

Environmental Education Through Children's Literature

A Major Qualifying Project (MQP)
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Submitted by:

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to write and illustrate a 56 page, environmentally themed, fictional book for children K-6 in order to educate children on the different ways of viewing the environment. The book, titled *Can We Take Them Home?*, features a mother teaching her son facts about animals as well as the kinship felt towards nature. It steadily introduces the idea that animals have value beyond what humans might place on them. The mom encourages her son to think about animals as beings with their own lives and their own right to make choices about their environment. A reflection which explains the motives for creation and aspects of the writing process is included.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to thank the following people for their contributions to the success of our project. In no particular order,

Loree Griffin Burns, Local children's book author

Robert Krueger, Advisor to the project

Joseph Pham, Artistic inspiration

Brock Adler, Environmental education consultant and lobbyist

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Process Reflection

Inspiration

I started writing this book in defiance to a different children's book I had seen, funded by the pro-oil industry, titled Petro Pete's Big Bad Dream (Zou, 2017). I often felt that what I wanted to write in my book was too blunt for children and their parents. Could I really push my ecocentric ethics onto them if I market the book as a fun animal story for K-6 graders? Then I'm reminded of the fact that the Oklahoma Energy Resources board spent \$40 million worth of oil and gas industry taxes on a K through 12 oil-centric education program (Wertz, 2017). I can only hope the editor and publishing house will understand my sentiment, as I would like to get this book (or some heavily edited version of this book) published someday.

Creative Choices

Of all creative decisions, choosing how much of the book should be an ethics lesson, how much should be factual, and how much should be the fictional description of the story, was the most difficult to make. Before adding in a line of dialogue from the Mom educating her son, I ultimately thought, "How will parents feel about this?" If I could justify that it wasn't enough to make a rational parent close the book, I left it in. After reading around 30 fiction and non-fiction, nature-centric and pro-environment children's books, I believe my book goes deepest into teaching behavior and treatment towards animals and the environment. It gives reasons for environmental preservation beyond scientific fact that is generally shown to children in the form of a non-fiction book that focuses on a single species or concept.

I chose to provide factual information when introducing each animal such as what it eats, what its main life events are, and how it interacts with its surroundings and its young. Later in the book I added more and more information about how these simple acts of life that each animal exhibits should be seen as that belonging to the animal. By the end of the book I wanted the boy to convey understanding that he does not have the right to infringe on the beaver's space, and it's right to life. To spare children the horror, but more realistically to increase sales, I chose not to make the boy a maniac who wants to ride the bear, eat the heron and make a hat out of the beaver. However this would have made the Mom's point more clear: humans do not have the

ultimate right to take from the environment in the way that we have generally been taught is acceptable.

I introduce this concept on Spread 19 when the Mom says, “We live in big cities and talk with many people every day. Our lives are so busy with school and work that sometimes we forget how to treat our not-human friends.” This line was inspired by the words of Donna Haraway during a 2019 interview in which she said, “Making kin seems to me the thing that we most need to be doing in a world that rips us apart from each other.” I believed that was one rather simply put reason for why children should care about the environment. It does not blatantly discredit the capitalist, materialist, human centric way of thinking, however it does show contrast between what our lives might usually be like and how we could be better.

Immediately following the first line on Spread 19, the Mom follows up with, “Even though animals cannot understand us, we cannot forget to respect animals, just like how you respect your friend, or your cousin, or your sister.” This again is a reflection on what Donna had said in the same interview about our kinship networks, “It’s not necessarily to be biologically related but in some consequential way to belong in the same category with each other in such a way that has consequences.” Even introducing children to a concept in which they are connected to animals by the duty they have to respect them, is hugely important to me but perhaps controversial.

My reasoning for choosing a boy and his mother rather than any other combination of relatives is based on gender stereotypes and the concept of ecofeminism. I imagine that young boys, and even their parents, would subconsciously be less likely to buy a book where the main character is a girl and the book is about loving nature. In fact, I wanted to normalize the idea of young boys spending time in nature in a respectful way; because the alternative version of the story with a female main character would not be much different from other stories of a popular feminine archetype (Ayesha, 2019).

When I learned that Donna Haraway was an ecofeminist, it was the first time I had heard of the term. I looked up its meaning and felt like I had discovered the perfect word for what I was grappling with since the start of this project. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. The philosophy emphasizes the

intersectionality of how both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (or male-centred) society (Warren, 2001). I found it easiest to convey these ideas through the voice of a mother talking to her son because I felt that it resembled mother earth talking to mankind.

I thought of what I would say to a child about the world through an ecofeminist point of view. This included distinguishing between the instrumental way the western world has viewed nature, and the intrinsically motivated way environmentalists seek to perpetuate it. Choosing what words to say in order to convey these topics was challenging because I wanted to keep the age range to below 6th graders. I would hope that past 6th grade, students would be reading more complex materials.

Final Thoughts

I sometimes approached these big concepts in a straightforward manner such as in Spread 22 where the boy says, “I thought maybe a beaver would be fun to have in the house, but it would not be too much fun for the beaver. It can make its own choices.” That is a bold statement from the boy showing that he acknowledges the beaver as an entity with thoughts, feelings, needs and responsibilities of its own. Other instances earlier in the book, like in Spread 10, their are less obvious messages in the wording. Here the Mom says, “We need lots of people, working together, all over the world to make sure animals like the great blue heron have a safe place to live. That is how we can show respect for them.” This is a simple explanation for how to protect wildlife for a child to understand, however the word ‘respect’ is specifically chosen. It is meant to get more advanced readers, as well as parents, thinking about the consequences we have on the lives of animals, and whether or not that is respectful and morally right.

In the second to last Spread, 23, I write, “I looked out into the vast forest and heard the wind rustle the trees. How many animals heard that same wind just now? Through a break in the trees, I got a good look at the moon. How many animals are looking at that same moon?” These are the boy’s final thoughts and I chose them to symbolize the connection that he feels between himself and nature. This line is meant to point out an animal’s sense of hearing and sight. It shows the boy’s awareness that the outside forces of nature affect animals as much as they do humans. Ultimately, I wanted to leave the reader feeling a little bit closer to nature than they were before.

Layout

Layout of *Can We Take Them Home?* modeled after a typical 48 page children's book:

Attribute	Contents	Page Number
Front cover	Title	1
1st end paper	Front flap	2
2nd end paper	Illustration	3
3rd end paper	Blank	4
Page 1	Second title page	5
Page 2	Publishing info	6
Page 3	Dedication	7
Page 4-48	First text body page to About the Heron page	8-52
1st end paper	About the beaver	53
2nd end paper	Illustration	54
3rd end paper	3rd end paper	55
Back cover	Back cover	56
Resources	Resources	57-58

