



LESSON PLAN

HOW THE ANIMALS LOST THEIR TAILS BY CARL SANDBURG

ABOUT THE STORY

- This story was called *How the Animals Lost Their Tails and Got Them Back Traveling from Philadelphia to Medicine Hat* when it appeared in the book *Rootabaga Stories* by Carl Sandburg, published in 1922.
- Sandburg was a famous American poet. He wrote *Rootabaga Stories* for his three daughters Margaret, Janet and Helga. The stories use repetition and nonsense language, a fun form of word play. The examples you will find in this story are *flongboo* and *parleyhoo*. The reader can use the context in the story and their imagination to understand what these words mean.

PREPARE TO LISTEN

Get students' attention

- This can be done in the students' native language or English.
- Ask: "What is the weather like today?" List the students' answers on the board in English, for example, *sunny, windy, rainy warm, cold*.
- Ask, "Does someone control the weather? Maybe you have heard stories about a powerful being who makes thunder and lightning, or people who can make it rain." Take student suggestions without judgment, if necessary, translating into English. They may name superheroes or fictional characters or divine beings.

Connect to students' experiences

- Tell students, "Today we are reading a story about some animals who have a problem with the weather."
- Ask students, "Does the weather cause problems for you sometimes? How?" Take some student suggestions and write them on the board in English, such as too much rain (floods), the weather is too hot, and the like.
- Ask, "Have you ever heard of a snow ghost? What do you think it is?" Show the photo of trees covered with snow if students cannot guess what the phrase means. A snow ghost is anything

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that is covered by ice and snow. Often they form from frozen fog that comes into contact with objects.



WATCH AND REVIEW THE VIDEO

Check understanding with specific questions (add your own as necessary)

- Ask, “Which animals missed their tails the most?” (The foxes and the flongboo)
- Ask, “How did the weather change?” (First, there was hot, dusty weather. Then came a rain. Then a cold wind came and froze all the tails. A big wind followed and blew all the animals’ tails off.)
- Ask, “Where did the animals begin their train trip?” (In Philadelphia.) Show a map of North America, like the one at the end of this lesson, to demonstrate the locations in the story. There are two maps – one is marked; the other is not marked and can be used to check if students can find the cities mentioned in the story.
- Ask, “Where did the animals end their train trip?” (Medicine Hat)

Talk more about the story

- Ask students what they liked, what made them laugh, what parts they want to read again.

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- Ask, “Why did the animals form a committee?” (Sandburg writes, *The animals decided to choose a committee of representatives to represent them in parleyhoo to see what steps could be taken by talking to do something.*)
- Ask, “What do you think ‘parleyhoo’ is?” (It may be a play on words for “Parliament.”)
- Ask, “How do you think Sandburg feels about committees?”
- Ask students to say what lesson they can learn from the story.
- Ask: “Are there any stories like this in your own language?” Explain that this kind of story might be similar to myths, traditional stories that explain a natural event.

1. Animal Tails Activity

Set up/materials

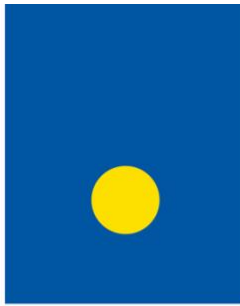
- Have printouts of the activity sheet or drawing paper and writing or coloring materials ready.

How to

- Explain to students that there are four different kinds of animals in this story. Have them look at the photos on the activity sheet and repeat the names of the animals: *blue fox*, *hog*, *rabbit*, *flongboo*. (This is an imaginary animal that Sandburg created).
- In pairs, have students take turns describing the animals' tails in their own words.
- Ask students to use the drawing or coloring materials to draw a picture of what they think a *flongboo* looks like.
- Ask several students to share their drawings with the class and explain why they think the *flongboo* looks like that, giving evidence from the story.

Variation

- Have students choose an animal from the story or any one they like, and make a "Lost: Tail" poster, drawing the missing tail for the animal and describing it in words below the picture.
- Give students drawing paper and ask them to draw the animals without their tails. Have them write or explain orally how each animal was affected by losing its tail.



