

Runners up: Under 8's

The Escapologist

I was walking along the river bank. The sun was warm on my toes. Mud squelched stickily between them. It had recently rained. Suddenly, I heard a clump clump noise. It sounded strange. Not sure what it was, I dived. A stream of bubbles pop pop popped on the surface behind me. The water felt cold. I kept on swimming until I reached the opposite bank. I slithered out and shook myself dry. I stared towards the noise curiously. Human and mink met. We looked at each other but said nothing. Our kind had met before. Mink had escaped then and I could do it again. I turned away casually and trotted down the river bank.

Maddy of Edinburgh - Age 7

A Beautiful Butterfly and A Hot Sunny Day

One day I saw a marvellous thing and it was a butterfly. It was beautiful and it was so soft and silent and the wings were beautiful. They were identical on each top wing and each bottom wing. The colours were black white and purple and violet and orange and it had two tiny antennae. Then it sat down on a flower and laid an egg. The eggs were so small sometimes you could not see them. But then one day as if by some incredible magic the eggs popped open and teeny caterpillars crawled slowly out onto the furry leaves of the flowers. They were so excited to be alive!

Laylah of Birmingham – Age 6

Runners up: 8-12 years

Frost Bittern

BOOM! BOOM! My deafening calls resounded hollowly around the reedbeds. A cattle egret rose up from its perch and flew off. Alone again. A small fish darted beneath me and as quick as a flash, I scooped it up in my beak. It might have been a minnow but as I gulped it down, I really didn't care. Being a bittern sucked. "I don't even know where I am. Skulking around the reeds all day isn't that interesting. At least there are plenty of fish for me to eat," I thought.

A yelping call overhead brought me out of my sulky daydream. A dark silhouette blotted out the sun. The osprey was on the move. His husky voice made me sit up and listen. "Why do you stay here, young bittern?" I was puzzled. "This is my home. Why? Should I leave?" The osprey chuckled haughtily. "You really don't know? My, my, this must be your first migration."

"My first what? A ...migration? What is that?" Suddenly, my head was buzzing with questions. Could I leave this place? It had never occurred to me but now it all made sense! The osprey interrupted my thoughts, (saying as if it were the most obvious thing in the world). "The water here won't last long. We must all move to new waters."

"What about all the fish?" At this, the osprey scoffed,

"Where we go, there are plenty of fish! The water never dries up. Paradise!"

"Where is this paradise?" I had to ask. The osprey beckoned towards the forest on the horizon, "It is a long journey, over field and sea. I doubt you would be strong enough to undergo such a trip. Maybe next year."

But my mind was set firmly on travelling to the 'Paradise'. As the osprey soared away, I took off after him. In a moment, I was seeing the world from a whole new perspective. I saw the bright lights of the human nests below me. I saw their jam-packed flight paths. I saw the osprey, gliding out in front of me. I tried to call out but my voice was lost among the roar of the humans and their giant birds that don't flap. Soon, the osprey was a mere speck on the horizon...

I was completely lost. Alone again. However, this time there were no fish to eat or any reeds to sleep in. I had passed over the human nests and now all I could see for what seems like forever was a desert. A desolate, hostile desert. At night I dreamt of eels, slipping and sliding through the water like daggers waiting to be eaten. Water...I dreamt of water...the reedbeds and the mudflats...the sandbank and the bog. But for now I was lost. Completely and utterly lost...

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The desert ended. I whooped and trumpeted with glee but still no sign of water. The days grew long and my wings felt as if they're going to drop off but I had to keep on flying in the direction of the osprey.

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The next day, I shared the sky with other birds. The gulls; the cawing, screaming, screeching, squawking, boisterous, bossy, loud and water-dwelling gulls. Oh! My heart skipped a beat. Gulls would never stray far from water! Could it be the paradise I was frantically searching for? A big gull caught a swift breeze and effortlessly drifted over to me. His dark eyes glared at me from their tiny sockets. "Who are you?" it queried bluntly. "A young bittern in search of the paradise. Do you know where it is?" The gull raised its 'eyebrow' at me.

