Whoever made up the saying ‘blind as a bat’ was obviously not a bat!

We can see in what is called ‘ultra-violet light’. Think of a rainbow. On one side there is red and at the other side is violet with other colours in between them. Everything that human beings see is made up of all the colours in the rainbow. As you know, if you blend colours together you can get other colours, for example, blue and yellow makes green.

Well, beyond the violet end there is something called ultra-violet light. At dusk and dawn, when there is very little light from the sun, human beings have difficulty in seeing things clearly. But bats, cats, reptiles, birds and insects are able to see in the ultra-violet light. However, ultra-violet light cannot be seen by human eyes.

We, bats, also have something else that enables us to ‘see’ in the dark. That is called ‘echolocation’ and means what you can guess it means. If you stand in a cave and shout, you can hear the echo coming back to you. If the cave is huge, it will take longer for the echo to sound than if you are in a very small cave. This allows you to sense how far away the walls are, and how big the cave is. In a similar way, what we, bats, do is to make a noise, and judging by how long it takes before we hear the echo, we can tell what is in front of us. By doing this a lot, we can tell how big the object in front of us is, and whether it is moving or still. You would not be able to hear the noise we make though because it is very high in pitch – too high for you to hear. So these are the ways that we find our way around and where there is something for us to eat. (*Sorry, this is all a bit complicated.*)

I was born in June in the roof timbers of an old abandoned barn close to a line of bushes and trees which grow beside the river. It was an ideal spot as there were plenty of insects in the area near to the water. I was not the only baby bat born in the barn (they call us pups). All the pregnant lady bats (possibly about 50 of them) were living in the same place, like the maternity ward of a hospital.

I had to stay at home with my mother for about three weeks while I was being nursed and then I had to learn to fly. I became fully independent a few weeks later.

It was a novelty for me to be out and about and collecting my own fresh food every night. But I soon got used to it and even enjoyed it. The area we lived in was quite easy to find if we ever ventured a bit further afield, and I soon memorised the pattern of trees and bushes and the barn. However, we bats tend to stay in the same general area the whole time unless we are forced to move away by changes to our surroundings, such as the hedges and trees being removed, or the river running dry, or the building we roost in being demolished.

By December, however, it was starting to get cold – too cold to be out and about for us, so I joined the rest of the bats in hibernating in the barn until the weather warmed up in April. Then it was back outside again flitting here and there to catch insects to eat. *(Would you like to hibernate when it is cold in winter?)*

In June, the talent competition began. All the male and female bats in the immediate area came together in our little corner of the world between the trees and the river. It was a huge crowd and very noisy.

The male bats all had a turn in showing how well they could sing and the female bats, like me, awarded them points and chose the best ones as partners.

I remember my mother telling me that she fell for my father because of how he serenaded her. He had such a beautiful singing voice, she told me, much nicer than the other male bats. It's a shame I never got to meet him, or perhaps I did, but didn't know it.

The one that I fell for had a wonderful voice. His song was long and his trilling was thrilling. I instantly recognised the tune – “Batman” Well, it had to be, didn't it?

(Can you draw a picture of the male bats singing to the female bats?)

I had no difficulty in choosing him and he immediately took me out to dinner. Well, that was no different to normal for me, except that I had company, and he did choose some bugs which I would have left alone if I'd been by myself.

It was then that I discovered his interest in insects which were not really suitable for us to eat. He became obsessed with watching the cricket, for instance. He would wait until he saw one on the ground and then he would swoop down low overhead and make it jump. He called this – playing the game of cricket.

But in spite of being a bit crazy, he's a pipistrelle after my own heart and we became hitched. I am not allowed to tell you about the wedding ceremonies of bats which is kept a secret from human beings. It mainly involves perching on a roost with your intended one and then going on a honeymoon to the river to catch bugs - pretty much the same as usual, in fact.

Well, I've run out of things to say, so I'll stop there. It's been a pleasure being here and it has made quite a change for me to visit this area. Hope to see you all soon.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

Just as Pippa the pipistrelle had finished talking there was a kerfuffle - a disturbance amongst the assembled animals, as something, or rather someone, made their appearance.

"I'm sorry," said Squiggle the squirrel. "This is a private meeting for animals only. We can't allow you to be here."

"I'm allowed to go anywhere on my own land," said the newcomer.

"Your land? This is our land. It belongs to all of us," said Hanna the hare.

"It looks as if we have no option but to allow him to be here," sighed Ben the beaver.

"I guess you're right," said Diana the deer. Then, turning towards the newcomer she said: "Well, as you are here you could at least tell us your name."

"I'm Percy, the person."

"Where is your tail?" asked Ben the beaver.

"I don't have a tail," replied Percy.

"You have to have a tail to be at this meeting," Oswald the otter told him.

"OK," said Percy, "I have a tail but it's hidden in my trousers." This was obviously not true, but he thought this would silence their objections to him being there.

"Then take off your trousers and show it to us," said Tommy the toad.

"I will not do any such thing," objected Percy.

"But you have to prove you have a tail or we won't believe you," Ben the beaver said.

