

NATURE



AND ME

A guide to the joys and excitements of the outdoors



You're probably used to hearing about how nature is important and how natural things are good for you.

Grown-ups like to point out that an apple is healthier than a bag of crisps, and how orange juice squeezed from actual oranges is better for you than a fizzy drink made with lots of artificial flavours and colouring. Or maybe they keep saying you should go out in the fresh air rather than sit indoors all the time looking at a screen.

The news often tells us that we need to look after nature: people shouldn't cut down so many trees, and we mustn't let all the glaciers melt, and we need to protect blue whales and black rhinos because there aren't many of them left.

That's all true and very sensible. But it is not what this book is about.

This book is about the feelings you can have around different parts of nature.

You know something about this already.

There is the warm feeling you get when a puppy tilts its head, wags its tail and looks at you. You might feel amazed at the sight of a huge tree or be fascinated by a tiny ant trying to carry a crumb of bread. Or you might like the feeling of the sand between your toes as you run down the beach to jump in the waves.

In this book we're going to talk about lots of other nice and interesting feelings you can get from nature. And we're going to be doing something special and unusual. We're going to think about why these feelings are important and how they can help you in your life.

Nature can help you feel good in your mind. It can help you feel less worried or less bothered when you feel annoyed. It can cheer you up when you're feeling sad. It can help you feel more confident when you're feeling a bit shy. And it helps with lots of other good things too. As you grow up, nature can help you become the best person you can be.

Let's find out how!

Aldebaran



Aldebaran is the fourteenth brightest star in the sky. It's huge: about 61 million kilometres across. You could fit 85,000 suns like ours into it. If you flew round Aldebaran in a plane, the flight time would be twenty-one years, six months and a few days (hopefully they'd have really good inflight entertainment). It is 65 light years away. If your grandpa looked up at it one night, the light he saw would have started its journey when he was probably still at school.

It can make you feel very small to think about how big and how far away Aldebaran is. But it's an interesting feeling. Normally you're the little one. When you're growing up, it can feel as if you're surrounded by big people. They are important and they are in charge. You're always supposed to listen to them and do what they tell you. And we're always worrying about who is bigger - who has more money, who is more famous or who is the boss.

But when you think about giant, distant Aldebaran, you realise that everyone is small. Your teacher is small, your parents are small, the richest person in the world is small and so are all the famous people. If Aldebaran could see us, it wouldn't think any of us were at all important: we're all just like tiny ants scurrying around on the surface of an insignificant planet. It is nice to keep this in mind when you feel you are not important enough - a feeling all of us have a lot of the time.

Sometimes
it's nice to feel
small

The Leopard Shark

Leopard sharks look really scary. They have lots of very sharp teeth and powerful jaws. They have spots on their skin that make them look a bit like ferocious underwater leopards – that’s where they get their name from! They grow to about 5 feet long and they like swimming in warm, shallow water (which is probably where you’d like to swim too). If you saw the triangle-shaped fin on the top of its back cutting through the water, you would probably be terrified.

It’s not surprising that you’d be afraid, because some sharks can be extremely dangerous. But not this kind. It certainly looks frightening, but it’s not actually going to harm you. No one has ever been bitten by a leopard shark. They only want to eat much smaller things like crabs and little fish. In fact, leopard sharks can be quite friendly. If you were in the water, one might come up and gently rub its nose against the back of your hand. It just wants to say hello.



Understanding what's scary

You might be frightened about all kinds of things – like starting at a new school or meeting the children of your parents’ friends. When we get frightened, we panic, we stop thinking and we want to run away and hide.

When you feel this way, the leopard shark has something interesting and important to say: ‘If you get to know me, and get to know about me, you will realise I’m not going to bite you. Actually, I’d like to be your friend.’

Something that feels scary might not really be as dangerous as you think. The people in the new school or the children of your parents’ friends might actually be rather nice.

The Giant Redwood Tree

This giant redwood tree is in California. It really is giant. It's 269 feet tall. But the even more amazing thing is how old it is. It's coming up on its 1000th birthday.

It was a little sapling when knights wore suits of armour and charged at each other on horseback with their lances lowered. It was already enormous when Christopher Columbus was sailing across the Atlantic. And it's still going strong. Maybe one day it will have a 2000th birthday party.

