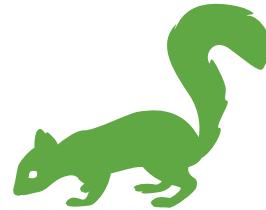


A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

Jackie sat down with a “humph.”

“I don’t think anything lives in these woods,” she thought. “I’ve been walking around for a long time, and I haven’t seen anything except for a couple of squirrels.” Squirrels didn’t really count. She had squirrels in her front yard, and there were squirrels around school. She was supposed to be seeing all kinds of interesting, unusual animals to include in her report for school.



“Pick a place near school or home, and investigate what lives there. Then write a report about all the interesting and unusual things you find.” That was the assignment. Too bad she didn’t live near the pet shop, like Rene Navarro. Then she’d have lots to write about. But no, she had picked this patch of woods behind the playground thinking it would be loaded with animals.

“Now what am I going to do?” she wondered. She closed her eyes to think...

“So, you don’t think anything interesting lives in these woods, huh?” she heard a high-pitched voice ask.

“What was that?” she gasped as she looked around. Sitting next to her, its head poking out from under the leaves, was a small, furry animal with big whiskers and tiny little eyes. It repeated its question.

“You don’t think anything interesting lives in these woods?”

“Well, I didn’t...” she answered. “Who are you?”

“I’m a short-tailed shrew,” he answered. “Everyone calls me S.T. for short. Now, put your finger on my back.”

“What?” she asked, surprised.

“Look, you want to know what lives in these woods, right? So, c’mon. Hurry up!”



Short-Tailed Shrew

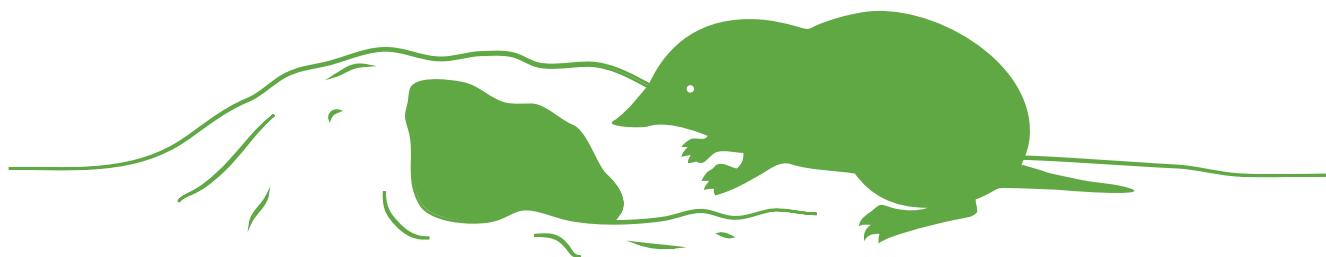
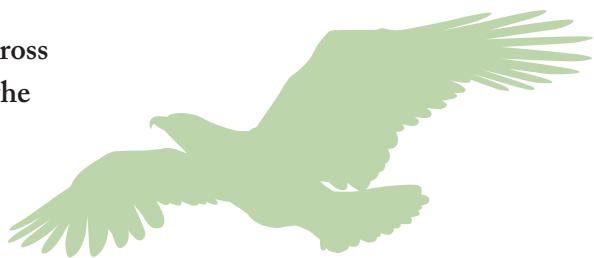
A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

Slowly, Jackie reached out her finger and gently touched him on the back. There was a flash and she found herself standing next to S.T., looking him right in the eye. Then she realized that she was standing on four legs and was covered with fur. She had turned into a shrew! “There, that’s much better,” he said. “Now, follow me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Jackie.

“A lot of creatures around here are pretty upset that you don’t know they even exist. So I’ve been appointed to show you around. Stick close to me so you don’t end up as someone’s lunch!” And with that he turned and dove down into a hole.

As Jackie stood there wondering what to do, she felt a shadow cross her back. She looked up and saw a large bird flapping through the trees. “Uh-oh!” she cried and dove into the hole after S.T.



A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

In the Ground

Jackie had never crawled through the ground before and wasn't sure she liked it. It was dark and damp and smelled like dirt. And there were so many roots everywhere! She saw S.T. just ahead of her in the tunnel and hurried to catch up.



Tiny roots were constantly brushing by her face. She and S.T. had to crawl up, over, and around larger roots. Then all of a sudden, S.T. stopped.

"Hey, everyone! We're here!" he yelled. At first, Jackie could hear and see nothing. Then she noticed a rumbling sound that seemed to be getting louder and louder. Suddenly, heads began popping out of the tunnel wall. There were earthworms, beetles, white grubs, and many other creatures Jackie couldn't identify.

"Do you all live in the ground?" asked Jackie in awe.

"Uh-huh, and lots of others do too," said one particularly fat earthworm.



"But how do you live?" Jackie asked. "I mean... what is there to eat down here?"

"Well, I eat my way through the soil!" replied the earthworm. "I make a tunnel by eating the dirt, then I digest bits of plants and other food from the dirt. It's not for everyone, but I love it!" he ended.

"We suck juices right out of roots," said three white grubs together. "One day we'll become pupae and change into adults. Then we'll crawl up out of the ground and fly around as beetles."



"Did you ever wonder what happens to animals that die in the woods?" interrupted a black beetle, waving its antennae back and forth. "It's thanks to me that they're taken care of."



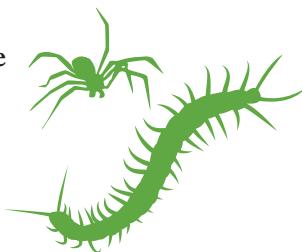
"He means, thanks to all us carrion beetles," said another black beetle.
"We eat them up. Keep the forest clean."

