G E C K O S!

BOO AT THE ZOO
THE REAL WOLVERINE
“SPOOKY” ANIMALS

October 2020
I’m the biggest and strongest!
FRONT COVER: With its head and tail raised, this baby bent-toed gecko is on the alert. Now turn to page 6 to discover what makes geckos so great.

PHOTO BY R. VALENTIC/NPL/MINDEN PICTURES

BACK COVER: This Eurasian red squirrel has it made in the shade! An oak branch full of acorns creates an ideal outdoor café.

PHOTO BY CYRIL RUOSO/BIOSPHOTO

PAGES 2–3: Two lappet-faced vultures challenge each other in a bragging contest. Maybe they’re both winners!

PHOTO BY SAVERIO GATTO/BIOSPHOTO

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Last February, we told you about our “Top of the World” contest, inspired by the Arctic travels of photographer Esther Horvath. We wanted to know the first thing you’d do if you could visit the North Pole. We enjoyed reading about your imaginative Arctic adventures—and seeing your awesome artwork, too! Here are just a few of the winning drawings.

I’d want to observe and sketch the animals around me at the North Pole, such as polar bears, narwhals, and seals.
Elena M.-S. (age 10)
Minnesota

I’d like to see the northern lights because I’ve seen them only in pictures. I would also want to float on a chunk of ice and have an orca jump over me!
Esther L. (age 11)
Washington

The first thing I’d do is search for polar bears on a dog sled.
Hosanna E. (age 7), Ohio

If I visited the North Pole, I’d like to observe polar bears. I’ve always wanted to see them in their natural habitat instead of a zoo. I’d watch them through my binoculars.
Nicole Z. (age 10), California

At the North Pole, I would help a scientist attach a satellite tracking collar to a polar bear. We’d have to do it quickly since we’d have only a few minutes until the bear wakes up!
Joseph D. (age 13)
Indiana

Ranger Rick’s Top of the World CONTEST
Ranger Rick's Rangers: Learn more about the contest and see all our contest winners' drawings at rangerrick.org/NorthPole.

—R.R.
Many kinds of geckos have talented toes—they help the lizards climb without falling. Here’s how: On the bottom of a gecko’s toes are small flaps (above right). And on these flaps are thousands of brush-like hairs. The hairs help the gecko stick on when it walks. A gecko can even walk on ceilings or walls without falling off, as this tokay gecko is demonstrating. Ta-da!
Geckos are quick. But a hungry enemy may be quicker. In that case, many geckos, such as this Mediterranean house gecko, have a tricky trick. If an enemy tries to grab it, the gecko drops its tail. Then the tail begins to wiggle, even though it’s not attached to the gecko’s body! The moving tail may distract the enemy while the gecko makes its getaway.
3 SOME CAN FLY (KIND OF).
In its forest home, this Kuhl’s (KOOLZ) flying gecko soars from tree to tree. It isn’t actually flying, though. Along its body, legs, toes, and tail are special skin flaps. When the gecko takes off, it spreads out the flaps. This lets it glide through the air, the same way a flying squirrel does. For escaping an enemy or just getting around, flaps do the job!

4 THEY WON’T WINK AT YOU.
Geckos have great eyesight, especially at night. And since many gecko species are most active at night, that’s a good thing. They can even see colors in the dark. Most geckos have see-through scales over their eyes instead of eyelids. That means they can’t blink to keep their eyes moist or clean. Instead, a gecko just swipes its “windshield-wiper” tongue across its eyes, and it’s good to go!
Whether hunting for prey or hiding from enemies, most geckos have ways of blending in with their surroundings. They may do this with colors and markings, or even with their body shapes. Can you find the giant leaf-tailed gecko hiding at right? It matches so perfectly with the tree trunk that it looks as if it could be made of bark!

The leaf-tailed gecko below has an even trickier disguise. Its body looks just like a dead, twisted leaf. It may even spend the day hanging from a branch just to complete its disguise. Unbeleafable!
Look out! By opening its mouth wide and making a barking sound, this startled gecko is giving a warning to stay away. Though most lizards are pretty quiet, geckos can be very chatty! In addition to barking, they may chirp, click, grunt, squeak, or even growl. Geckos make noises for different reasons, but most often they sound off to attract a mate, warn other geckos away from their territory, or scare off a predator.