It must be funny being this tree. A year or two would feel like no time at all. It would hardly notice ten years going by. You can imagine the tree feels sorry for us humans because we live such short lives.

The tree is right. Our lives are quite short. It's a weird thought, and it can feel a bit scary. But actually, it's a very important and helpful idea.

But how can it be helpful to think that life is short?

Well, it's because our brains tend to make a big mistake. Day by day, it feels as if we have so much time. It is hard to imagine being twenty or thirty-five – it seems so far away. Time doesn't feel important, so we end up wasting a lot of it.

**Don't waste
your time**

The tree is saying you should remember that your life is short. Time is precious. Knowing this helps you to realise something wonderful and unexpected. You can't live as long as a tree, but you can do a lot more. Your life can feel bigger if you do bigger and better things with your time.

You can start thinking now about who you want to be when you're older. You can decide what's really important to you and what's not so important.

You haven't got forever, but you've got enough time if you use it well.



The Scorpion

Grown-ups know lots of things: they know about the ancient Greeks, how to drive a car and what a credit card is. It can be pretty annoying. You're always feeling that you should be asking them to explain things (though sometimes you can't be bothered). They never seem to ask you to explain things they don't know about but that you do.

That is why scorpions can be helpful. Hardly any grown-ups know much about scorpions.

They don't know that:

The smallest kind is about the length of your thumbnail. The biggest ones are about as long as your foot.

Outside, at night, scorpions get their sense of direction by looking at the stars.

Scorpions are nocturnal - they sleep during the day and get up at night.

A baby scorpion gets carried around on its mother's back.

They evolved 430 million years ago.

They can have up to twelve eyes.

There are no scorpions in New Zealand.

Scorpions glow in the dark under ultraviolet light.

A scorpion's lungs are located below its stomach (with us, it's the other way around).

Scorpions have eight legs and two claws at the front.

But this isn't just about scorpions. Actually, there are lots of things grown-ups don't know much about.

Scorpion-related words to make grown-ups fall out of their chair with surprise if you drop them casually into a conversation:

Arachnid: It takes a bit of practice to say: *uh-rak-nid*. Scorpions are arachnids - that means they're related to spiders, which also have eight legs.

'Dad, there's an arachnid in the kitchen.'

Exoskeleton: *Ek-soh-skel-i-tn*. This means that the hard parts of a scorpion's body are on the outside. That's the opposite of us. Our bones are on the inside and we're squishy on the surface. Scorpions are squishy on the inside but tough on the outside - it's as if they're wearing a suit of armour.

