



A Noise in the Night



Bats Under the Bridge



A Howl at Dusk

Reading Booklet

2023 key stage 2 English reading booklet



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Priya and her friends are camping near a farm owned by Mr Jones. Earlier in the day, Mr Jones had told the group that sheep thieves had been seen in the area.

A Noise in the Night

Priya woke with a start, her heart beating fast. Something had disturbed her but she wasn't sure what. Abby was still sleeping quietly beside her, and the night-light glowed, but now she could see things inside the tent, and she realised that the moon must have risen. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but then she heard something rustling outside. *It's nothing, she told herself strictly. It's a hedgehog, or a mole. It's something nice and harmless.*



The sound died away, and everything was quiet once more. But not completely. There was Abby's gentle breathing. Someone coughed in one of the other tents. It sounded like Toby. And then there was another sound – a deep throbbing that was growing steadily louder. Just for a second a bright light flashed across the tent as a car drove past the campsite, followed by another.

Priya was surprised, and now she was completely awake. They had only seen a couple of cars all day, and now two had come past together. Although, now she thought about it, one of them must have been a truck, or a tractor, because its engine had sounded much too deep for a car.

She looked at the dark hump beside her that was Abby, fast asleep. The noise didn't seem to have woken anyone else. She could still hear it, and she imagined the two cars, or whatever they were, reaching the foot of the hill and crossing the bridge by Greystone Farm. She heard the rattle as they crossed the cattle grid on the far side, so now they must be going along the other side of the valley.

For a while the sound didn't change and then, quite suddenly, it stopped. Priya wondered about that. Maybe they had stopped at the Jones's farm. Maybe the farmer had been out visiting someone in the other valley. Whatever it was, she was going to take a look.

Very quietly, so as not to wake Abby, she unfastened the zip of the tent. She pulled back the flap and realised she could see the whole valley, blue and black and silver in the moonlight. Directly opposite, on the far side of the valley, she saw two pairs of headlights, not moving. As she watched, the lights went out.

Then it hit her.

Rustlers! They had to be. It couldn't possibly be Mr Jones. Why would he have two vehicles? Why would he park there with the lights out? She knew she was right.

She wriggled back inside the tent and shook Abby's shoulder. 'Abby! Wake up!'

'What is it? What's going on?'

'Abby, something's happening. On the other side of the valley... I think they're stealing sheep.'

Abby groaned. 'It's the middle of the night. I'm asleep.'

'We have to do something,' Priya said. 'We have to tell the farmer. Abby, wake up!'

She shook Abby again, and this time Abby emerged from her sleeping bag rubbing her eyes. 'What time is it?' she asked. 'You'd better not be making this up.'

Priya looked at her watch. 'It's two in the morning,' she said. 'I can't believe the truck didn't wake you up. Have you got your binoculars?'

Abby grunted and got the binoculars out of her bag. Priya pulled on her shoes and went outside. Seconds later, Abby joined her.

'Show me,' she whispered. 'Where did you see them?'

Priya pointed, and heard a sharp intake of breath from Abby.

'You're right,' she breathed. 'Those are Mr Jones's sheep. We have to do something.'



Bats Under the Bridge

By day, the Congress Avenue Bridge in the city of Austin could hardly look more normal: a grey, dreary city-centre road bridge. By night, it plays host to one of the most amazing shows nature has to offer. The underside of the bridge is home to more than a million bats, and every evening in summer they all come swarming out at once, rising up into the city sky like a tornado before spreading out in all directions like plumes of smoke. Standing on the bridge, you might even feel the wind from their wings as they pass by.

Austin is the capital city of the state of Texas in the USA, but it is also the bat capital of North America. The bats under the bridge attract thousands of visitors every year, and every August bat lovers celebrate Bat Fest on the bridge in their honour.

We interviewed Harriet Lopez, a bat expert, to find out more.



Q This ordinary bridge is popular with bats. What makes it such a hotspot?

A It's actually very appropriate that you call it a 'hotspot'. The gaps underneath the bridge are a perfect place for mother bats to raise their young. Baby bats are born hairless and have only a few months to develop before travelling south in autumn. They need somewhere warm and safe and the gaps under the bridge are just the right width to trap warmth nicely. These bat pups need to spend their energy on growth, not on keeping themselves warm.

Texas in general is a paradise for bats because of all its tasty insects. A mother bat will go out hunting every evening and consume about two-thirds of her body weight in insects every single night to meet her energy needs. The feeding frenzy can last all night.

Q Have there always been so many bats here?

A No, this large number of bats is quite new. A few bats had lived under the bridge for years. It was headline news when they suddenly began moving in by the thousands after engineers rebuilt the Congress Avenue Bridge in 1980 – they had no idea that they were creating such an ideal bat home. So, when these bats first came, they were seen as uninvited guests.