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ANIMALS' TAILS

AMERICAN
STORIES

Look at each animal. Describe its tail.
Then draw the last animal as you see
it in your imagination.

Blue Fox



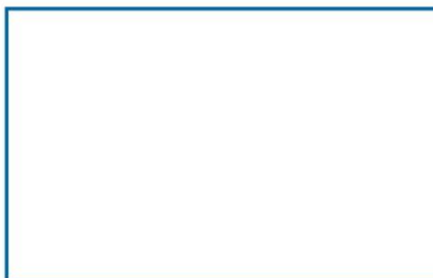
Hog



Rabbit



Flongboo



Words:
curly, straight,
short, bushy, long,
white, bright

2. Animal Guessing Game

Set up/materials

- In this game, students listen to or read descriptions of animals. They guess the animal by writing the animal's name on their activity sheet or asking questions to get more information.

How to

- Give students the handout below.
- Read each description aloud and ask students to write the name of the animal described on the line after the description. If they do not know an animal, let them ask you a question for more details.

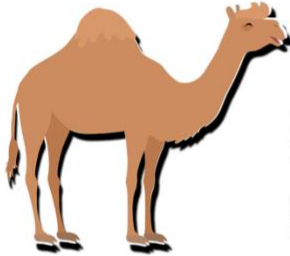
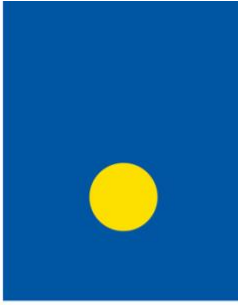
Variation

- Have students form pairs and take turns reading each description aloud, then confirming for each other the correct animal.
- Have students write their own animal descriptions and ask their classmates to guess what they

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GUESS THE ANIMAL GAME

AMERICAN STORIES



1. This animal is large and makes a loud roar. It lives in Africa and there is long hair around its face. What is it? a lion

2. This animal is very big, has long legs, a long neck and lives in Africa. What is it?



3. This animal is quite big. It is brown, but can also be black, white or grey. It helps farmers to work in the fields. You can ride on its back. What is it?

4. This animal is quite big and lives on the farm. People like these animals because they give us milk. What is it?



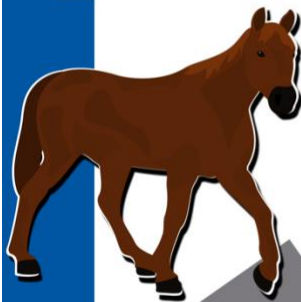
5. This animal lives in people's houses or on the farm. It barks and people like it. Cats are sometimes afraid of it. What is it?



6. This animal is very funny. You can see it in the zoo, but it lives in Africa. It likes bananas. What is it?

7. This animal is like a horse but lives in Africa. It has black and white stripes on its body. What is it?

8. This animal is very big and lives in water, but it is not a fish. It is friendly and sometimes saves people's lives. What is it?



9. This animal is pretty, and people have it at home as a pet in a cage. It has colored feathers. What is it?

10. This animal is small and friendly. It lives in people's houses. People like it because this animal catches mice. What is it?

Word bank:

zebra, cow, monkey, kangaroo, parrot, lion, horse, camel, cat, dog, dolphin, giraffe



are describing.

3. Writing activity

Set up/materials

- Have writing materials available for students to use. Begin by asking students to imagine themselves as an animal.

How to

- Ask students to write a part of the story with themselves as an additional kind of animal.
- Have students share their story endings and in a small group, choose one to act out by reading parts of it aloud as the different characters.

Variation

- Ask students to write a similar story explaining a fact in the natural world, such as, “Where does snow come from?” “Why do butterflies change from caterpillars?” or “What causes thunder and lightning?”