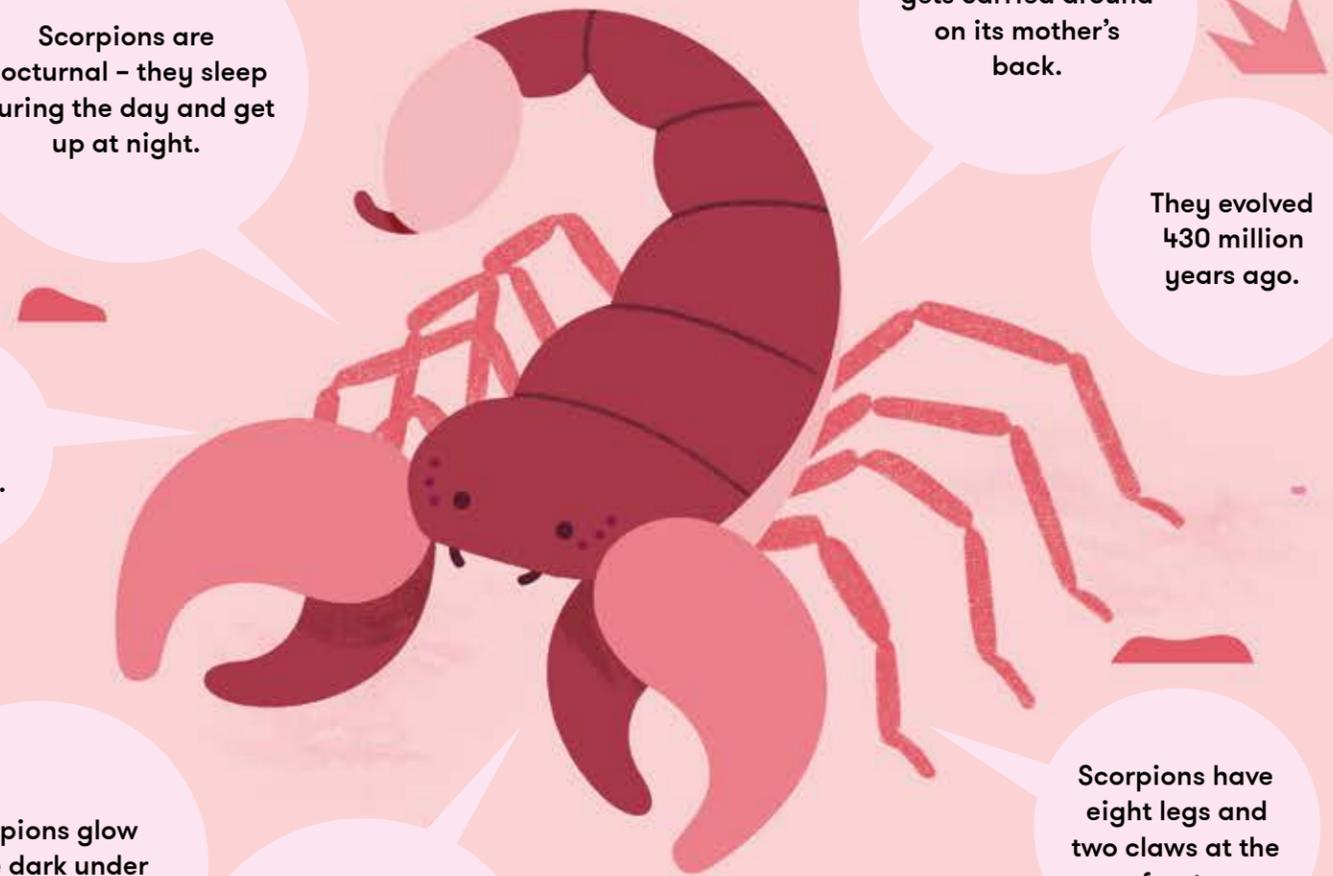
'Mum, I fell off my bike and cut my knee. I wish I had an exoskeleton.'

They don't know ...

- * how to make sure everyone gets a good education
- * how to make beautiful cities
- * how to solve arguments without getting upset

It would be great if we could have experts on these things. Maybe that could be you one day!

You are the expert!



Be a Hedgehog!

You're not really a hedgehog, of course. But one of the very clever things your brain can do is think about what it would be like to be a hedgehog.

You would sleep for most of the day and only wake up when it started to get dark – so no school for you! You'd only be about 20 centimetres long. If you came across an old football boot, it might look like a strange cousin.

You get excited by the smell of a rotting leaf – maybe underneath there's a delicious caterpillar or a lovely beetle you can have for breakfast. You don't walk very fast – it might take you a few minutes just to go along a short garden path (you really like human gardens).

You've never watched television. You don't know what a holiday is. You can't think in words, but you have lots of feelings.

When you meet another hedgehog, you're both quite chatty. You grunt and snuffle and make little squeals to show you're happy to meet each other.

But it's very scary if you catch sight of a badger or hear an owl hooting. You quickly roll yourself up into a little ball, with all your sharp, spiky hairs sticking out to keep you safe.

Soon it will be morning and you'll head home to the cosy little burrow you dug in some soft earth, hidden away behind some bushes.

The hedgehog is teaching you about imagination. You could also imagine what it's like to be someone else: a grown-up, maybe, or someone living in another country. If you were them, what would you be feeling? What would excite you? What would frighten you? Your imagination helps you to understand other people much better.

You can use your brain to travel into the minds and lives of other people and animals. It's one of the most interesting and helpful journeys you can ever make.



Imagining is fun

The Flatfish

It's called a flatfish because of its flat shape – obviously! It likes to live in shallow water not far from the coast, where it snuggles down into the mud or sand of the seabed. It never gets very big – an adult flatfish would probably be about the size of both your hands stretched out together.