Total pages in document 58

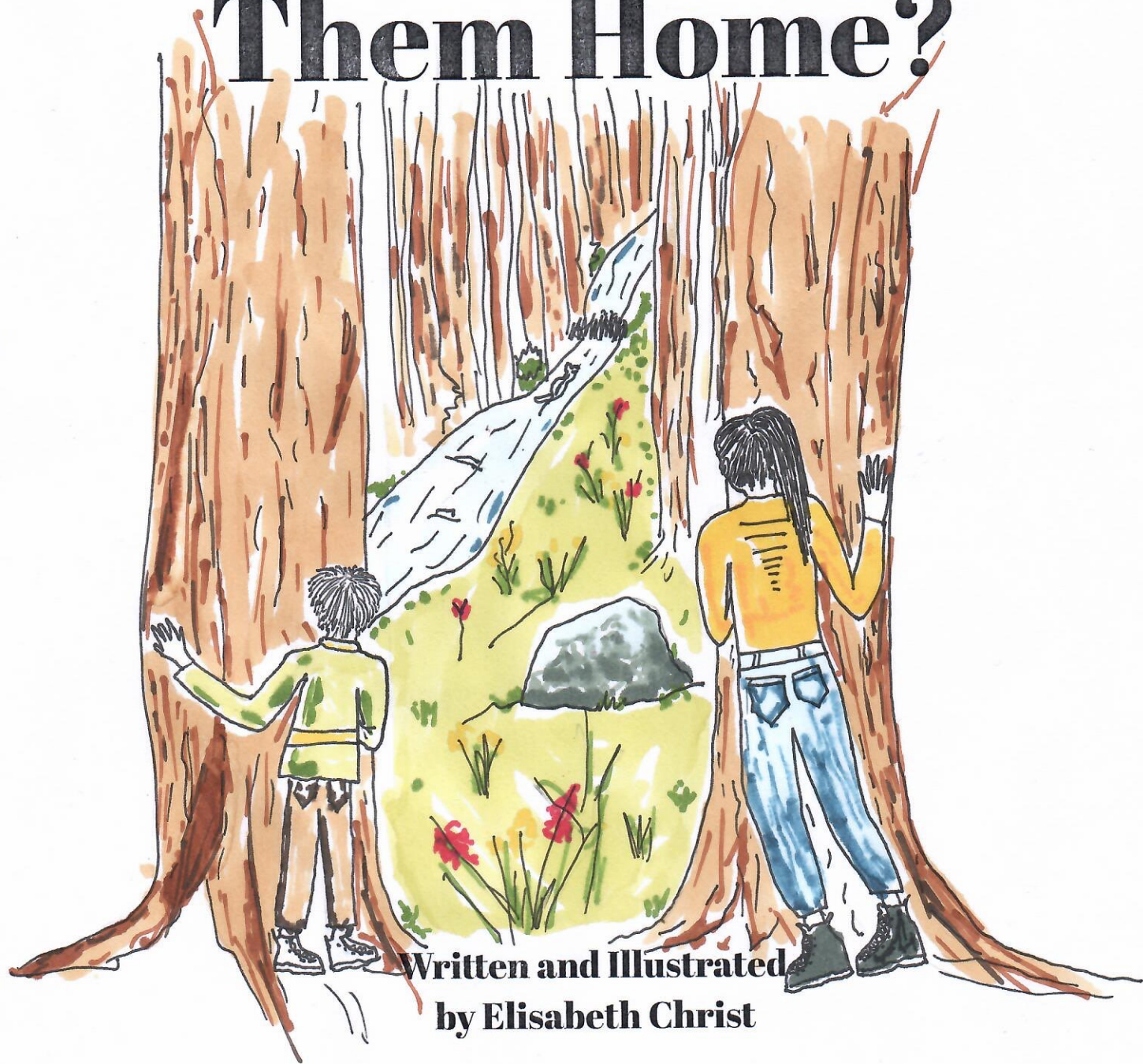
Total pages in story: 48

*Children's books have pages that come in sets of 8 because of the way the books are bound. There are usually 3 end pages at the front end and 3 in the back end. Plus a front and back cover.

*The illustrations that accompany this book are composed of mostly scenery and wildlife, outlined with black pen, and hand drawn with watercolor brush pens and occasionally markers. In a normal setting, almost always, an author provides a manuscript and is then paired up with an illustrator of the publisher's choice. All drawings included in this book are to be temporary and only as aid the illustrator in the author's general vision.

Can We Take

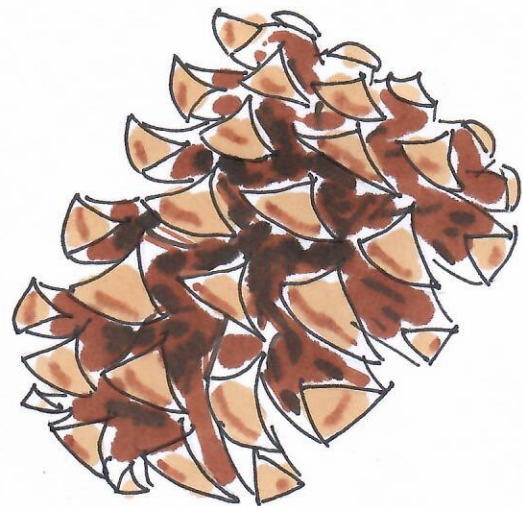
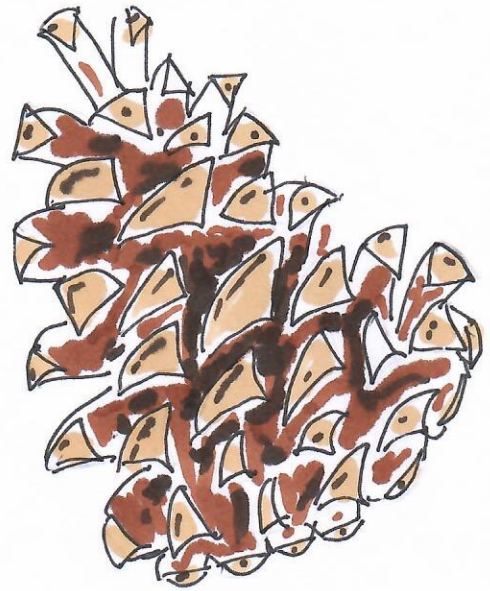
Them Home?

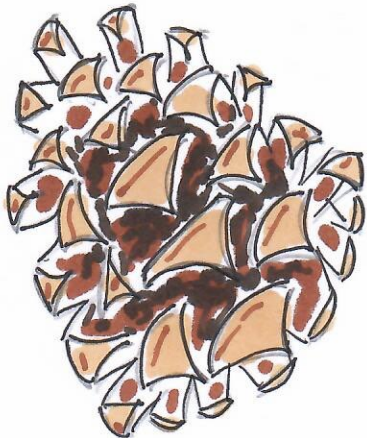
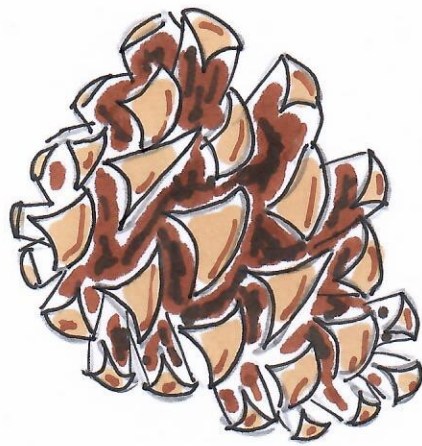
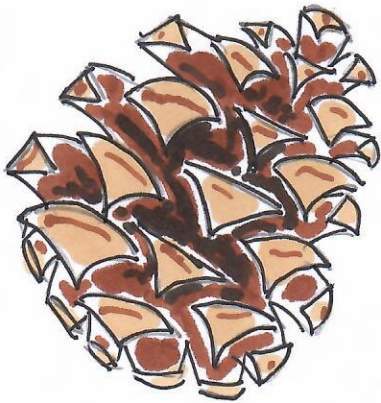