"Paradise! They all say the same thing every year. You bitterns don't get any wiser, do you?" I was shocked. There were other bitterns that came here! "Can you at least direct me to the

paradise?" I asked hopefully. The gull nodded slowly and thrust its wing towards the North. "That's where they all go. Ospreys, egrets, herons...go on then!"

I rushed a thank you and set off again with a new determination tugging at me. A cool breeze chilled me to the core. I had never encountered such cold winds. Soon, I saw the reason... I had been right about gulls never straying far from water. What lay in front of me could only be described as a huge, turquoise sea. A tangy smell wafted through my nose and set the back of my throat on fire. Nevertheless, I hadn't come this far to give up now. I fluttered and flapped for what seemed like miles. A plethora of colourful fish darted about in the crystal clear water. Occasionally, I darted down to snatch some up to eat. I spotted a lone rock jutting out above the waterline. It was freezing but smooth. My wings were frozen and I was frostbitten. Finally, a place to rest. I closed my eyes and fell into a deep sleep...

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It was a clap of thunder that woke me up. That and the torrential rain running down my back. I was soaked. The entire sky was a menacing black and the waves were churning around, as if being stirred around. Lightning forked across the sky, illuminating the darkness vividly. I had to fly away... anywhere the storm couldn't harm me. As I fled, I felt something I have never felt before: fear. I could feel it, pulsing through my veins, pumping around my brain. It was the only thing that kept me flapping. I was fatigued and exhausted but my fear drove me on. The pounding waves smashed against the rock I had been sleeping on only a few moments ago. The sky ahead was getting bleaker by the second so I had to fly. Away. Anywhere.

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I woke to find myself floating on a soft bed of feathers. I was conscious of myself moving slowly along. A network of fields and farmland whizzed past down below me. A kind face looked back at me. "Osprey!" I couldn't believe my eyes. He guffawed heartily and smiled at me. "You're lucky to be alive. I stopped off in Tunisia and heard from some rather unpleasant gulls that you were trying to complete the migration. I flew out into the middle of that massive storm and who should I find spiralling downwards towards the sea. You! I tell you, if I didn't catch fish for a living I would have missed you there."

I was elated. Overcome with emotion, I jumped off the osprey's back and flew beside him. "So, where are we now?" I asked eagerly. "We are in sunny France. The perfect place to stopover for some juicy fish. Right about...there!" On saying this, he folded back his wings, descended down in a moment and plunged into a lake beneath us. He emerged from the myriad of splashes triumphantly carrying a thrashing fish in his beak. I fluttered down into the reedbeds and stalked around seeking eels and minnows.

As darkness descended like a shroud over the world, the osprey flew to roost in the trees while I snuggled down in the brittle reeds for a good night's sleep. I dreamed of the paradise. Infinite miles of reedbeds teeming with eels. Long mudflats with slimy lungfish. Other bitterns calling for me.

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The osprey woke me up by screeching in my ear. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." I scowled at him and walked over to a pool of young elvers. I swallowed my fill and skidded out over the water and I made my ungainly return to the skies. As we flew low over the patchwork of fields and small human roosts, people watched us and pointed, squealing with delight. A large flash dazed me and the osprey swooped underneath me to support me. "They call them cameras. They freeze a part of you in a picture forever." I shuddered at that.

We passed over a massive colony of humans later. It seemed as if all the people in the world had come here. I was scared. Everywhere I looked there seemed to be people. If the humans live all over the land, what about us birds? That niggling thought kept playing around in the back of

my head, trying to break out of the prison in which it was contained in my mind. Huge stone trees rose up from their busy flight paths and we swerved up to avoid them. Roaring beasts of burden carried the flightless humans to and from places. The osprey instinctively steered us as far away from the humans as possible.

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We reached another sea, but this one not as vast as the last one. If I squinted hard against the glare of the sun, I could make out a pale white land. "The white cliffs of Dover. We're nearly there", called the osprey. Subsequently, we reached the other side of the expanse. I fluttered and loop-the-looped with glee! I was over the moon! Never before had I been in such a jovial mood! A short and joyous flight later and we were at the 'paradise'! The osprey showed me the tremendous reedbeds and the acres of flooded fields. Grey Heron prowled the shallows silently while shrieking lapwing tumbled and tore around madly. Elegant swans glided over the water effortlessly while the sky was filled with raucous gulls. The osprey grinned, "I will leave you here. I need deeper, quieter waters to fish in. Moreover, there are too many people nearby. However, I shall return in two seasons to travel back to Africa with you." With that bombshell, he flew off into the sunset.