Lucky geckos—they have self-cleaning skin! Here's how it works: A gecko's skin is covered with tiny, rounded scales. They give the lizard a beaded look, as you can see on this giant day gecko. Some geckos have larger, bumpy scales as well. On top of a gecko's scales are microscopic, hair-like spines. They're so tiny that thousands of them together would be the thickness of just one human hair! These spines trap water droplets from rain, dew, or mist. The droplets then join together, picking up things such as dirt, pollen, and dust as they do. When the droplets get big enough, they roll off the gecko's skin, leaving it clean and dry. Don't you wish you had self-cleaning skin?
In many places in the world, a gecko is a symbol of good fortune. Some people don’t even mind when they come into their houses. The house gecko above right is hunting for bugs attracted to a porch light. And the mourning gecko above left has made it inside and is walking on a keyboard!

They may be good luck. They may—geckos sure are full of surprises!
Orangutan S.O.S.

Orangutans and breakfast cereal. How could the two possibly be connected?

By a kind of oil made from the fruits of palm trees!

Palm oil is used in thousands of everyday products, from toothpaste to margarine to cereal. Sadly, people have cut down thousands of acres of tropical rainforests to make way for huge plantations (farms) of palm oil trees. This destroys habitat for many creatures, including the endangered orangutan—a large ape.

Two sisters in England, Asha (12) and Jia (10) Kirkpatrick, watched a news show about this threat to orangutans. They found out that a large cereal company still uses palm oil from the plantations that destroyed rainforests. The girls started an online petition asking the company to stop doing business with these plantations.

They got over 805,000 signatures! The company heard about the petition and decided to act. The company promised that, by 2025, it will buy 100% of its palm oil from suppliers that do not harm the environment. Victory for the orangutans!

Brainy Critters

It may not be fluffy or able to fetch, but a squid has brains that might match a dog’s. For the first time, scientists took pictures of the inside of a squid’s brain. To do so, they used a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine. The pictures showed lots of pathways and complex connections.

The pathways and connections were between nerve cells called neurons (NOOR-onz). These cells send messages to each other that tell the body to move, breathe, feel—pretty much everything the animal does.

Some squids and their close cousins, octopuses, have more than 500 million neurons in their brains. That’s the same as in a dog’s brain. In comparison, a rat has only about 200 million.

What do squids do with all that brain power? They have been known to count and to solve problems. They also can change color to match their surroundings, even though they are color-blind. Scientists are studying these MRI pictures to discover how they do that.
People fixing up an old church in Panama, a country in Central America, made an amazing discovery: bee mummies! Bee nests, bees, and pollen had been preserved for 150 years behind gold paint and gold leaf (gold that has been hammered into a very thin layer). The nests belonged to female orchid bees, which usually live in the rainforest and can be hard to find. Scientists at the Smithsonian Institution studied the pollen. They were able to find out what kinds of plants lived in the area in the 1870s. Over the years, as more people moved in and more buildings were built, the types of plants and animals in the area changed. It was like discovering an insect time capsule!

We at *Ranger Rick* already knew amphibians were amazing. After all, these animals, which include frogs, salamanders, and newts, can breathe through their skin! Now, scientists have discovered another astounding skin trick: Most—maybe even all—amphibians glow in fluorescent colors! The colors are invisible to the human eye. But when you shine blue light on an amphibian's skin and view it through special goggles, the creature glows with a green (sometimes yellow or orange) light.

This is called *biofluorescence* (bye-oh-floor-ESS-unts). Scientists shined blue light on every amphibian in Chicago's Shedd Aquarium—and every single one glowed. Biofluorescence has been studied most often in fish and other underwater animals. No one is sure why amphibians glow, but scientists think it might be a way they talk to each other. Imagine saying “hi” to your buddy by glowing green!
Even after Halloween has come and gone, the fun isn’t done. At many zoos around the world, leftover pumpkins entertain all kinds of hungry, bored, or just-plain-curious creatures.

Big animals like to smash and eat pumpkins. Burrowing animals enjoy crawling in and out of them. And all kinds of animals love to search for treats hidden in them. Check out the lion above, pretending those pumpkins are prey. If there’s some meat stuffed inside, all the better!