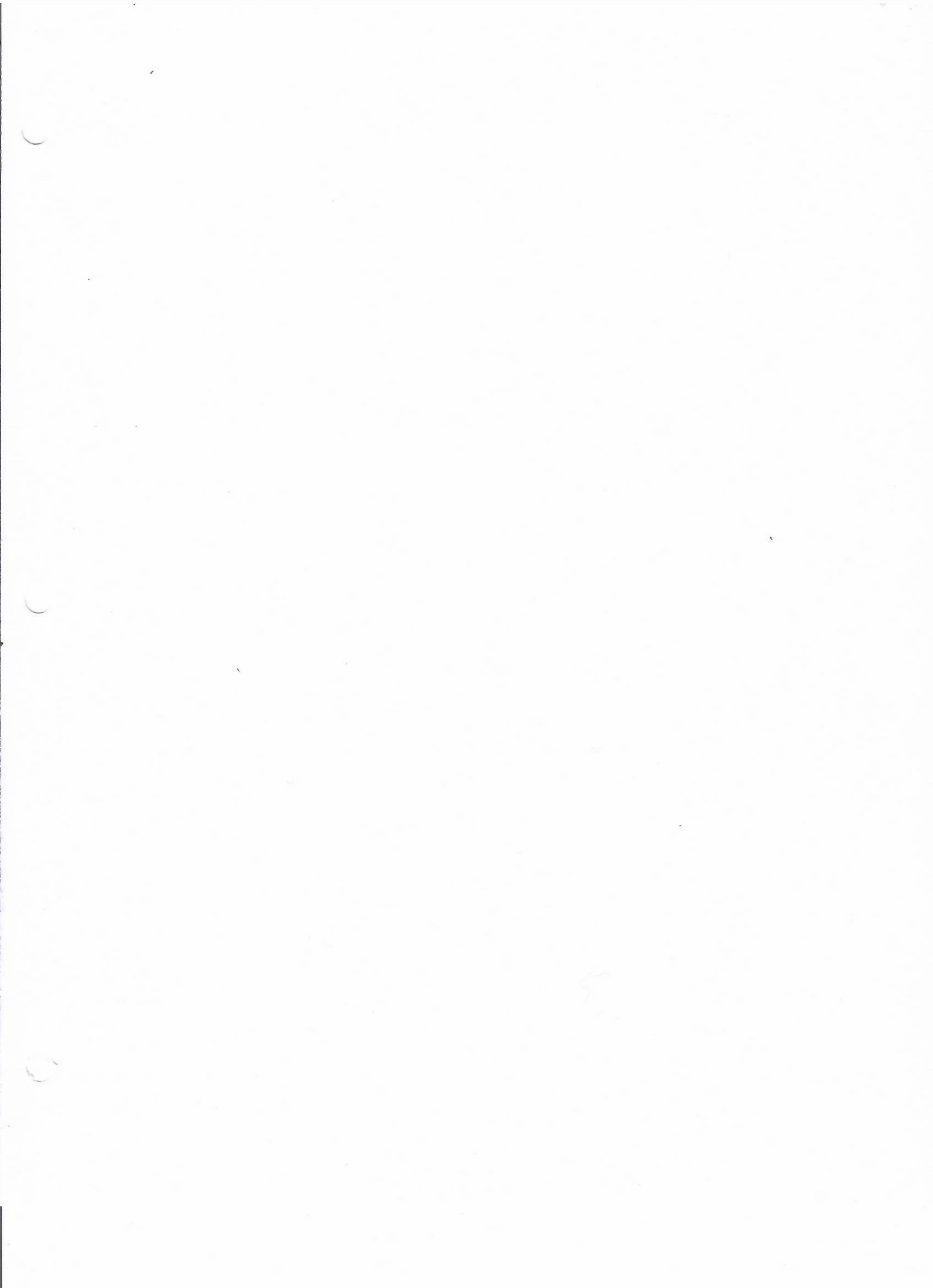
Written and Illustrated
by Elisabeth Christ

In the mountains of the Northwest US, we see Black Bears coming out of hibernation, Great Blue Herons migrating, and Beavers building dams across a stream. A mother and son take a hike through a conifer forest full of old and tall trees, up a mountain where they encounter many different animals. They watch from far away as a bear, heron and beaver go about their normal lives. They talk about the often forgotten connection that people have between animals and nature.

[Publisher Info]







Can We Take Them Home?

By ELISABETH CHRIST

Publishing Info

Copyright information

Publisher information

Contact information/More resources

ISBN

For

The young people of the world
Who never asked
But must face the burden of climate change

Pine and cedar trees cover the mountain that mom and I like to hike. We walk on the trail past berry bushes and boulders. We can hear a stream close by and we can smell the springtime air.

Lots of animals live on this mountain and around the nearby stream. Spotting one of them is the best part about going hiking!



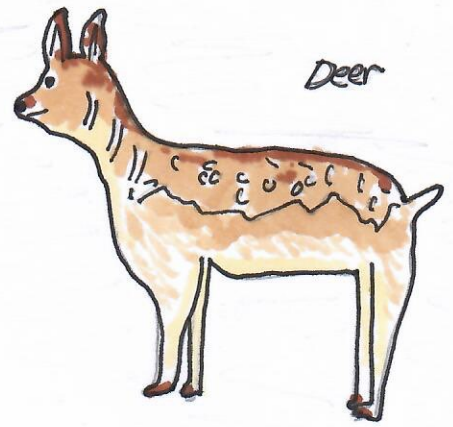
I think this trail is the best trail to hike because I always see so many different animals. Mom says that black bears, fish, deer, beavers, loons and racoons are the native wildlife of this area.

I wonder what animals we will see today?

Black Bear



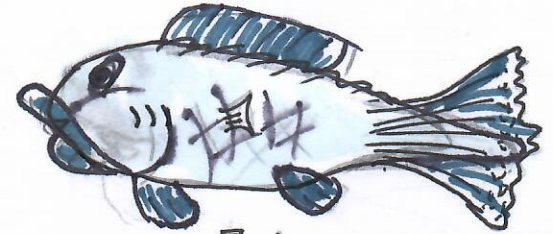
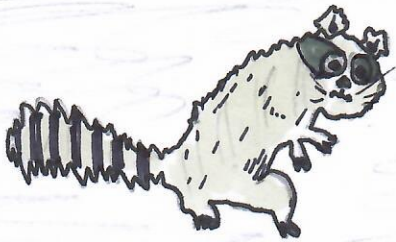
Deer



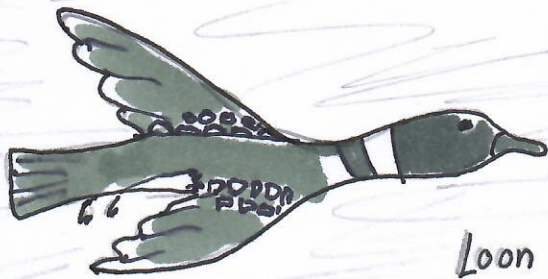
Beaver



Raccoon



Fish



Loon

When people say **native wildlife**, they usually mean all the wild animal species in one area. Wild animals prefer to live in certain areas because some climates are better suited than others for the way they live, what they eat, and how they reproduce. These species of wildlife that depend on each other as food sources are native to the area.

We climb and climb until our legs are tired.

“Let's take a rest”, Mom says as she pulls out her binoculars and hands them to me. I start scanning the mountain below for land animals, and the sky above for birds.

“I see a black bear, over there on that mountain side!”

Mom takes a look through the binoculars. She is trying to find out what the bear is doing.



“It looks like a mother bear and two cubs! Around this time of year, black bears are starting to come out of hibernation. All winter long they hibernate in their dens and in the spring they wake up sleepy and hungry. These bears are probably looking for food.” Mom says.

“I don’t want them to be hungry, let's feed them! We brought some sandwiches we could leave for them.” I reply.



Bears and other animals including bats, hedgehogs, ground squirrels, and marmots all deal with the harsh, cold winter by **hibernating**. Animals that hibernate are called hibernators and they like to find dark and quiet homes some place underground or in a cave to fall into a deep sleep. Black bears can hibernate for up to seven and a half months without drinking or eating.

“Black bears eat foods like fish, grasses and berries. We can help them find food by keeping the land where they live safe and healthy,” she says.

With that, we keep climbing.



We climb until we are tired but we know we were almost at the top. Careful not to prick ourselves on their needles, we hold onto larch trees for balance and continue climbing through the cloudline.

As birds fly above us, all I can think about is the view of the birds from the top of the mountain.



FINALLY! We're at the top and I pull out my binoculars for a better look at what's in the sky.

"What is that grey bird called? The one with the long legs!" I exclaim.

"That sounds like a great blue heron. They usually nest near wetlands, but not in high places like this mountain" Mom says.



Wetlands are areas where the ground is saturated with shallow water. They can also be called swamps, marshes or bogs. Wetlands play a huge role in the environment because they are home to many species of wildlife including the great blue heron, they protect shorelines by preventing floods and they clean dirty waters.

I wonder what the heron is doing so far from its nest. Maybe it is lost.

“We should help it find its way home! Where are the wetlands?” I ask.