Meanwhile, I settled down into the reedbeds that would be my new home. It was a busy place, with plovers and redshank arriving every minute while knot and sandpiper flew off to other lakes. I felt a rumble in my stomach and searched for a meal. The osprey had been right about the abundance of fish. I had barely adopted my hunting pose before a plump minnow skittered past. Despite being in a beautiful place with plenty of food and comforts, I still felt a melancholy ache in my chest. The one thing I was missing was the very thing I needed from the start: company. Many birds and waterfowl lived here but none took the time to stop and talk. Lonely, I raised my head skywards and let out the most colossal BOOM! Then, to my utmost delight and rapture, a bittern in the adjacent reedbeds called back...

Kabir of Southall – Age 12

A mystery story

As the glowing sun comes down; as the people start to exit (like fathers leaving for work), tired children start to yawn and jump into their mothers' arms – I am still waiting here, for my beloved mother to come home.

The reason why I am still waiting here is a mystery to everyone. Yet it is heart-breaking for me.

Looking carefully I can see trees blowing like a powerful storm is coming. "Will I ever see home again?"

As I see the flashes of cars go by, I can smell the curry from outside my cage... I can hear the wind strokes and the cage rattle. Yawning tigers, eagles squawking after a long day of prey-catching, whales splashing furiously.

Yet I can never make a sound when I am this lonely.

As I can smell the green, glittery grass and the spring flowers, I can remember sadly where my true home is – I can also smell the blossom trees and my mother's warm nest.

Yet I can never find a smile when I am this lonely.

As I look around for something to do with home, nothing fills my heart with joy and yet I see other birds like me.

Courageously, I stand back as the thrashing lightning and the booming thunder freak everyone out.

Nervously, I know where I am and who I am... mysteries to everyone, but me.

Crystal of London – Age 9

Runners up: 13 years and over

Dr. Dipper

It was one of those days, you know? I mean, we all have them. You're walking to the bus stop in the morning, still not entirely sure whether or not you're awake, goodness knows what books are in your bag, and you'll be phenomenally surprised if you've remembered to pack your lunch. You're cold, tired, miserable, and looking ahead to a day of extreme boredom, wondering vaguely how you are going to survive *this* Maths lesson. No answers come to mind.

Anyway, I wasn't in the best of moods. It was winter, and the mornings were still dark. I live in the country, and, due to the traumatically early time I set off to school, walking alone along the pavement makes you feel like you're the only person alive. There's a dull silence at that time of the year, which creeps around you, and closes you off from reality. You become entirely self-absorbed, following the rambling paths of your thoughts. Come the spring, the dawn chorus lifts you gently into wakefulness, and life seeps into your body. Not now. The dead emptiness fills you with a numb, weary feeling, as though the energetic hustling of routine is just a distant dream.

It's surprising, really, that I noticed him. I was almost oblivious to my surroundings, close to falling asleep, and I placed one foot in front of the other purely by habit. I suppose it was also habit that made me glance to the right when I did. Near my bus stop runs a small beck, and it was my tendency to look at it as I passed, so I could decide on a word to describe it (I have no recollection of the origins of this eccentric custom). On that day, the water shuffled sullenly forwards, as if it, too, were weary. But what really caught my eye, even in the obscuring gloom, was a patch of white.

Maybe you've never seen a dipper. They're not all that common, and I had only ever caught glimpses of the dark, seemingly unimpressive bird, before that morning. But the strange thing was, I knew exactly what he was, even before he bobbed his legs, as if in idiosyncratic introduction.

Then – and here's the slightly embarrassing part (I put it entirely down to unhealthy levels of fatigue) – I found myself bobbing back. Stupid, I know. But strangely fun. You should try it. Maybe you need a dipper to coax you into it, but I swear that a good bit of bobbing can seriously brighten up your day. The dipper stared at me as though I was mad. He had a point.