Many campaigned to have the bat colony eradicated. It was frightening. Back then, we thought they'd attack us by pulling out our hair or



that they'd carry disease. Gradually, though, we learnt the surprising truth: bats make ideal neighbours. They are gentle creatures that will not harm you, as long as you do not try to touch them.

Eventually we came to welcome the bats, and the population under the bridge grew to be the largest city bat colony in the world. Austin now has one of the most unusual and fascinating tourist attractions anywhere.



Q Why do you think so many people dislike bats?

A There's a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding about bats. People have difficulty seeing past the surface. With their teeth, claws and big, black wings, bats do look a bit frightening, but they are basically harmless if you don't hold them, and some of them are even cute. We should be protecting bats, not persecuting them.

Q There are millions of bats in Texas – how can they need protecting?

A It's true that bats easily outnumber humans in Texas, but they're vulnerable because they live in very large groups. One cave alone has 15 million bats living in it. Imagine if anything happened to that cave. 15 million bats would all become homeless at once, and many wouldn't survive, which would be very damaging considering the benefits bats bring to society.

Q What benefits could bats possibly bring to humans?

A We humans spend a great deal of time battling against insects. Who hasn't been tormented by mosquitoes or wasps? And farmers have to spend millions of dollars every year buying chemicals, some of which are quite harmful to the environment, to stop hungry insects from eating their crops. A group of bats like the ones under this bridge will eat about ten tonnes of insects every night. That's about the weight of two normal-sized elephants. So we should view bats as allies, not as enemies. Some farmers are already doing this by installing bat boxes in their fields and encouraging bats to live there.

Q Amazing – what helpful animals! Is there anything I can do to support bats in my area?

A If you have a garden, don't cover it in concrete. Fill it with flowers and plants to encourage garden insects. You could also put up your own bat box. They are quite easy to make if you don't want to buy one. And, finally, remember to let everyone know about our flying friends!



Innis Munro is a boy who lives on the island of Nin.

A Howl at Dusk

The howl pierced the darkening sky and made Innis Munro stop dead in his tracks. He pulled his hood down, listened intently. The only sound was his beating heart.

That was a wolf, he thought.

But it couldn't have been. There were no wolves on the island of Nin, no wolves in Scotland any more, not for almost three hundred years. It was just a trick of the wind.

He pressed on but kept his hood down. The afternoon light of early March was fading fast, snow was falling, and he was still a good half-mile from home.

Innis walked faster, told himself it was not the howl that made him hurry but the gloomy sky and gathering snow. He was crossing 'the Barrens' – the middle of the island where the land was bumpy and boggy.

To a stranger, a mainlander, it would have seemed he was lost in the middle of bleak nowhere, but Innis knew this ground, knew every rise and dip.

Another howl came; long, bloodcurdling, wolf-like.

Innis stopped again, caught his breath and held it. He turned full circle, scanning the landscape, peering through the snow and the gloom. Closer this time.

It was someone playing a trick, trying to frighten him. It was pretty ridiculous, actually. There were no wolves on Nin.

Innis cupped a hand to his mouth and returned the best horror-movie wolf howl he could muster. There was an immediate response but from further away this time, in the distance up by the mountain. And then another howl, much closer, a sound that no boy could make.

Innis whirled around and stared across the moor. Twenty paces from where he stood was a shape, dark against the brightness of swirling snow. The silhouette of an animal. It stood side-on to him, front and back legs splayed, back arched, bushy tail curved down. Innis watched the creature raise its head slowly to the sky and another howl shattered the silence.

It was the unmistakable silhouette of a wolf.

Innis turned and ran, leaping across the marshy ground, rasping air in and out. He slid down shallow slopes and sank into boggy puddles, rammed hands into the mud to haul himself out, moved forwards at speed, too frightened to look back in case the wolf was upon him and his legs gave out. He took a glance behind as he ran, saw nothing and stumbled and fell, landing face first in the marsh.

Innis sat up, felt water ooze beneath his trousers and melting snow run down his back. He gave a shiver and looked around. No wolves – but a boy was walking towards him, the snow lying thick enough now to hear the crunch of his steps.

Innis struggled to his feet. He didn't recognise the boy.

He was smaller than Innis but seemed older. In appearance, the boys were the exact opposite. The stranger was squat, with short, fair hair, shaved almost to the scalp. He had dark, unfriendly eyes. Innis didn't know him.

The boy turned and took a step away, and Innis asked, 'Where are you going?'

'What's it to you?' the boy asked, without turning or stopping.

'There's a wolf out there,' Innis said.

The boy stopped and headed back toward Innis. 'Where exactly?'

Innis pointed. 'Out there somewhere.'

'You saw it?' probed the boy.

'I heard it *and* I saw it.'

The boy didn't answer, but asked instead, 'How far?'

'Not far, five minutes from here.'

The boy sighed and wiped snow from his face. He turned and strode off without another word.

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