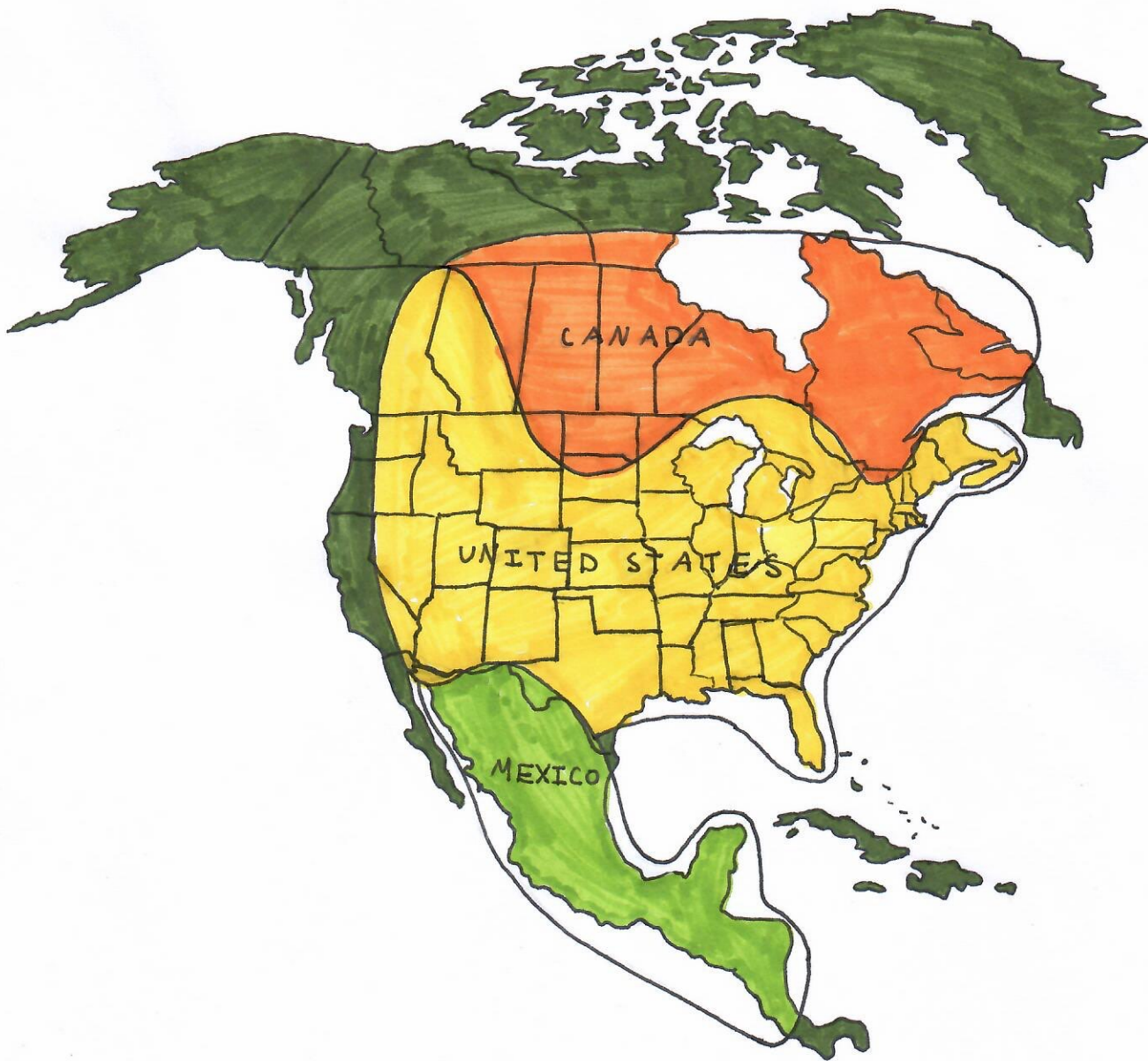
“The great blue heron knows where the wetlands are, better than you and I do. We can help the heron fly home by keeping the wetlands safe, and keeping the air in the sky clean. Depending on the time of the year, herons will fly very long distances called migrations to get to their summer and winter homes.” Mom replies.






Many mammals like birds, fishes and even insects will move, or **migrate**, from one place to another depending on the time of year. Migration is an important part of an animal's life cycle and there are many different reasons why they do this. Some migrate to find food, some to breed, some to find a place where they can hibernate, some escape hot, dry summers or cold, wet winters.

I watch as the great blue heron glides away, out of sight. I wonder, how far away will it fly? How am I supposed to keep the heron's home safe and healthy when it lives so far away? I ask my mom these questions as we unpack some lunch.

“We need lots of people, working together, all over the world to make sure animals living near them, like the great blue heron, have a safe place to live. That is how we can show respect for these animals.” she answers.



-  = Summer
-  = Year Round
-  = Winter

After eating our sandwiches and drinking lots of water, we start to hike back down the mountain, this time on a different part of the trail that borders the stream.

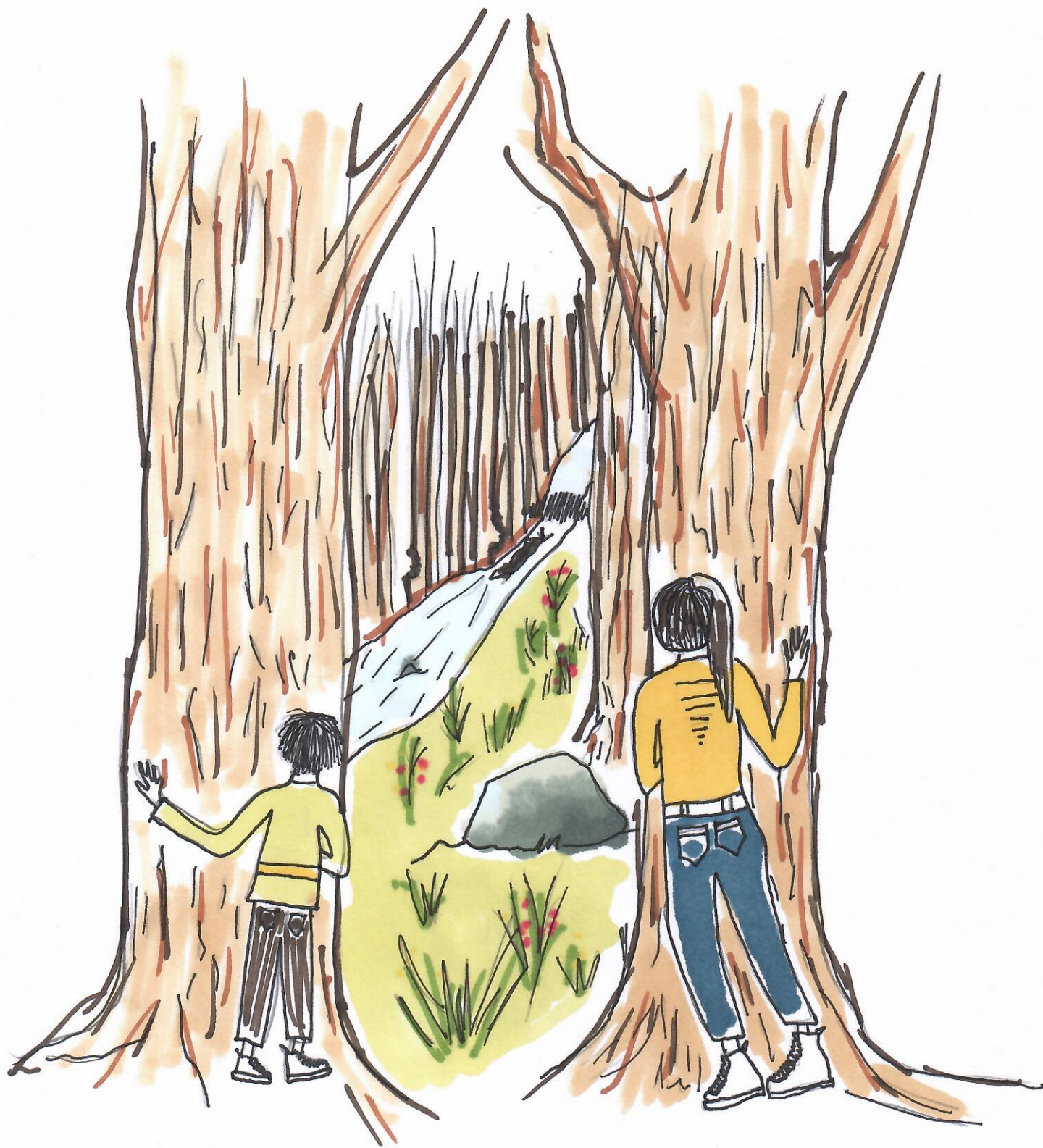
Going down the mountain feels easier than going up. We make our way into the trees and through the forest once again. My eyes look left and right, hoping to spot another friend.



