

The Forest without Fox

By Hannah Squires

One sunny day in the Forest, Rabbit hopped peacefully into a small clearing. He'd only been munching on some clover for a couple of minutes when Mouse scurried out of the woods.

"Hello, Rabbit! Lovely day, isn't it?" Her voice squeaked from beneath the tall grass.

"Oh, yes yes yes," Rabbit exclaimed. "The sun is out, the birds are singing, and there's no Fox to worry about. It couldn't get lovelier." Rabbit spoke fast and hopped up and down a couple of times when he was done.

"I agree. I've been so relaxed since he's been gone. I even took the children for a stroll in broad daylight yesterday, without any worry or care. We still have to be careful of Owl, of course, but he doesn't come out during the day like Fox used to do when he was especially hungry. Yes, life is quite perfect."

Up in a tree on the other side of the forest, Owl slept contentedly, with a full stomach. For the few weeks since Fox had disappeared, she'd gone to sleep in the morning completely satisfied with the spoils of the previous night's hunt. Without the clever creature there to snatch up half the creatures, Owl had an easy time of hunting. She often finished early and spent the rest of her night flying through the warm summer air.

That night, Owl had found dinner quite early, as many of the little creatures living on the forest floor had felt braver with the absence of Fox. Afterwards, she went to visit Wolf and Bear, who were lying on a particularly soft patch of grass in front of Bear's cave.

“Hullo, Owl,” Bear rumbled without lifting his giant head from his paws, rested on the grass.

“Good day, Bear. Wolf.”

“Owl.” Wolf’s voice was silky and he nodded a fraction of an inch before continuing. “I was just telling Bear here how I’ve been missing Fox these last few weeks. You know how I love chasing him, and these smaller, weaker animals aren’t much fun.

“Oh, I don’t miss him at all. I’ve actually been having quite the time without him. He was always making everything so very difficult.”

“I didn’t realize Fox was missing.” Bear yawned.

“Yes, for quite some time now,” Owl said haughtily.

“Mm, I have been finding more berries than usual, I suppose. And I caught a squirrel yesterday that hadn’t been paying any attention. I guess he was feeling safe without Ol’ Foxy there to chase him up a tree.”

That summer, life seemed much easier with Fox gone. Rabbit and Mouse found themselves eating in peace for the first time in their lives, not looking over their shoulder or scampering home to check on the children. Owl didn’t have to work nearly as hard for dinner, and she found a greater variety in the food she could eat. Wolf was a little bored, but like Owl, he found there was more to eat and that even chasing Deer could sometimes satisfy that boredom.

The next summer, things were different. The forest was much quieter. Rabbit hopped slowly, his feet barely leaving the ground. He was skinnier, his fur patches in places. The sun was too strong for him.

The clearing was sparse. Rabbit's favorite, clover, hadn't been seen for months. Even the grass had been chewed down so low it hadn't had a chance to recover. Rabbit found a small patch of grass beneath a particularly shady tree. It was the only spot in the entire forest that seemed untouched.

"Rabbit! Don't eat all that grass. You've always been so selfish. I have six other little mouths to feed, and there you go chomping away like a beast. Do you ever think of anyone but yourself?" Mouse's voice was shrill and desperate. She was looking at Rabbit from behind a tree, and she too was thinner than she'd ever been.

"I'm starving, Mouse. Leave me alone. I found this grass, and it's mine." Rabbit quickly stuffed a bunch of the grass into his mouth.

For a while, the smaller animals, Rabbit, Mouse, Chipmunk, and all their friends had taken over the forest. There were so many of them, that one was hardly missed when Owl swooped down at night to take them away, and Mouse and Rabbit's immediate group stayed relatively safe. They feasted and played all day long. Fox's disappearance was the best thing that had ever happened to them.

Then, one day they realized that they didn't have enough food to feed their growing families. Food started to become scarce, and they started to starve. Already a majority of their friends had died or moved away from home. Rabbit and Mouse hadn't spoken in weeks except to argue with each other about a blade of grass or a small leaf.

Owl was starving, too. She flew far and wide, all night long and sometimes into the early morning, searching for food. For a while, she'd been able to pick off the weak creatures or eat them right after they'd fallen dead, but even then the small, fat-less creatures hadn't been enough to satisfy her after so many months of having her pick of plump, well-fed dinners.