"I will not take off my trousers, and that's final." Percy shouted.

"Just assuming you might have a tail, and I doubt that very much," said Hermione the harvest-mouse, "you must also be a *wild* animal to be at this meeting and not a *domesticated* one."

"True," added Oswald the otter. "Where do you live, Percy?"

"I live in a farmhouse not far from here," said Percy.

"A farmhouse? Did you build it yourself?" asked Ben the beaver.

"No, a builder built it, with some help from a carpenter and a plumber and various other people," answered Percy.

"So you can't even build your own house!" said Freddie the fox, forgetting for a moment that he had once lived in a den made by a badger.

"What is it made from?" asked Hanna the hedgehog.

"Bricks and planks of wood and lots of other things," said Percy.

"What, no branches?" said Ben the beaver. "And no mud?"

“No leaves?” said Squiggle the squirrel

“And no stalks of grass?” said Hermione the harvest-mouse.

“It sounds like a very strange house,” said Freddie the fox.

All the animals agreed with him. Proper wild animals build their own houses, they said to each other.

“Another thing – does your wife tell you what to do?” asked Oswald the otter.

“Sometimes,” said Percy.

“Then you must be domesticated,” said Tommy the toad.

“As a female myself, I’d like to know if you ever tell your wife what to do?” asked Diana the deer.

“Sometimes,” said Percy.

All the female animals tut-tutted at this. It seems that his wife was also domesticated.

“He is definitely not a wild creature and most probably hasn’t even got a tail,” Henrietta the hedgehog commented.

“If you get other people to do things like build your house, what do you do yourself?” asked Pippa the pipistrelle.

“I am a farmer. I plant crops in the spring...”

“Do the plants grow well?” asked Squiggle the squirrel.

“Usually, but I have to spray them with herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers just to make sure they grow well.”

“So you are responsible for all those chemicals we find in the water,” remarked Oswald the otter.

“And in the autumn, I use my combine-harvester to harvest the crops.”

At the mention of the words combine-harvester, Hermione the harvest-mouse went very pale.

“What do you do about getting hold of your food every day?” asked Diana the deer.

“I get in my car and drive to the shops to buy it.”

“Is it dark when you come back from the shops?” wondered Tommy the toad.

“Sometimes.”

Most of the animals present shuddered, remembering members of their families who had been run over by cars.

“You say you buy all your food in shops - whatever shops are,” enquired Henrietta the hedgehog.

“Of course.”

“What if there was no food left in the shops? Could you catch your own food, like we do?” asked Oswald the otter.

“Certainly. I sometimes go fishing...”

Oswald, who had had experience of fishermen with their fishing-rods and nets took an instant dislike to the man.

“Don’t you ever just jump into a river and swim after the fish? Oswald asked Percy.

“No, I can’t swim.”

“You can’t swim?” said Ben the beaver. “That’s unbelievable!”

“Maybe he can fly,” said Pippa the pipistrelle.

Percy shook his head.

“But there are lots and lots of bugs to eat in the air,” Pippa stated.

“Maybe he prefers to eat leaves and the barks of trees,” said Diana the deer.

Percy shook his head again.

“He may prefer acorns,” said Squiggle the squirrel.

“Or slugs and worms,” said Henrietta the hedgehog.

“Or fresh chicken,” said Freddie the fox.

“Yes, I do like chicken, but I buy it from a butcher’s.”

“Can’t you just jump into a hen coup and get one yourself?” Freddie asked,

“I don’t keep chickens and that would be illegal if I helped myself to someone else’s.”

The animals did not know what he meant by ‘illegal’ so they changed the subject.

“Tell me,” said Hanna the hare. “How good is your hearing? If there was a hungry tiger a mile away could you hear it?”

“No.”

“And how good is your eyesight? Could you walk around this field on a dark night without falling into the river?”

“Only if I had a torch.”

None of them knew what a torch was, but they gathered his eyesight was not very good.

“What about your sense of smell?” enquired Oswald the otter. “Could you catch a fish by just smelling where it is?”

“Certainly not.”

“How fast can you run?” asked Hanna the hare.

“Can you run quicker than I can?” asked Diana the deer.

“No.”

“How about climbing trees? You surely must be able to do something like that?” asked Squiggle the squirrel.

“I’ve never been much good at climbing trees.”

“So you can’t do very much at all. You sound very pathetic,” said Freddie the fox.

“I may sound pathetic to you, but I have to remind you that I do own this land. And what’s more, I have some news for you. I have been offered a good price by a property developer if I sell it to him so that he can build houses on it.”

“What about the hedges?”

“And the trees?”

“And the river?”

“And the grass?”

All the animals confronted him at the same time.

“The hedges and the trees would be chopped down. The water in the river would be put into pipes which would be put underground. And the grass and other plants would be dug up so that houses could be built on the land.”

The animals looked at each other in dismay and were dumb-struck by what they had heard. There was a long silence as they contemplated their future.

The silence was broken when Percy cleared his throat and spoke again.