The trail and the river run next to each other at the bottom of the mountain. I wander onto one of the rocks on the river bank and sit down. Mom follows behind and sits down on a rock next to mine.

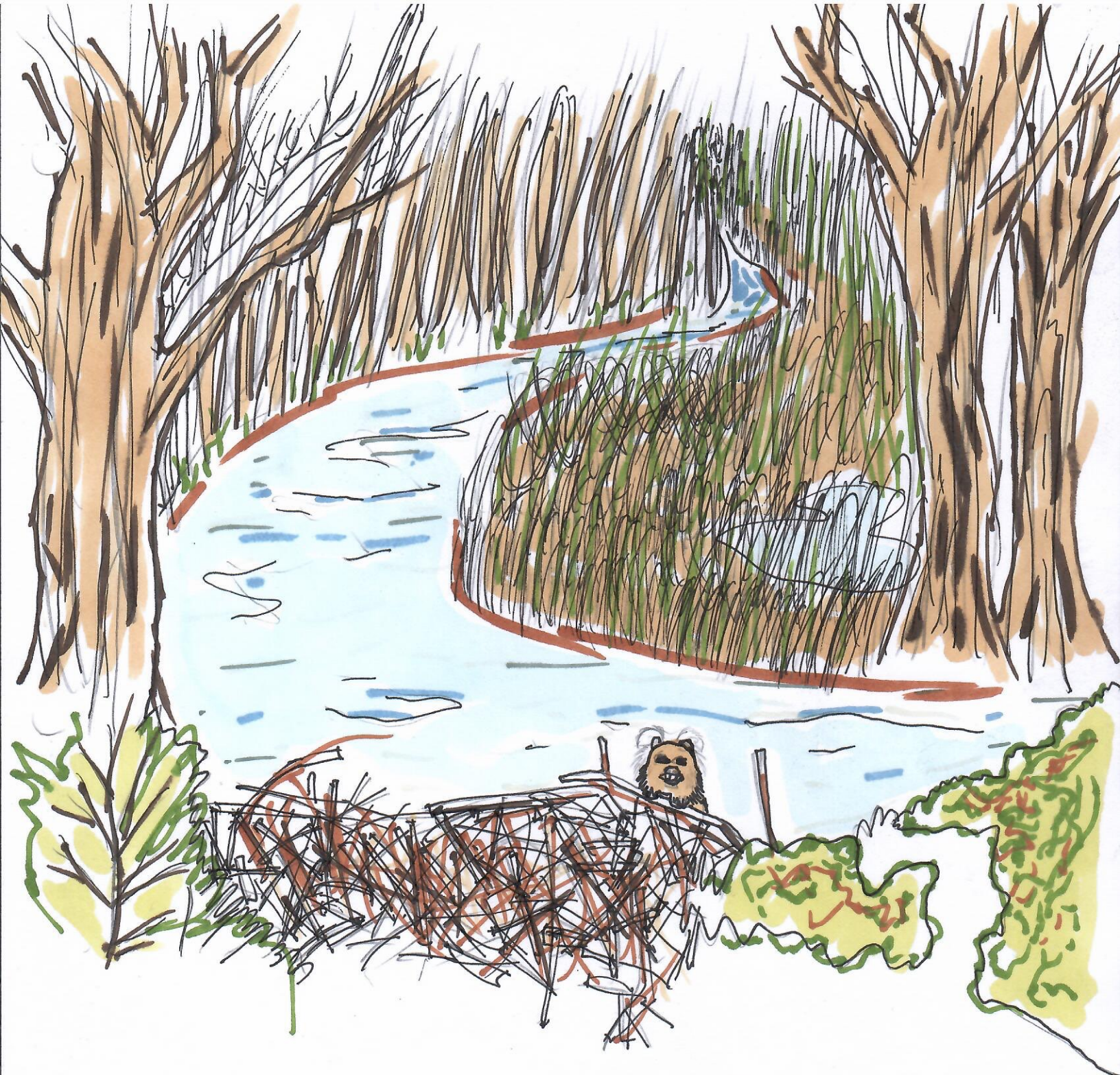
We sit very still in the sun, looking for fish swimming in the clear water or deer coming for a drink.

Mom taps me on the shoulder and points to a log floating down the river. I look at her confused, for a second, until I realize it is not a log, it is a beaver!



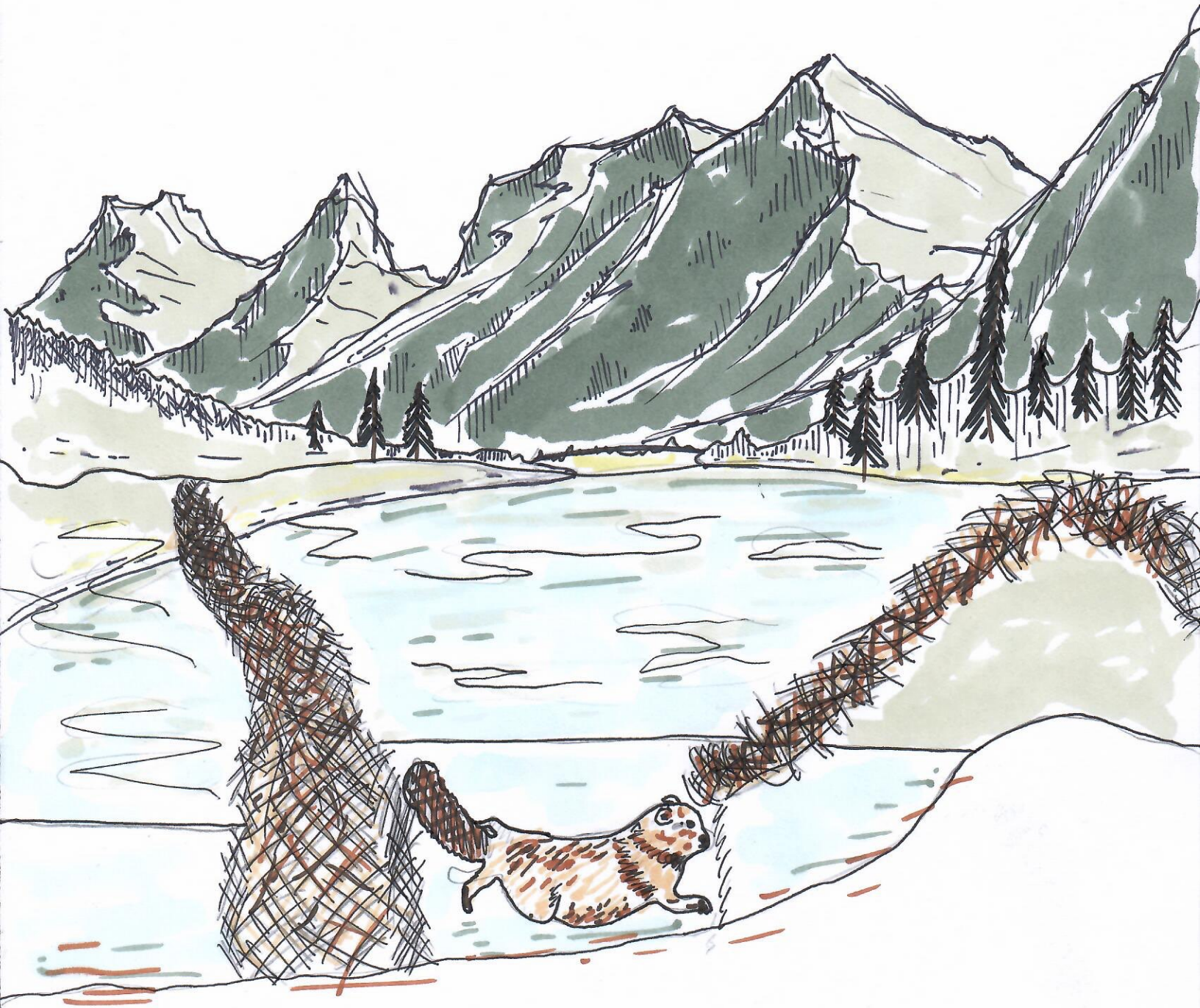
We watch as it swims with sticks in it's mouth, up to the beaver dam it had been building a little farther down the river. It takes the sticks from its mouth and starts adding them to the dam.