It’s all part of the Halloween fun at the zoo. Take a look!
Hmmm, there's something fishy about this pumpkin.

Your shell isn't nearly as tough as my shell!
Who’s taller now?

Water polo, anyone?
Rangers: Want to join the fun? After Halloween, put some bird seed or peanuts inside your jack-o’-lantern and set it outside for the birds and squirrels. Or turn the page to find out how to make a pumpkin planter.

—R.R.
MAKE A PUMPKIN PLANTER

BY MICHELE REYZER

This Halloween, turn a pumpkin into a festive jack-o'-lantern!

WHAT YOU NEED
- pumpkin
- pen or marker
- pumpkin carving tool or knife
- potting soil
- mosses, grasses, or any other plants

WHAT YOU DO

1. Cut open the top of the pumpkin and scoop out the “guts.”

2. Draw a face on the pumpkin, then carve out the shapes. (Ask an adult for help.)

3. Fill the pumpkin with soil.

4. Arrange the plants in the pumpkin. Place some in the mouth, nose, and/or eyes. Put tall grass in the top of the pumpkin to create “hair.”

5. Enjoy your gourd-geous creation! 🎃
WANT TO JOIN THE FUN? Send your favorite nature riddle with your full name and address to Reader Riddles; Ranger Rick; 11100 Wildlife Center Dr.; Reston, VA 20190-5362; E-mail: rick@nwf.org. We like reading all the riddles from our readers. We’re sorry, but there’s room to print only some of them. All submissions become the property of the National Wildlife Federation.


What did the spider say to the moth in its web? “Stick around for dinner!”

What do you get when you cross a spider with an ear of corn? Cobwebs.

What do you call spiders that just got married? Newly-webs.

How do spiders decide what’s for dinner? They search the web.

What kind of spiders live in outer space? Star-antulas.
Why do some trees drop their leaves in the fall?

Rebecca H., Washington D.C.

In summer, many leafy trees lose a lot of water through their leaves. Water passes from the leaves into the air. But that’s OK! A tree just gets more water from the ground. In winter, though, the ground is often frozen or dry. If the leaves stayed on, the tree would lose water with no way to get more. And the leaves might freeze and die anyway. So the shorter days of fall tell a tree to shed its leaves, and the tree goes into a sort of “hibernation.”

Do Komodo dragons attack and kill people?

Jeremiah R., Pennsylvania

Komodo dragons—the world’s largest lizards—live only on a few islands in Southeast Asia. These reptiles have razor-sharp teeth and a venomous bite, and they can grow to be nearly 10 feet long. So, if a dragon wanted to kill a human, it probably could.

The good news is that most Komodo dragons stay as far away from people as they can. The bad news is that the number of people on the islands where dragons live is increasing. That means there’s a better chance of a dragon meeting up with a person. It also means there are fewer of the wild places—and natural prey—that Komodo dragons need. So you don’t need to be afraid of dragons. But they just might be afraid of you!

Do scarecrows really scare crows away?

LeUyen P., California

Not for long! When it’s first put out, a scarecrow may frighten off most crows. But within a week the birds probably will have gotten used to it.
Scarecrows that have loose sleeves or metallic streamers that flutter in the breeze might keep the birds away longer. People have tried using a gigantic metal scarecrow with swinging arms and a swaying body. But even that didn’t keep the birds away forever. Crows are just too smart to be fooled for long!

**Do wolves really howl at the moon?**  Penelope P., Texas

No, they don’t. When wolves howl, they point their snouts up. People long ago saw this and thought the wolves were howling at the moon. Some people still believe this today.

In fact, wolves howl during the day as well as on nights when the moon isn’t visible. And their howling has a purpose. A wolf pack hunts over a large area. By howling, pack members can keep track of each other—and also warn rival wolf packs to stay away.

**Can cats really survive falling from high windows or tall trees?**  Lauren F., Florida

Yes, they often can. A cat quickly rights itself as it falls, which means it can land on all four feet. And when falling from a 10- or 20-story building, the cat relaxes and spreads its legs out. That slows it down and helps soften the blow of its landing. So it may be injured, but it usually survives.