The next morning, I was in a similar mood. I stumbled to the bus stop in my customary daze, and spent the journey trying to decide whether I'd done my French homework, or if I'd just dreamed that I'd done it. He was waiting for me. I'm not the kind of person to keep a wildlife diary, and after yesterday's spontaneous session of therapeutic bobbing, my dipper had drifted down into the dark and mysterious depths of my mind. So when I saw him, I was pleasantly surprised, and, with the logic of one who is very tired, decided that this second encounter meant I had to name him. And so it was that Dr. Dipper received his shamefully unoriginal name.

I don't know whether this is bias, but I'd say Dr. Dipper was an exceptionally handsome bird. The pitch black around his wings and tail feathers melted into a soft brown, broken by a pure white chest. He had a neat, unassuming stance, and though I never got close enough to see his eyes properly, I like to think they were dark but twinkling. I came to think of him as a comedian, pretending to be deadly sombre, gravely standing there, with the utmost sobriety, before the

whole facade was broken with a quick and comical bob. However dignified the dip was, it was impossible to take the solemn bird at all seriously.

He wasn't there every day – sometimes we'd go a week, maybe two, without seeing each other - but I came to hope he'd be there, and, more often than not, he was. Perhaps it was just because I knew he'd come back, because I knew he'd be standing there one morning, bobbing away, that Dr. Dipper became a good, if unusual, friend of mine. When you see someone every morning, especially in a setting so seemingly barren of human life, they become comfortingly familiar. They set your mood for the day, and Dr. Dipper was no exception.

He came all through the spring, the summer, the autumn. When the early winter arrived, he was still there, even with the light frosts. Then came the snow. Several weeks of deep frosts followed. The beck iced over, and there was no sign of my friend. I lost track of exactly how long it was before everything finally thawed. The brook was temporarily teeming with a rush of melted ice. Then things calmed down. The water level dropped, and the stream was back to its sluggish flow. But no sign of Dr. Dipper. Several weeks went by. I became used to his absence. Maybe he'd come back in the spring.

Spring dawned. The sun returned. Dr. Dipper didn't. I stopped looking into the beck, and my daily trudges to the bus stop slipped back into their old monotony. I knew he'd not come back. It was a hard winter.

Katriana of Lancaster – Age 16

Go Wild – Wasp

I agree. I'm a nasty, vicious creature that doesn't deserve a place in this world. I'll inevitably go to hell and inevitably end up in a pit of steaming lava. But the thing is I'm not doing it intentionally. I don't mean to inject poison into your bloodstream. I just don't want you to inject fear and terror into mine. When you scare me the only option left is to scare you. Otherwise, you waft and scream and then kill. I don't have a rolled up magazine or a glass prison to murder and punish. I'm afraid all I have is the penetrating poison pointing like a needle out of my back end. If I don't attack and defend, my life would be over before it's even started.

What would you do if you were ten, twenty, thirty-thousand times smaller than a murderer? It's like a human standing below an erupting volcano. You can feel the anger beforehand bubbling then steaming then it attacks. The only advantage I have is that I own two strong, translucent and fragile machines attached to one of my horizontal stripes. They might look stupid and dangerous to you, but for me they save my life.

However, one Saturday, as the morning mist gently drifted upwards and carefully sculpted into a layer of whiteness against the blue backdrop, that horrendous journey repeated again. I was humming softly to myself, making a faint buzz, whilst calmly searching for an insect burger or a leaf and herb sausage. Soon enough, I saw something. But as usual I made the wrong decision. All I can recall seeing was the sweet flavoured double cream sitting daintily on top of a crunchy cone. I edged closer, watching the strawberry sauce slide onto the pavement. Then it was the flake's turn. It slid steadily through the ice cream and landed powerfully on the ground. I zoomed downwards, weaving in and out of lamp posts, shop signs, walls and landed on the flake with a contented buzz just before the mother's manicured hand. However, no sooner had I taken a lick

at the strawberry heaven, my bottom had been heaved out of her flesh and I was plonked down hard on the paving stones.

I'm now covered in scars and bruises and have once again nearly killed myself. Although, I have to say the only other option is starvation. I was revived by that enticing lick of entrancing sweetness and I will now be able to last until tomorrow's breakfast so long as I don't get greedy.

Amy of Skipton – Age 13