She no longer swooped low enough to speak to Wolf and Bear, out of fear that Wolf would betray her. His coat has lost its shine and his voice had lost its silk. He spent his days stalking in the shadows, searching for any morsel he could find. After a long day of looking, and finding nothing, he collapsed in front of Bear's cave.

Bear lumbered out, slowly easing his tired body down to the ground. For a second, he considered attacking his old friend, who was weaker than he'd ever seen him. But Bear was weak too, and didn't feel he'd even have the strength to get up.

"How did this happen, Bear?" Wolf asked sadly. Before Bear could answer, there was a noise from up in the tree. "It's okay, Owl, you can come down. We're exhausted. You have nothing to worry about."

Owl fluttered weakly down to a lower branch, nearly losing her balance when she perched, and finally leaning heavily on the trunk of the tree. She still stayed out of reach of Wolf's leap, though on close inspection, she realized that he was as weak as her. He wouldn't have been able to reach her even on the lowest branch.

"It's Fox. It's because he left, disappeared. The forest used to be in perfect balance, but now, now everything is wrong." Owl cooed. That night, she had flown over her home and realized that it was completely unfamiliar to her. It had lost all of the qualities that she had once loved about it.

“Yes.” Wolf sighed, “Yes, we needed Fox. We didn’t even know, but we needed him.”

Even Bear, who was usually unconcerned with these types of things, nodded his head in agreement.

Project Summary

For my project, I wanted to create a story that would be simple, and easy to follow, while also describing something complicated (1). My intent was to make it like a children's story, although I think that some of the death towards the end of the piece may be too dark for children. I didn't want to make light of something so dangerous, something that can ruin an entire ecosystem.

I wanted to talk about the deciduous forest, which is a well-balanced ecosystem that is home to many creatures. I read about all of the different animals that live there and got inspired by the Red Fox (3). The Red Fox eats almost anything, and is preyed on more by hunters than any natural predator in the wild (2). I imagined that Fox wouldn't be missed by any of the other animals at first, since even Wolf, who may eat it, can find many other animals to eat. I then wanted to show how in the long run, the loss of Fox would hurt the other characters, even one as strong and seemingly unaffected as Bear, because the balance of The Forest, their home, would be completely ruined.

I didn't realize until after I started writing how sad the story would end up being. Obviously, in the wild, the animals wouldn't be fighting or worrying about betrayal from friends, they wouldn't be talking or accusing each other, but the desperation would still be there, would be stronger than I could ever depict in a short fable.

Lately, I have been very interested in the genre of Children's Literature and how children perceive things, especially through stories. I think it's important that children are interested in story-telling in all senses, and that they are taught through that medium. I didn't always know how much ecosystems, and in turn, the world, depended on the balance of each of its organisms. It is important for everyone, including children, to understand this, so that they don't continue to live in a way that is disruptive to that balance.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Bascompte, Jordi, and Carlos J. Melián. "Simple Trophic Modules For Complex Food Webs." *Ecology* 86.11 (2005): 2868-873. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Apr. 2012.

This article describes the complexities of a food web and how models of them can't really capture everything that goes on within one. It talks about trying to test and understand specific food webs, but how that is impossible because of the many different factors that contribute to the web. Since I wanted to write a children's story, I couldn't let the food web get too complicated or let its complexities way down the story. I had to choose certain animals to focus on, to do my best to convey the actual problems at hand. Reading this article before writing my story helped me to understand that I needed to do that, and to be careful to not take on too much in a short children's story.

2. "Red Fox." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, 2012. Web. 21 Apr. 2012.

This article was the most important because it described everything I needed to know about Red Foxes. The article is about where they live, what they eat, what eats them, and is also provided pictures. This article is the one that inspired me to write about what would happen to an ecosystem if the fox went missing.

3. "Temperate Deciduous Forests." *Nature Works*. New Hampshire Public Television, 2012. Web. 21 Apr. 2012.

This article helped me to get the setting right for my story. It described in detail the type of place that a deciduous forest is and the animals that live there. It also gave me information about Red Foxes, which were the focal point of my story. The website also provided pictures that helped me have a clear image in my mind of the place I was writing about.