Where did cats learn this trick? They’ve had this talent a long time: Their wild ancestors spent a lot of time climbing trees—and sometimes falling out of them.

Still, your cat COULD be badly hurt in a fall. So keep it off high balconies—and be sure you have strong screens on any open windows. 🐱
THE SUPERHERO WOLVERINE in the X-Men movies fights bad guys with sharp claws, a muscular body, and a ferocious attitude. The REAL wolverine has all that and more, making it one of the toughest mammals in the world.

See those big paws? They are like built-in snowshoes that help the wolverine walk on top of the snow. And that thick fur protects it from extremely cold temperatures. You can glimpse some of its teeth here, too—but more on those later! Turn the page to find out about other wolverine superpowers.
These cold-climate creatures are true survivors. But a warming planet may put them at risk.

by Anne Cissel
A wolverine’s sharp claws help it tear up meat and climb up trees.

**STRONG AND FAST**

Wolverines live in some of the coldest places on Earth, such as northern Canada and Alaska. (See map on page 23.) They are the largest land-based members of the weasel family, which also includes otters and badgers.

A wolverine is as big as a medium-sized dog but is much stronger than the average pooch. Take a look at its powerful body. Its shoulders, neck, and jaws are super-strong. Its legs are built for long-distance travel: A wolverine has been known to trek more than 50 miles a day, and its territory can be more than 1,200 square miles (two-thirds the size of Rhode Island).
Peek-a-boo! Wolverines dig in deep snow to make their dens, which serve as nurseries, food pantries, and bedrooms.

One of the wolverine’s nicknames is “skunk bear.” You can see here why people think it looks like a bear. The “skunk” part is because its scent glands can give off a strong odor.

Snowy Shelter

Wolverine babies (kits) arrive in winter. Before her kits are born, a mother must find or build a den to protect them. Cold temperatures are always a threat, and hungry predators, such as wolves and mountain lions, could be nearby. Often, wolverines dig snow caves with a complex tunnel system that includes a few “rooms.” Under a blanket of deep snow, the temperature can stay pretty toasty! But sometimes they den under fallen trees or in dens abandoned by other animals.
**Suppertime**

To fill its belly, a wolverine will often eat carrion, or already-dead prey. Its strong sense of smell helps it sniff out dead animals far away or deep beneath the snow.

Wolverines can also be fierce hunters and can take down animals much bigger than themselves—even caribou and moose! But they also go after small mammals, such as rodents and hares. Wolverines do not hibernate, so they are constantly on the move, looking for their next meals.

**A Closer Look**

Scientists are eager to learn more about these amazing animals. Recently, scientists from The Wildlife Conservation Society studied one group of wolverines on Alaska’s arctic coast. They captured them and gave them health checks. They then placed electronic tracking collars around the wolverines’ necks. The collars let the scientists know where the wolverines go.

The scientists also used small, low-flying planes to follow wolverine tracks. They found out that wolverines were following caribou for long distances—in one case for nearly 40 miles without stopping. Once the caribou became tired, the wolverines could overcome their prey. But sometimes these fearsome hunters have a little time to goof off. As scientists watched, one wolverine slid on its belly down a snowy hillside over and over. The scientists think it was just having fun!

The study showed that wolverines really need lots of snow to survive. They use it to shelter their kits, to store food, and to dig out resting places.
Once the health check is finished, the scientists attach a special collar to the wolverine and set it free. The collar will track the wolverine wherever it goes.

A warming planet may hurt wolverines by reducing the amount of snow that falls in their habitat. People also hunt wolverines for sport and for their fur. As tough as they are, wolverines might still need people’s help to survive.
Ranger Rick, Scarlett, and Boomer have just arrived at Stony Stream in Deep Green Wood. I can’t believe this mess! It hasn’t even been that long since we picked up trash here the last time.

Good thing we brought plenty of trash bags. I’ll say!

Bottles, cups, cans, plastic bags…

I feel bad for all the animals that live in the stream or get food or water here.

Wind blows it from that big parking lot nearby. And rain washes it down, too.

Even worse, rain washes oil and other chemicals we can’t see off the land and into the stream.

I’m going to take some pictures before we clean it all up.

SO MANY plastic bags.

People can be so careless!

Yuck!