“I realise that this will make a lot of you homeless, you may go hungry and some of you and your families may die, not just here but in the wider area.” He paused. “So that is why I have come here today to inform you about it. I have come to a decision.” He paused again, this time for much longer. Then he said: “I have decided not to sell this land to the developer.”

The animals could hardly believe what they had just heard.

“Does that mean that everything will stay as normal?” asked Ben the beaver.

“Yes, it does.”

“Then we take back what we said about you being pathetic. You are a hero - our hero,” said Oswald the otter, and everyone began to cheer and clap, at least as best as they could.

“There is only one condition,” Percy stated. “You must learn to live in peace with one another.”

They all promised, but knew that they would not be able to keep their promise for evermore. But they would at least try for a while.

With that, Percy departed and soon afterwards the animals went their separate ways. The meeting was over.

So too is this story and all the other stories. I hope you have enjoyed them and that you can now understand more about the lives of wild animals. For in many ways they depend upon us, and we depend upon them. That is something you should always remember. Goodbye.

FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Here are some things for older children to think about. It is not a test. In most of these points, there are no correct or incorrect answers.

1. Why do we like some animals and not others, based largely on looks? Frogs good, toads bad, and so on. Appearances mean very little. Some (but not all) people who are very beautiful or handsome can turn out to be horrible, whereas people who are not good-looking can be very kind and good. We are naturally attracted to others who are very beautiful/handsome. Do you think that TV programmes and films are partly to blame for this? If you saw a glamorous film star in a supermarket you would probably not recognise her without all the make-up and fancy clothes. She would be nothing special to look at. Don't forget too that photographs of good-looking men and women you see in magazines and in social media have probably been tinkered about with to hide any blemishes. Bear in mind, though, that people who really are attractive can be quite lonely, because everyone else thinks they are unapproachable. The best thing is to go by people's personality rather than by their looks. That also applies to people from different countries. And the same applies to animals.

2. Do you think that people believe animals think and behave like them? There is a word for that – anthropomorphism. It may be partly as a result of many stories about animals assuming they act and think just like human beings. However, animals are different from people and they are all different from each other. If you have a dog or cat, do they ever behave in a way that you don't expect? For example, not eating their food, or not seeming to be grateful to you when you've done something for them? There are also times when animals and humans have conflicting interests, as in the story about the beaver. Can you think of other examples?

3. Regarding using pesticides, herbicides and fertiliser on crops, the farmer can't risk his crops failing to grow as he relies upon selling them for his income, and people rely upon farmers to produce their food. Without pesticides, the crops could be eaten by insects. Without herbicides, weeds could prevent the crops from growing, and without fertiliser, the plants may lack the nutrients they need to grow. But these chemicals can harm or kill animals, such as harvest mice. The chemicals can also enter streams and rivers through run-off after heavy rain, or seep into the ground and pollute the ground-water in the rocks underneath the soil – the aquifers, as they are called. If human beings drink any of this polluted water they can become ill, ranging from vomiting to getting cancer. Some of the pesticides may stay in some crops as residues and when eaten they can also make people sick. (That is one reason why you should always wash fruit and vegetables before eating them.) Growing crops organically (without chemicals) is more risky for a farmer and requires more work for him to do, or it is more expensive for him if he has to pay others to do the extra work. It may not even be possible on a large scale. What would you do if you were a farmer?

4. Getting rid of hedgerows to combine fields means that there is a greater area to grow crops and it is easier to manage with large modern farming equipment. But hedges act as corridors for wild animals to get around safely without being seen, as well as providing homes for many wild animals. With much larger fields, some farmers now grow the same crop in the same field for many years running because that particular crop will give him more money than other crops. Is this a good idea? Or does it deplete the nutrients in the soil and require even more fertiliser plus more pesticides and herbicides? How does this affect wild animals?

5. The farmer has received an offer by a developer to buy his land. Suppose he is having problems making ends meet and may be deep in debt, or he may be too ill to continue working on the land. Would he be wrong to sell it in that case, even though it would take away places where wild animals live? What if a lot of farmers in a particular area or in the whole country sold off their land for housing development, not just crop land but pastures (grass) and areas that had been allowed to grow wild? What would happen to all the wild animals? In time, the countryside would not exist. But fields would still be needed in which to grow crops – food for the country's population. It would have to be imported. But what if the same situation occurred in other countries too? Where would the food come from?

6. The developer wants to build houses on the land. With a shortage of houses in this country, isn't it a good idea to build more of them? But only a few of the houses that developers build tend to be "affordable" (i.e. relatively low cost to buy or with low rent) as they get more money from building more expensive houses. Is this right that young local people cannot afford to buy these houses? Or is it more important that wealthier people who can afford expensive houses should move into an area? Why?

7. If houses are not built, many builders, carpenters, electricians and plumbers may find themselves out of work. For the interests of the continued existence of wild animals, should it be right to deny these tradesmen their chances of working? Is there an alternative to building houses on what is called 'green-field' sites?

There is a lot to think about here. For the sake of younger children, I finished the stories on a happy note for the animals. But this might not happen in real life. I hope you will have learned something from thinking about the various issues.