"I don't even think I could build a house that sturdy in the middle of a river." I whisper to Mom, to make sure I do not scare the beaver.



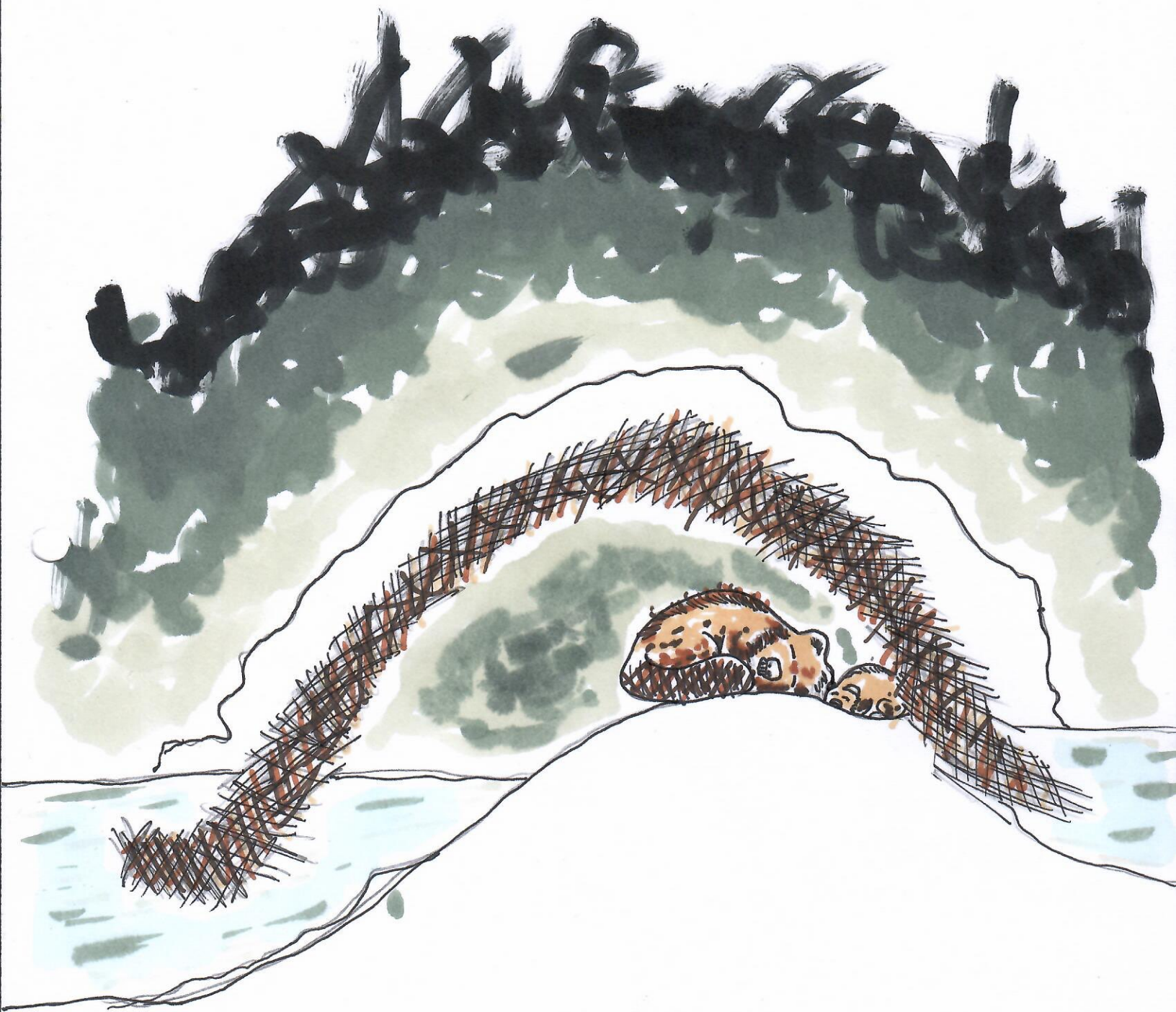
Beaver dams protect beavers from predators like wolves, bears and foxes. Once a beaver is in it's dam, it knows that it is safe because beaver dams are built to be nearly impossible to break. These dams are good for the earth too! They actually help the river stay healthy by letting water travel to places it needs to go.

Mom replies, "Beavers sure are very smart animals. They use tools to build their houses out of wood for their families to live in, just like we do. When they are scared, they can dive into their houses through an underwater backdoor."



“Do beavers hibernate like bears do?” I ask.

“Nope. In the winter they might hide themselves, but they are still out repairing their houses at night. Beavers eat lots of plants like tree bark, leaves and underwater weeds,” Mom answers.



“Mom, can we keep him? Beavers sound like the perfect pets, we could even build a beaver dam in our own backyard! It would be great if we could bring home the bear and the heron too! Our backyard looks safe and healthy to me.” I say joyfully.

Just then, I imagine what life would be like with these wild animals always by my side.



“I know that a beaver is one of the cutest animals,” Mom says, “but they get very angry when others are in their space. To bring the beaver back home with us would be taking it away from its own home.”

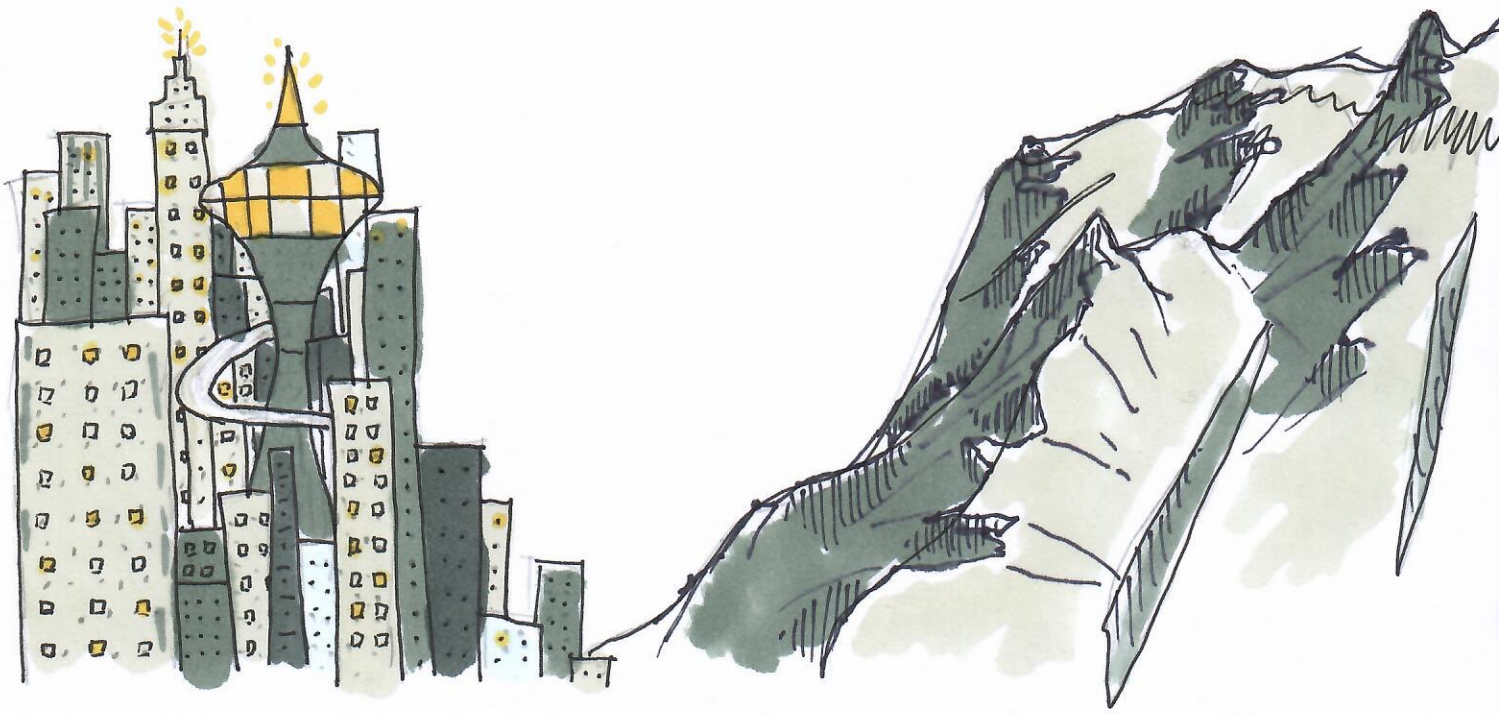
I stop daydreaming and turn to her.