Maybe if we show people your photos, they’ll stop dumping all this stuff that ends up in the stream.

A little while later...

We’ve done some good work! Let’s just go a little farther before we finish for the day.

Hey, I see people ahead.

Save Our Stream

I feel bad for all the animals that live in the stream or get food or water here.
Wait a minute, let’s watch and see.

Hmmm, now they’ve taken something back out of the water.

They have a big trash bag. And they’re putting something IN the stream!

Looks like a whole family.

What are they doing?

I bet they’re dumping trash. Grrr, I’m gonna get this on camera.

We’ll catch them in the act!

Wait a minute, let’s watch and see.

Hmmmm, now they’ve taken something back out of the water.

If we get closer, we can hear what they’re saying.

OK, we got our pH and dissolved oxygen measurement.

What else do we need?

Is it time to sample the macroinvertebrates?

Sample the WHAT?

Those are the insects, worms, and other tiny things that live in water. Finding—or not finding—certain kinds can tell you how healthy a stream is.
What are they doing now?  

Got our Stream Selfie!  

And now they're picking up trash just like we are!  

Not dumping it after all.  

What are they doing now?  

Ha! They're taking a picture of themselves!  

Boomer, can you get a photo of them, too?  

Right, we should share this good work!  

And I'm gonna let my Rangers know how THEY can help check up on streams!  

Got it!  

Oh, I get it! These people are giving Stony Stream a checkup!  

Ranger Rick’s Field Notes  

Streams are important habitats. When streams are unhealthy, so are the plants and animals that live in—and depend on—them.  

Trash and pollution affect the health of a stream. Oil and salt run off roads and parking lots when it rains. Fertilizers and pesticides come from lawns and farm fields. It all washes into waterways.  

Regularly checking on a stream’s health is a way to keep track of changes and problems that might need to be fixed. It’s called “stream monitoring.”  

There are many ways to get involved. Have an adult visit iwla.org and click on “clean water,” then “stream monitoring” to find out how your family can help. Start by taking a Stream Selfie with your favorite stream!
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Picture this: You’re walking in the dark through a strange, spooky house. Suddenly something brushes against your arm. Aaaaggh! Is it a ghost? A vampire? A zombie? Then you flip on a light. In the now-bright room, you see it was just a fluttering curtain. Now that you know, the house doesn’t seem scary at all.

Certain animals are like that spooky house. They may give you a creepy feeling at first. But once you “turn on the light” and get to know more about them, you might not find them scary at all. In fact, you may decide some of them are downright lovable!

Yes, rats can be pests. And no, you shouldn’t befriend one you find in the street. But these rodents are smart, and tame ones make good pets. If you really want to get a warm and fuzzy feeling about rats, think about this: They are ticklish! Scientists have found that when rats are nice and relaxed, they love a good belly tickle. And while they’re being tickled, rats let out happy, super-high-pitched squeaking sounds—rodent giggles! Tee-hee!
There’s a lot to love about bats. Many kinds spread pollen from plant to plant, which helps make fruits and seeds. Other bats devour lots of insect pests.

And then there are vampire bats. These bats are small, but there’s no denying that they have something in common with Count Dracula. They eat nothing but blood! Vampire bats bite cattle or other large, grazing animals, then lap up the blood that oozes out. But they never take enough blood to hurt the animals they feed on.

And there’s a sweet side to these little bats. When a vampire bat mother dies or is unable to care for her baby, another mama bat may take in the orphaned baby as her own. That’s rare among wild animals. And among bats, it’s one of a kind!
If you read fairy tales, you might think that wolves are just about the most dangerous animals out there. But, unless you’re Little Red Riding Hood, these beautiful creatures are almost certainly no threat to you at all. Wolves are shy and avoid people. Even in places where both live, most people never catch a glimpse of a wolf.

More than 100 years ago, people killed so many wolves that the animals nearly disappeared from most of the United States. Wolves are starting to come back, but there aren’t nearly as many as there used to be. So we shouldn’t be scared of them. But they have good reason to be scared of us!

More than 100 years ago, people killed so many wolves that the animals nearly disappeared from most of the United States. Wolves are starting to come back, but there aren’t nearly as many as there used to be. So we shouldn’t be scared of them. But they have good reason to be scared of us!