You're a bit like a flatfish. You'll change a huge amount as you grow too. You started out tiny; you could only waggle your hands and gurgle. Then you learned to crawl and walk and jump. You learned to speak. You got bigger; your face changed. You started going to school. And changes will keep on happening.

You'll become an adult, you'll learn to drive a car, you'll have a job. Who knows, one day you might become a parent and you'll see your own children grow and change.

For us it all happens so slowly that we don't see the changes day to day. When you think about the flatfish, you can see its whole life cycle. It makes it feel less frightening. 'Don't worry,' says the flatfish. 'Of course you're going to keep on changing a lot – just like me!'



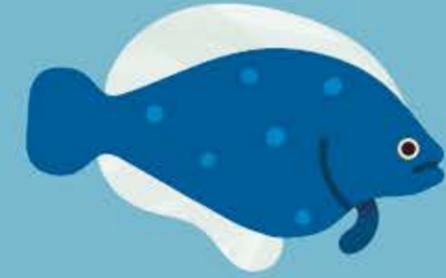
Then it grows a tail.

The weird thing is that a flatfish doesn't start out flat at all. When it's born, it's just a tiny round egg that bobs about in the water.

Life is full of exciting changes!



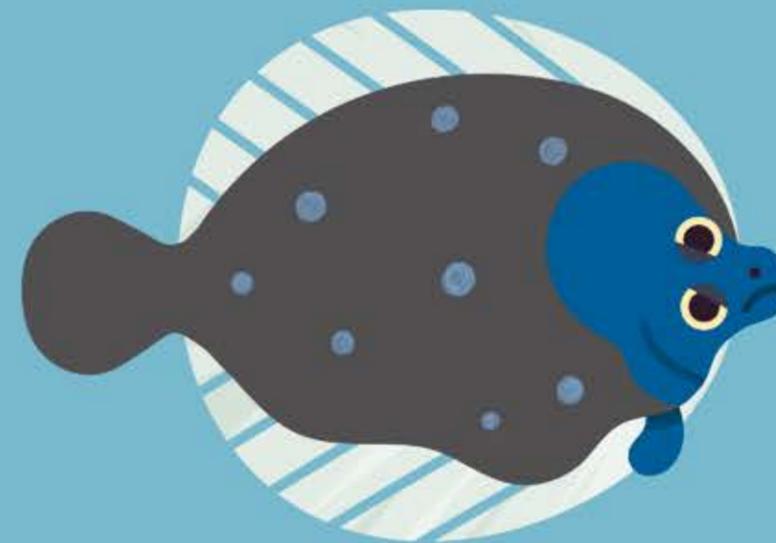
Later it looks like an ordinary little fish – a bit like a goldfish, maybe; it swims about upright.



Then something really strange happens: it starts getting thinner and flatter.



It swims about on its side and one of its eyes actually moves so that both of its eyes end up on the same side.



And it changes colour too: the upper side goes a dark grey while the underside stays a whitish colour. It's great that it changes: at last it can live happily on the sandy seabed.

A Cow



A cow living in a field doesn't have a very exciting life. Year after year, it's just munching grass and going indoors twice a day to get milked. It spends a lot of time standing still and staring into the distance. The highlight of a day might be spotting a particularly juicy tuft of grass or having to use its tail to swat away some annoying flies. But cows don't seem to get bored. You don't see them fretting or getting frustrated. They're not drumming their hooves impatiently on the ground or trying to dig tunnels under the fence so they can escape and finally go somewhere interesting.

No. A cow seems really at peace. It's patient. It accepts that most of the time nothing much is happening.

We spend a lot of our time making ourselves upset. We long for things we know we will probably never get, so we go around feeling disappointed – even though we might have quite a nice life already. We look at other people and think: 'Why have they got things I haven't? It's so unfair!'

It makes us upset to think about it. But it doesn't change anything. Cows don't do that sort of thing. They don't spend their lives wishing they could go on holiday somewhere hot or feeling that it's unfair that humans get to wear clothes and they're never allowed even to put on a jumper.

A cow with plenty of good grass to eat in summer and a warm barn and nice feed in winter is happy because it has what it really needs. It doesn't ask for more. In a funny way, we get unhappy when we forget to be like cows. Maybe we already have the main things we need.