Birds around a honey pot

Africa

The honeyguide flits from perch to perch – it has exciting news to share! Up ahead a man chops wood in the village. The dowdy little bird makes a whistle and suddenly, the man puts down his axe. His face lights up and follows the honeyguide into the shady forest ...

In parts of Africa, the honeyguide has a very special relationship with the local people. It helps them to find wild bee's nests so they can collect the sweet honey inside.

Wild bees usually nest inside a hollow tree or in a hole in the ground, building their honeycombs from wax that they make themselves.

Sniff the air. Imagine that you could smell bees' wax inside a nest over a kilometre away ... that's exactly what the honeyguide can do!

The inside of the honeyguide's nostrils, at the base of its beak, are extremely sensitive to the scent of honey wax.

When a honeyguide gets a whiff of bees' wax on the air, it follows the smell until it finds the bees' nest. It remembers where the nest is, then it flies off to find someone.

As soon as the bird comes across a person, the honeyguide makes a special call that seems to say,

'Follow me, I'll take you to some yummy honeycomb!'

The local people love honey, so they follow the bird all the way to the nest and then take out the honeycomb, but they are always careful to thank the honeyguide by leaving a piece of honeycomb for it to eat.

This unlikely partnership depends on the people rewarding the honeyguide, but also on the bird's remarkable sense of smell.

The fox and the bird

Europe and Asia

You are a baby chick – the last of ten brothers and sisters to peck your way out of an egg. Now it is your turn to emerge, a stripy ball of fluff bobbing and blinking up at the daylight. Even though you are just a few hours old, you are already able to run! Your mother – a partridge – is there to lead the way.

The most important thing for a mother is to keep her little ones safe long enough to become grown-up partridges.

She is always on the lookout. Danger lurks around every corner ...

A fox, a stoat or a hawk would gobble up any baby partridge that dares to stray across its path.

In the distance, the mother partridge sees a crow flying over the edge of the field. Quickly, she calls softly to her chicks and gathers them around her. Then she leads the brood under the hedge and out of sight.

As the partridge family start to come out of the other side, a fox looms up from the shadows! Oh no, the fox has spied the mother! But it has not seen the chicks in the long grass.

When the mother partridge senses that it is safe, she runs back to find her family, calling the little birds out of their hiding place in the long grass, ready to continue their journey.

There is no time for the mother partridge to lead her babies away. She has to try something else. She pretends to have a broken wing, flopping along the track towards the fox with one wing hanging by her side.

It looks like she cannot fly.

The fox, hoping for an easy meal, chases the partridge while she runs and flops, faster and faster, further and further away from her hidden chicks. Then, just as the fox pounces, the clever mother partridge bursts into the air and flies off!

She has tricked the fox by luring it so far away from her chicks there's no chance he will find them now. The disappointed fox skulks away. When the mother partridge senses that it is safe, she runs back to find her family, calling the little birds out of their hiding place, ready to continue their journey.

Sledging for beginners

Europe

One heavy winter snowfall, a soft, thick white blanket covers the hills, trees and rooftops. Perched high on a sloping hillside is a group of stark black ravens. One brave bird steps forward and peers over the edge.

One … two … three … he leaps off, sliding down on his front.

WEEEEEEEEEE!

Completely covered in feathers and with a hefty bill, the plucky raven rolls over a few times before steadying himself once more. Despite being able to fly, this raven trudges back up to the top on foot and joins the rest of the flock who are waiting for their turn to slide.

Ravens are playful birds, but they are incredibly intelligent too.



It can be difficult for many birds to find food in the winter, but the crafty raven knows what to do. He seeks out a rubbish bin left by humans. He can smell that there is some leftover food inside. With a sharp thrust of his beak, the lid flips up. The rest of the flock join him for the feast.

Ravens living in captivity have been known to solve man-made puzzles that would baffle a dog or a squirrel or indeed almost any other bird. Some captive ravens can even count …

One … two … three … four … five.

You could play a game with a raven, but be warned: ravens are thought to be one of the cleverest species of bird, so they might be able to outsmart you!

Ravens are sociable birds and will often spend their whole life with the same partner. They can live for around thirteen years – that's a long time to spend together! In winter, pairs of ravens join others to roost in large flocks.