As Jackie thought about all this, S.T. thanked all the soil creatures for coming. Then he turned to Jackie and said, "Follow me. There's still a lot more for you to see."

A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

A Rotten Place to Live

Jackie followed S.T. through the soil for a short distance; then they climbed up to the surface and ran along the ground under the cover of leaves. As they traveled, the leaves crunched and rustled. Jackie could see spiders, centipedes, and other small creatures crawling around. She wanted to stop and talk to them, but S.T. kept moving and she had to keep up with him. Finally, S.T. ran onto the top of a log that was covered with a thick, green carpet of moss.



"Oooh!" cried Jackie. "It's so soft. And look at all the other things growing up here." Jackie ran around on top of the log. She rolled in the soft moss, touching the cool, bright orange fungi that were growing on one end of the log, and sniffing the tops of tall, red-capped lichens as though they were flowers. There was even a tiny tree, only about three inches tall, growing out of the log.

"Want to see the inside?" asked S.T. "OK," answered Jackie, following S.T. back over the end of the log. She waited as he called to someone named Millie. In just a few seconds, a long, dark creature with dozens of legs came crawling out of the end of the log.

"I'm a little too big to go with you on this part of the trip," S.T. told her. "You go with Millie and I'll wait for you here."

Millie reared up and touched Jackie's head with several of her legs. Just as before, there was a flash, and Jackie turned into a millipede just like Millie.



At first, Jackie found it a little difficult to move all her legs in a coordinated way. But once she and Millie got inside the log, she found that rippling along by Millie's side just came naturally.

"In here, it's like a tiny factory," Millie told her. "We have tons of workers who are busy, day and night, breaking this log down into soil. All the nutrients in the wood are getting recycled!"

Everywhere they went there were things chewing, tunneling, and boring through the wood. There were wood roaches, small white termites, and hard-shelled pill bugs that rolled into tight little balls for protection as she and Millie went by. There were also insect-eating hunters: huge, shiny, black beetles with giant jaws and centipedes with venomous fangs.



When they crawled deep inside the log, they saw a salamander resting in a dark damp hole. Jackie had no idea there was so much life inside a decaying log and was really sorry when Millie said it was time to go back.



A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

Life at the Top

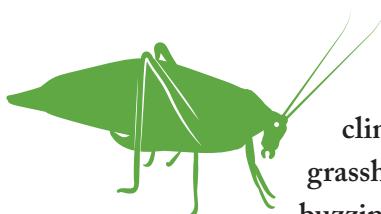


S.T. was waiting for them outside the log and turned Jackie back into a shrew. Soon Jackie and S.T. stopped at the base of a tree. Immediately, a small, black-capped bird came racing headfirst down the trunk toward them, clinging to the bark with its long toes. “I was beginning to wonder whether you were coming,” said the bird. “Hello, Jackie—I’m Sitta. Ever felt like flying?” She stretched one of her wings over Jackie’s head. There was a flash and then Jackie eagerly opened her own wings—she had become a nuthatch just like Sitta.

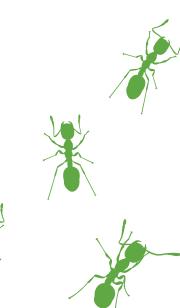
“Let’s go!” cried Sitta, and she leaped into the air and flew off.



Of everything she had done that day, Jackie was sure flying was the best. First they flew up over the trees where Jackie could see many other birds flying in and out of the treetops. Then she and Sitta swooped into the top of one tree and darted in and out among its branches.



Jackie was amazed at all the insects she saw. There were lots of bugs clinging to the undersides of the leaves. “The ones that look like grasshoppers are katydids!” Sitta called to her. There were wasps and flies buzzing around. And there were caterpillars crawling on many of the leaves.



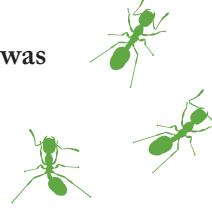
Then Sitta fluttered down and landed on the tree trunk. As Sitta led Jackie down the tree headfirst, Jackie looked closely at the trunk and was amazed at what she saw. There were caterpillars and long lines of ants crawling up the tree. She saw several spiders and a moth that was almost the same color as the bark—in fact, she almost missed it because it was so perfectly camouflaged against the bark. There were also pale greenish lichens and moss growing on the bark. Eventually, she and Sitta reached the bottom of the trunk.



“This tree is like an apartment building or something,” said Jackie as she jumped onto the ground next to S.T. “There are different things living on it all the way from the leaves at the top to the base right here on the forest floor.” Then she added, “I guess I should say right down into the dirt—I shouldn’t forget everyone I met underground earlier!”



“That’s right—the forest is teeming with life!” said Sitta. “Time for me to go. It was nice to meet you!” She flew back into the trees out of sight.



A Forest Adventure with S.T. Shrew

Home Again



S.T. turned Jackie into a shrew again. As Jackie once more followed him through the ground, she wondered where they were going. It was dark and damp in the tunnel, and root hairs were brushing by her face. As they ran along, the smell of dirt filled her nose...

Suddenly, Jackie opened her eyes. She was lying in the woods, with her face resting on top of the leaves. Her nose was filled with the smell of dead leaves and dirt. Slowly, Jackie sat up.

She wondered if she had dreamed the whole thing as she looked around. “There’s a dead log over there like the one I went to with S.T. And the bark of this tree is covered with all kinds of things, just like the one I saw with Sitta,” she said as she stood up. Still, her adventure seemed impossible.

Then Jackie looked at the spot near her where she’d first seen S.T. As she carefully lifted up some of the leaves, she saw it: a small hole in the ground. Jackie laughed out loud.

“Boy, do I have a lot to write about in my report!” she cried. Then she turned and ran all the way home.