A few years ago, scientists found that people are more scared of spiders than of any other animals. In fact, *arachnophobia* (uh-rak-nuh-FOH-bee-uh)—the fear of spiders—is so common that there was a movie made about it. (Ask your parents!) But, as with sharks, there really isn’t much to fear about spiders. Most spiders can’t even pierce a person’s skin with their tiny fangs. Even the few spiders with dangerous bites—such as the black widow and the brown recluse—are shy and would rather leave people alone.

And if you’re not a fan of mosquitoes, house flies, or other insect pests, remember this: Spiders eat lots of the insects that bug us. So the next time you see a spider in your house or yard, don’t scream or squish it. Say, “Thanks!”
In books and movies, these big, black birds are often portrayed as tricky—or even evil. And if you look up at a bare tree in winter and see a flock of crows silhouetted against the sky, you might think they look spooky. But corvids—crows, ravens, and their cousins—are harmless to people. And they’re among the smartest birds on Earth. Some of them even use tools to get at hard-to-reach food!

Here’s something that might make you say “Aw!” about these caw-some animals. Unlike most birds, young crows often stay with their parents for a year or even longer. Even once they’re able to find food on their own, they help Mom and Dad care for their next batch of babies. So when you see a crow circling in the sky, remember that it isn’t looking for trouble. It just might be looking out for its little brothers and sisters!

If there’s an animal YOU find scary, find out as much as you can about it. You just might learn that there’s really nothing to fear! 😊
These kids are trying out the snake kites they made. Follow their kite strings to answer these questions.

1. Whose kite is flying the highest?
2. Whose kite crashed?
3. Who is flying the rattlesnake kite?

Brianna
Julio
To find the favorites of these animals, circle each one's name three times in its word-search puzzle. Then write the remaining letters in order on the blanks, starting at the top row.

**Frog**

Favorite game:
- CROCKFROGKGAY

**Croc**

Favorite kind of photos:
- SNCCPRRSHCUTS

**Gecko**

Favorite movie:
- LOIZAKKRGBKDEEGOFZOGZ

**Turtle**

Favorite vehicle:
- SHEEELLLTIERTURELTURTLETURETTER

**Snake**

Favorite sport:
- SEKASNACKSEBOSNAKAERDIEKANNSNG

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1. Whose kite is flying the highest?
2. Whose kite crashed?
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**Froggy Solo**

This frog is performing a silly poem called a limerick. Trouble is, he scrambled the words in the last two lines. Unscramble them so that...

- line 4 rhymes with line 3.
- line 5 rhymes with lines 1 and 2.

**1** There once was a frog named Olay,
**2** Who said, “Hop on, if you’re going my way.
**3** You’ll discover, of course,
**4** ____________________________.
**5** ____________________________.”

**Salamander Match-Ups**

Can you put these salamanders back together? Match the numbers and letters to form whole salamanders.

**BONUS**

Answer the riddle below by filling in the letter that goes with each numbered salamander.

What do snakes eat when they’re on a diet?

___ A ___ A ___ – ___ A N D E R S

1          2         3           4

**What Do Frogs Do at Baseball Games?**

Write the word that describes each picture below. Then circle the middle letter of each word. (One is done for you.) The circled letters, in order, spell out the answer to the riddle.

Good job!
I may look a little like a chicken, but I'm no farm animal! I'm a wild, endangered bird with a fan-shaped tail, a “helmet” on my head, and a pink belly.

I live on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (soo-lah-WAY-see). When it’s time to start a family, my mate and I don’t build a nest. Instead, we use our big feet to dig one, as you see me doing here! My mate will lay one big egg in the hole, then we’ll cover it up. And that, my friends, is the end of our job as parents.

**Rangers:** Be a super sleuth! Head to the library or search online to find the name of this animal. Then send your answer on a **postcard**, along with your full name and mailing address, by **October 31, 2020.** (Answers in envelopes won’t be included.) We’ll mix all the cards together and pick until we have 10 with the correct answer. Each of those 10 readers will be named in the April 2021 issue of **Ranger Rick**.

**Send your postcard to** Who Am I?; Ranger Rick; 11100 Wildlife Center Drive; Reston, VA 20190-5362.