THE MOORWITCH

A story developed and inspired with children from Castle Carrock Primary School as part of RSPB Geltsdale’s Explore Moor Project
The aim of this project with Castle Carrock Primary School was to raise awareness within the local community of England’s rarest breeding bird of prey, the hen harrier, and the challenges associated with its conservation.

When the project began, the children knew nothing of these birds, but through a series of sessions and visits to the RSPB Geltsdale Reserve and the Langholm Demonstration Project, their knowledge and enthusiasm for the birds grew.

Their creativity and ideas inspired this story and the illustrations. We hope you enjoy reading it!

Julie Willenbruch, RSPB Community Outreach Officer, September 2011
THE MOORWITCH

Photo courtesy of Schooldays Photography

Castle Carrock Primary School 2011

Story by Malcolm Green
Illustrated by Barry Robson
with inspiration from Class 3 Castle Carrock Primary School
The Moorwitch was not happy. She scowled into the damp moss. Every spring she sang the birds back to the moor. The curlews, the peewits, the plovers and the sandpipers, coming from the estuaries and marshes and the far off coasts of Africa. But in recent years one sky-dancer had been missing … the hen harrier. He was a bird of prey and some people didn’t like that. This April, one had arrived and she knew she would have to use all her wits to make sure he stayed. A plan stirred inside her.

Tom stared out of the classroom window and longed to be out on the moor. He was terrified he was going to be asked to stand up and speak in class. He knew his voice would tremble; he never seemed to be able to get his words out in the way he wanted. His school report called him shy, a daydreamer. And as for exams, he was a disaster.

On the moors, nobody asked him to speak except his dog, Wolf, and they had a way of speaking to each other that didn’t need words.

And today, something strange was happening; there was an eerie light coming from the moors that seemed to be calling him.

The school bell went; he grabbed his coat and ran outside.
He ran past the coaches and the cars with all the children piling in to travel to their distant homes. But Tom hurtled along the track round the back of the village to the small bungalow where he lived with his grandparents. He shouted that he was back and whistled for Wolf, who jumped up and licked his face.

'Come on, come on, let’s go' he said and the dog needed no encouraging, bounding off in front of him up the small moorland track.

As she heard him go, his grandmother smiled and shook her head. 'Do you think you should go with him, John?' 'Ach, he'll be fine', replied his grandfather; 'That’s the way he likes it, just him and his dog.'

Tom jumped over the tussocks of grass, grabbed a stick and threw it for Wolf, who caught it in mid-air and tore round and round in excitement. It was early Spring. A curlew bubbled overhead. 'Go catch it', he joked as the dog barked into the air. He could speak to Wolf without stammering. Tom was fourteen and already knew most of the birds.
They walked up high, forgetting time. At first he didn't notice the clouds gathering in the west. It was a common enough sight. But today they came in a great rush like they were in a hurry. 'Hey, look at that', Tom said to Wolf. 'We'll soon be smothered'.

And sure enough it wasn't long before both Tom and Wolf found themselves in a thick mist and couldn't see a thing. Tom wrapped his jacket around him and kept walking on. He knew that all he had to do was head downhill and he would get home so he wasn't bothered. At least not at first ... but gradually he found himself feeling more and more disorientated. Then, he realised he hadn't a clue where he was.

Wolf was whining and urging him to go in one direction and he was sure it was another. Suddenly he felt very scared. He started to shake inside. Something was happening that he didn't understand. He tried to run, following Wolf and then he tripped and fell. He wasn't dressed for a night on the moor. He couldn't move; all he could see was a peat hag, a strange mossy mound, in front of him, with Wolf next to it wagging his tail. What was going on?

The Moorwitch watched from the mossy mound that she was. He had walked right into the trap she had set. She had been watching him for weeks. He was different from the others. It was the way he moved: like an animal, always alert. He would help her to protect the hen harrier, her fine moorland sky-dancer.

She started to hum, in a very low voice at first ... a mesmeric kind of hum with a pulsing beat. She urged the sound toward him. She knew it would work. He was a sensitive soul. It would put the harrier dance in him.
This was the song she used to call the birds back to the moors.

Tom lay there shaking. And then he felt it, a sound but not a sound, more a kind of vibration that was entering into the pores of his body. He knew it had something to do with that mossy mound but he hadn’t a clue what. At first he resisted, tried to push it away but then he looked at Wolf contentedly wagging his tail and he felt oddly safe. He allowed the sound to enter him and slowly the terrible fear that had been with him just minutes before began to lift. His heavy damp body started to feel light. It was like there was an electric current running through it. His arms started to move and then his legs and then his whole body. It felt like he was rising off the moor. It was slow at first, just gentle movements like the breeze but then it became more and more intense, He felt as if he was about to fly. He glanced across at the peat hag. He was sure he could see a shape, something moving, looking at him but then it was gone and he was away …

Taken away by his body … twisting and turning, whirling round and round. Arms out like a bird, legs running, jumping, skipping … dipping and rising over the moor … If he wasn’t a fourteen year old boy from a Cumbrian village, he might have said he was dancing … Sky-dancing!
The Moorwitch looked on, motionless. She could tell he had seen her and she wanted to join him, show him who she was but she knew that would ruin everything. The dog knew but he would never tell. There was a pact of silence between them. She hummed until she knew it had entered him … the dance of the hen harrier … and then slowly she let him down.

Tom had no idea how long he had flown for, or even if he really had. But lightly he felt his feet touch the earth. He looked around him; Wolf was curled up by his feet. The mist was still there, then, gliding out of it he saw a bird, a blue-grey bird, with a long tail and a white patch on its rump. It flew over his head and was quickly swallowed up by the mist again. That was the way home. He knew he had to follow it.