“Why are we going on a hike to see animals if we can’t feed them, or touch them, or talk to them?” I ask.



“Because we share this forest with the black bear, the great blue heron and the beaver. They are not ours to take, and neither is their home. We are going on a hike because it reminds us that our animal and plant friends are still out here, safe and healthy.

We live in big cities and talk with many people every day. Our lives are so busy with school and work that sometimes we forget how to treat our not-human friends,” she says.



“Even though animals cannot understand us, we cannot forget to respect animals, just like how you respect your friend, or your cousin, or your sister.” Mom says.

This is not the answer I was hoping to hear, but maybe the beaver is better off living in the place it knows best. I would not be able to live in a beaver den!

I reply to her, “There are a lot of things I don’t know about animals, like how they stay warm in the winter, if they ever need haircuts, and why some can breathe underwater when others cannot. But I do know that they all have their own secret lives. Bears hibernate, herons migrate, and beavers hide in their dams.”



We sit on the rocks until it starts to get dark. We watch the stream trickle past us as we listen to the calm splashing it made.

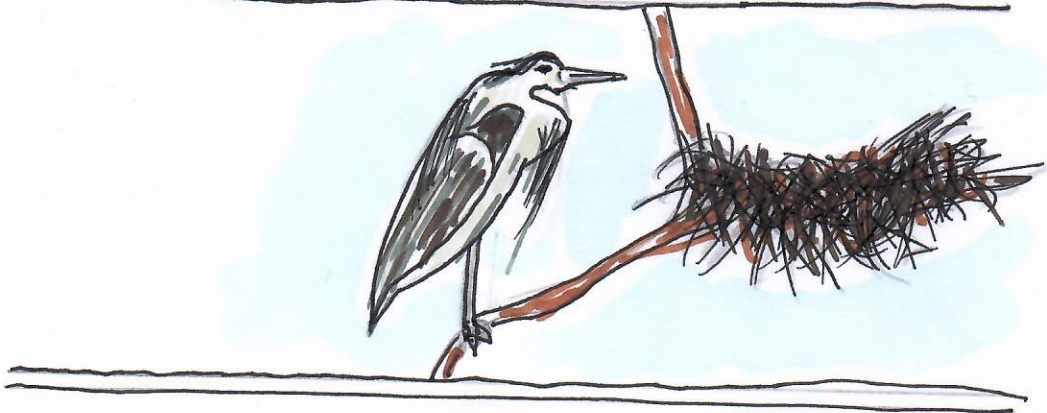
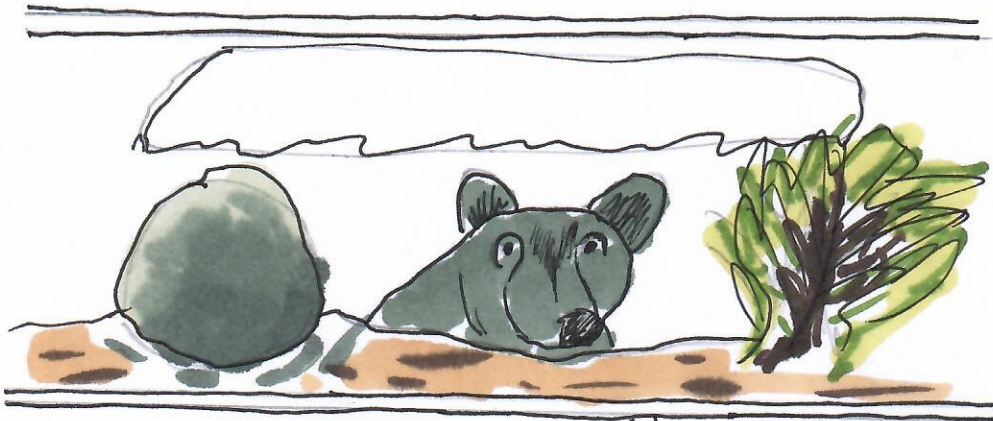
The beaver had swam away a long time ago. I wonder where it is, probably in its house, or maybe out in the forest somewhere gathering more wood.



“Are you upset that you can’t take the beaver home?” Mom asks.

“Not anymore. I thought maybe a beaver would be fun to have in the house, but it would not be too much fun for the beaver.” I say.

“Your right! We can’t make choices for animals, but we can make sure that the choices we make are not harming them or the places they live, like this forest,” she said smiling.

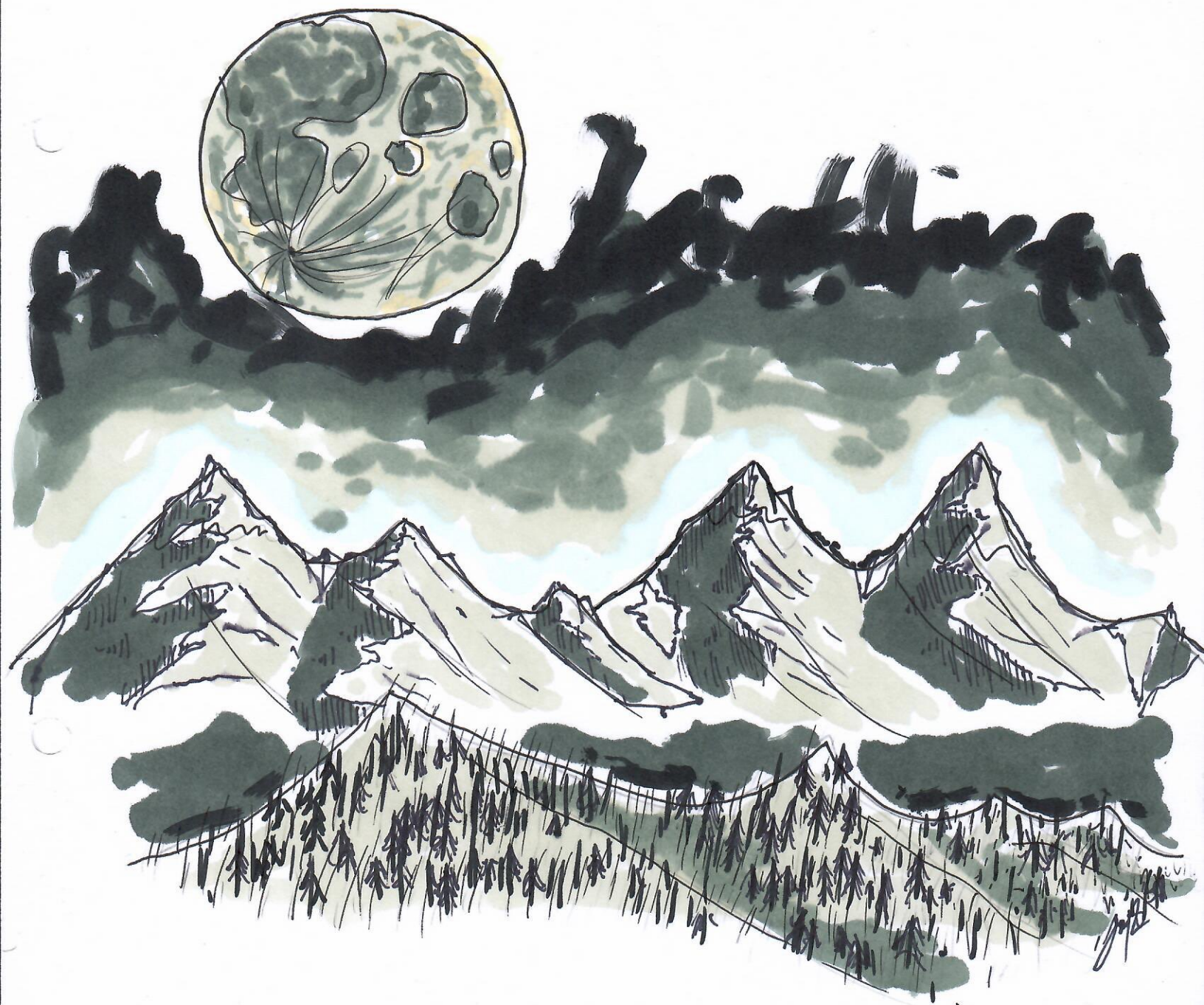


I look out into the giant forest and hear the wind rustle the trees. How many animals heard that same wind just now?