HAVE STUDENTS READ THE STORY ALOUD IN CLASS OR TO A YOUNGER SIBLING. PLACE THE STUDENTS’ STORIES ON THE WALL OF THE CLASSROOM OR HALLWAY OR ON A DIGITAL BULLETIN BOARD TO SHARE WITH OTHERS IN THE SCHOOL.

WORDS IN THIS STORY

no picnic – *idiom* a difficult thing to do or an unpleasant experience

gavel – *n.* a small hammer that is used for getting attention in a court or a formal meeting of officials or lawmakers

have the floor – *idiom* have the right to speak at a public meeting

make a motion – *idiom* to formally propose something in a debate or formal proceedings

move – *v.* (formal) to propose that something be done

razzamatazz – *n.* noisy and excited activity meant to attract attention

hind legs – *n. (pl.)* the two back legs of a four-legged animal

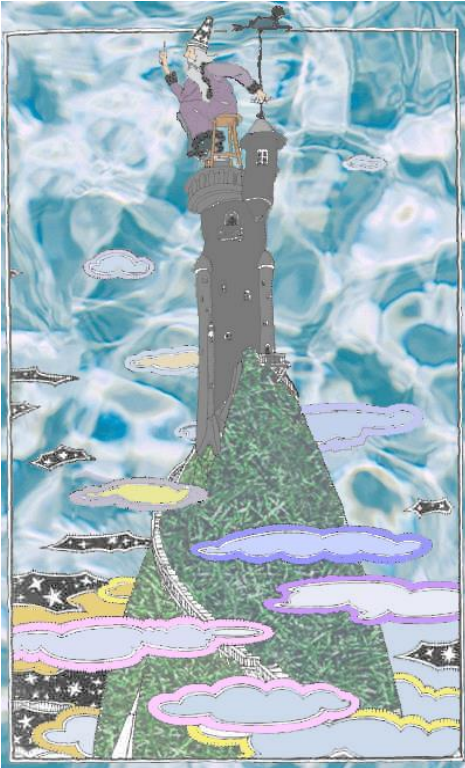
polite – *adj.* showing good manners and respect for others

distinguished – *adj.* known by many people for some special quality or something done in the past

errand – *n.* a short trip aimed at getting something done

ax – *n.* a tool used for cutting wood

AMERICAN STORIES: HOW THE ANIMALS LOST THEIR TAILS BY CARL SANDBURG



Far up in North America, near the Saskatchewan River in Winnipeg wheat country not far from the town of Moose Jaw, where nobody works unless they have to, and they nearly all have to, there is a place known as Medicine Hat.

There, on top of a high tower in a high chair, sits the Head Spotter of the Weather Makers.

When the animals lost their tails, it was because the Head Spotter got careless.

How all the animals lost their tails

You see, the tails of the animals were hard and dry because of a stretch of hot, dusty weather. Then, at last, came a rain. It poured down on the animals' tails and softened them.

But then a cold wind came and froze all the tails solid. A big wind followed and blew and blew and blew until all the animals' tails flew off their bodies.

It was easy for the hogs with their short tails. But it was not so easy for the blue fox, who uses his tail to run and to write secret letters in the snow.

It was easy for the rabbit with her little white tail. But it was hard for the yellow flongboo who lights up her home in the hollow tree with her bright tail.

The animals decided to choose a committee of representatives to represent them in parleyhoo to see what steps could be taken by talking to do something.

There were 66 representatives on the committee. They decided to call it the committee of Sixty Six.

For a chairperson they picked the top flongboo. When there was a fight among the flongboo families, she was the one who would say who was right and who was wrong.

She was from Chappaquiddick and lived there in a horse chestnut tree between South Hadley and Northampton.

After her nomination and election, she brought the Committee of Sixty Six to order.

"It is **no picnic** to lose your tail and we are here for business," she said banging the **gavel**.

The blue fox's proposal

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Then a blue fox from Waco, Texas stood up and said, “Madam Chairwoman, do I have the floor?”

That is a way of saying, “May I speak?”

“I **make a motion**,” said the blue.