Tom and Wolf ran back together in silence; their hearts beating fast. Tom knew that he had just been in the presence of a powerful force: firstly the eerie light coming into the classroom, then the mist and then the pulse that had made him dance. He also knew it had something to do with that strange mossy being on the moor … He had no idea why it had happened? But he was sure this wasn’t the end of it. The questions kept coming, ‘what was it all for, and what would happen next?’
It was almost dark, when they got home.

'We were about to send a search party out for you', said his grandmother.

'I wouldn’t let her', said his grandfather, 'I knew you would be back soon. Wolf would never let you get into trouble. So where have you been?'

Tom couldn’t tell his grandparents about the mound of moss, the strange noise and the ‘flying’. He thought they would laugh at him. But in his hesitant voice, he did tell them about getting lost in the mist and the bird that showed them the way home.

'Never seen one before. It were grey', he stammered, 'with a slender body about the size of a large seagull and seemed to dance in the sky.'

'Sounds like a Blue Gled, or at least that’s what we called them', said his grandfather. 'Used to be more of them when I were a lad but folks took against them … called them vermin because they preyed on game-birds and now there’s precious few of them around. You were lucky to see one.'
Tom went through all the books in the library and found the 'Blue Gled' and saw that it was another name for a hen harrier. He found out all he could about it. He glimpsed the same one again the following day. Then a few days later he saw the brown one, which he knew was his mate. He felt they were his birds, and started to go up on the moors simply to be near them. They seemed unbothered by his presence. Like with Wolf, he felt he could talk to them without words.

But there was another thing. On several occasions he saw a strange man wandering around the moors, constantly looking at the birds and checking the ground. There was something about him that worried Tom.

Then one day he saw the harriers dancing wildly in the sky and Wolf bolted off into the distance over a hillock. Tom couldn’t see him but could hear him barking and growling. He mounted the rise and saw his dog, hackles up, pulling at the trouser leg of a man. Tom had never seen Wolf attack a person before.
He sprinted over, shouting for him to stop.

Then he saw it, nestled in the heather, a nest with four white eggs. One smashed and the man with eggshell and yolk on the bottom of his foot. It was the same man.

‘Get your dog off me’, he shouted.

Tom looked at the nest and up at the man, then looking straight into his face, he said without a tremor; ‘And you get off that nest.’

He called Wolf to let go and the man turned and walked away muttering words about vermin and he would be back.

Tom cleaned away the remains of the broken egg and whistled to Wolf. ‘We had better let her back on to sit, or they will get cold’, he said, as he and his dog started for the village again. Then something very odd happened.

The grey harrier followed him, soaring and dancing in the sky above his head. By the time they entered the village, it was doing somersaults and cartwheels.
It was a sunny Sunday and there were many people sitting outside eating their lunch when Tom arrived. Tom could see his grandparents amongst them. The harrier swooped low and up again. Tom couldn’t help himself, he had a flash of an image of that shape in the peat hag and the same electric current started to flow through him. He felt his feet becoming light, just as they had done that time on the moor. He started to move, at first his arms, then his legs and then his whole body. And all of a sudden they were … him and the harrier twisting and turning in the middle of the street in front of the pub.

Some people were from the village and knew Tom. Others were strangers out for a Sunday lunch. They all stopped and stared in amazement. What they saw was like nothing else. A light grey bird of prey, spiralling from high out of the sky and diving rapidly over and around the boy as he jumped, somersaulted and spun in time with its movements. With each move the bird plummeted ever closer to the hard tarmac, daring the boy to leap and spin over and round it in closer precision. It was a transfixed, breathtaking display.
Some looked at Tom and glanced over at his grandparents. What had happened to this shy boy of few words who always went off on his own, and what was this bird?

‘It’s a hen harrier’ his grandfather suddenly blurted out ‘They are a rare bird, my boy knows all about them, he looks after them.’ When the episode had started he had been ashamed and had almost run out and grabbed his grandson, now he was brimming with pride as he spoke. But he really couldn’t explain the dance.

Then slowly it subsided, the mesmeric energy that had entered in through his feet and skin flowed back onto the moors. Tom looked around and the bird was gone. He found himself standing in the middle of the street facing a great crowd of people on their feet applauding deliriously. Cars had stopped and people hung their heads out of the windows.

One woman shouted out, ‘What’s going on? Is it a party?’

And then Tom looked directly at them. The chatter stopped and he began to speak in a way he had never spoken before, his voice clear and unruffled. ‘It was a man’ he started, ‘a stranger, he was trying to smash their eggs …’ And so the story flew out of him to ears that were keen to hear.
People were moved. A committee was set up in the village. They formed a group to protect the hen harriers. Tom’s grandfather, the old countryman, was the advisor. And Tom, well, he was made the keeper of the moor, with the special role of looking after the birds.

As years went by he started feeding the harriers so that they didn’t hunt the grouse chicks to feed their young. Tom watched and he noticed that people started to leave the harriers alone and to appreciate them for their graceful beauty. Both grouse hunters and walkers would nod at him and say, ‘Good job, Tom.’ He would reply by saying, ‘Don’t thank me, thank her’ and point to a strange mound on the moor.

Tom would often be seen walking around the peat hag, talking apparently into thin air. People, who knew him, would ask him, what he was doing there. He would smile and say ‘I’m just thanking the old Moorwitch, I owe my whole job and life to her.’ And funnily enough he believed it.
Children from Castle Carrock Primary School performing a hen harrier sky-dance at the RSPB Geltsdale Nature Reserve.

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Tom and his dog, Wolf, think they are going for their usual walk on the moors but the Moorwitch has other ideas, as she hatches a plan to help save her beloved hen harriers.