Through a break in the trees, I get a good look at the moon. How many animals are looking at that same moon? Probably more than I could count.

It makes me happy to know that we all call the earth our home.

That we all breathe the air and hear the wind. That we all feel the sun and see the light of the moon.



Author's Note

All the animals mentioned in the story call the old-growth coniferous forest of the Northwest United States their home. The native wildlife and all the plants that grow in the area interact with one another and with the environment. This interconnected community of organisms makes up what is called an ecosystem.

We, humans, often forget that we live in this same ecosystem. It is easy to forget that we also take part in those interactions with other organisms and with the environment. We normally call those that we care about and interact impactfully with, our kin. Many people consider their relatives, pets, and close family friends to be part of their kinship network. However, it is clear that humans can have huge impacts on the environment and the lives of animals, just as they might do to us. This book challenges readers to think about wild animals and the nature around them as part of their kinship network as well.

The book steadily introduces the idea that animals have value beyond what humans might place on them. If you look back through the story, you'll find that the little boy grows upset because he is not allowed to feed, help or take home any of the animals he sees. This is an example of when people think about nature in an instrumental way. In other words, they only see plants and animals as things that can be used by humans. The mom encourages her son to think about animals as beings with their own lives and their own right to make choices about their environment.

About the Black Bear

Ursus americanus

Habitat: Coniferous and deciduous forests

Where: Forests of Canada, the United States, and even parts of Mexico

The Facts: The black bear is the most common bear in North America. The color of their fur might not always be black. Different color variations can make the bear appear cinnamon, blue-black, blue-grey, brown, or white. It is important not to confuse a black bear with a grizzly bear, which is also brown, but much larger.

Black bears are classified as carnivores (meat eaters) even though they also eat fruits and nuts, especially acorns and beechnuts. When the bear wants to eat meat, it frequently kills moose calves and deer fawns. Black bears that live near humans often eat garbage from dumps or campsites. Although black bears can be trained in animal shows and have been known to accept handouts from tourism parks, they generally tend to avoid people and are fierce predators when encountered.

Black bears are not territorial. They are actually very solitary animals. Their homes range from 15 to 77 square miles depending on how much food and water is around them.

Before black bears sleep during hibernation, bears must accumulate large quantities of body fat during late summer and fall by eating as much food as possible. Not only does this allow them to survive the long period of fasting in wintertime, but it also allows them to have enough energy in spring when they emerge from their dens and food is scarce. Females will also care for their young at this time, and will spend the springtime after they emerge teaching their young how to hunt and find food.

The time it takes for a black bear to have a litter of cubs is 60 to 70 days. One to four cubs are usually born in January or February. They are born blind with no teeth and fully furred. Cubs will stay with their mother for 16 months and have a lifespan of more than 20 years. Black bears that live near humans do not live as long due to hunting, trapping, poaching, removal near campgrounds or dumps, and car crashes.

About the Great blue heron

Ardea herodias

Habitat: Saltwater and freshwater, along coastlines, in marshes, near the shores of ponds or streams

Where: Southern Canada, the United States, Mexico and the Caribbean

The Facts: The great blue heron flies at around 20 to 30 miles an hour with a wingspan of up to 6 and a half feet. In the air, it flaps its wings very slowly because they are so large. Even though Great Blue Herons are large, they actually only weigh about five or six pounds. Like all birds, they have hollow bones, which makes them lightweight so they are able to fly.

In flight, you can see its long legs sticking straight out behind it. They are graceful flyers but also spend long periods of time standing still, waiting for fish to come near or walking slowly to snare their prey in the water. Their long, S-shaped necks, blade-like bills, and special vertebrae, or backbones, make them expert fishers. The blueish-grey bird will quickly dive its head under the water to grab its prey and swallow it whole. Mice, insects and other small creatures also make up a large part of their diet.

A group of great blue herons is called a colony. Though great blue herons hunt alone, they typically nest in colonies. A heron's nest can be up to 4 feet across and they can be found in tall trees, but sometimes in low shrubs as well. Females will have 2 to 7 eggs, which both parents protect and incubate. Chicks can survive on their own after about two months of age. The average lifespan of these birds is 15 years. In the wild, the current population of great blue herons is increasing.

Hérons have a special claw on their middle toes that lets them comb their feathers. This claw even has fringes on it which are used like a rag to wash oils or fish slime from their feathers. They also have great night vision, so they can hunt during the night as well as the day.

About the Beaver
Castor canadensis

Habitat: Ponds, lakes, rivers, and streams

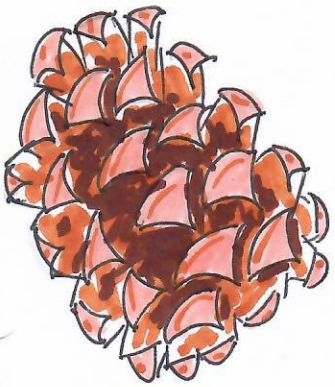
Where: Canada, much of the United States and parts of northern Mexico

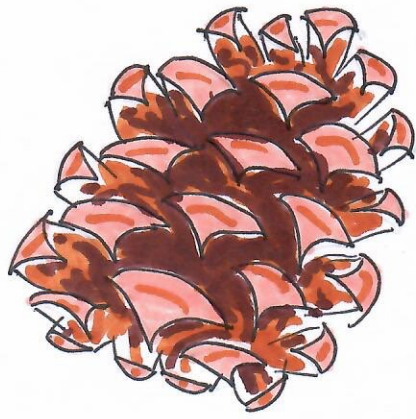
The Facts: Beavers are the largest rodents (gnawing animals) in North America. Families can have as many as ten members. When babies are born, they spend their first month at home with their mothers while their fathers guard the territory. As they grow older, they will spend their time playing, copying their parents, and helping raise their younger brothers and sisters.

Beaver dams are created for protection against predators like coyotes, wolves and bears. They also provide easy access to food during the winter. If a dam is broken due to human or animal activity, or just due to natural causes, beavers can rebuild it overnight. Well kept dams create ponds which help isolate beaver homes, called lodges. These lodges are made from branches and mud, which freeze in the wintertime to become as hard as stone. After they finish building the dams and the above water lodge structure, beavers dig out underwater entrances for their lodges to prevent predators from getting inside. Usually, there are two dens within the lodge. One is for drying off after getting out of the water and another one is the dry area where the family lives.

The beaver works as a keystone species in an ecosystem. Besides humans, no other animal appears to do more to shape its landscape. For hundreds of thousands of years, the actions of beavers have kept these watery systems healthy and in good repair. The beaver ponds they create also make wetlands which are used by many other species like the great blue heron and the black bear for habitat and food sources. The wetlands also filter out sediments and pollution from waterways.

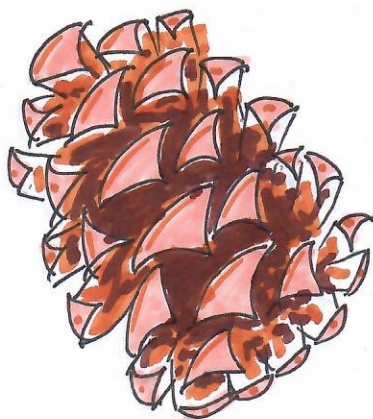
Some broadleaved trees that beavers use to construct their dams and lodges can also re-grow stems and leaves, providing easy-to-reach food in the years to come. Beaver ponds can even kill some tree species by drowning them in the newly created wetland. This is actually a good thing because it creates standing dead wood, which is useful for a wide range of animals and plants.





About the Author

Elisabeth Christ is a student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute studying engineering and policy. She has a passion for educating people about environmental issues and in her free time she loves to hike, draw and play music. Elisabeth enjoys work in public service and loves to create art or music that can be used as informative tools. She lives in Massachusetts with her two roommates and her cat, Prince Yeti.





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