“I **move** that this committee get on a train at Philadelphia and ride on the train until it stops and then take another train until we get to Medicine Hat where the Head Spotter of the Weather Makers sits. There, we will ask if he will bring back our tails.”

The Chairwoman said, “All in favor of the motion will clean their right ears with their right paws.”

And all the blue foxes and yellow flongboos began cleaning their right ears with their right paws.

“All who oppose the motion will clean their left ears with their left paws,” said the chairwoman.

And all the blue foxes and yellow flongboos began cleaning their left ears with their left paws.

“The motion is carried both ways, it’s a **razzamatazz**,” said the chairwoman.

“Once again, all in favor of the motion will stand up on the toes.”

And all the blue foxes and all the yellow flongboos stood up.

“And now,” said the chairman, “all who are against the motion will stand on the top of their heads, stick their hind legs up in the air, and make a noise like woof, woof.”

No one opposed the motion.

“The motion is carried,” said the chairwoman.

So the committee went to Philadelphia to get the train to Medicine Hat.

The Chairwoman asked a policeman there: “Would you be so kind as to tell us the way to the Union Depot.”

“It pays to be **polite**,” said the policeman.

“May I ask you again if you would kindly direct us to the Union Depot where the train is?” asked the flongboo again.

“Polite persons and angry persons are different kinds,” said the policeman.

The flongboo’s eyes changed their lights and a slow fire burned from where her tail used to be.

She said, “Sir, I must inform you that we are The Committee of Sixty Six. We are **distinguished** representatives from places you do not know. This committee is going to ride to Medicine Hat with a special message and a secret **errand** for the Head Spotter of the Weather Makers.”

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“I am a polite friend of all respectable people,” said the policeman touching the star on his chest.

“This is the first time ever in the history of the United States that a committee of sixty-six has ever visited a city in the United States,” said the flongboo.

“I beg to be mistaken,” finished the policeman. “The Union Depot is under that clock.” And he pointed to a big clock nearby.

The train trip to Medicine Hat

Over to Union Depot train station they went, all sixty-six, half foxes, half flongboos.

“They are speaking in some strange language from where they come from,” said one passenger.

“They have secrets to keep among each other, and never tell us,” said another passenger.

“We will find out all about it in the newspapers tomorrow,” said a third passenger.

Then the foxes and flongboos climbed into a special car.

The train left the station. It came to the Horseshoe Curve near Altoona where the tracks bend in a half circle. Then it went on toward Ohio.

Two baby blue foxes, the youngest on the committee, sat at the front of the car.

Crossing Ohio and Indiana at night the flongboos took off the top of the car. The conductor told them, “I must have an explanation.” “It is between us and the stars,” they told him.

The train ran on to Chicago. There were pictures in the newspapers that afternoon showing foxes and flongboos eating pink ice cream with iron **axes**.

Each blue fox and yellow flongboo got their own newspaper.

Crossing to the north the sky began to fill with the snow ghosts of Minnesota. Again the foxes and flongboos lifted the top off the car so they would not miss the show.

Some went to sleep but the two baby blue foxes stayed up watching the snow ghosts and telling snow ghost stories to each other.

Early in the night the first baby blue fox said to the second, “Who are the snow ghosts the ghosts of?” The second baby blue fox answered, “Snow men, snow foxes and snow fishes, everybody has a snow ghost.”

And that was only the beginning of their talk. They would talk until morning about where the snow ghosts go on Christmas morning and how the snow ghosts watch the New Year.

Somewhere between Winnipeg and Moose Jaw, they stopped the train and all ran out in the snow. The white moon was shining down a valley of birch trees.

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At last they came to Medicine Hat, near the Saskatchewan River in Winnipeg wheat country not far from the town of Moose Jaw, where nobody works unless they have to, and they nearly all have to.

There they ran to the place where the Head Spotter of the Weather Makers sits in a high chair on a high tower watching the weather.

“Let loose another big wind to blow back our tails, let loose a big freeze to freeze our tails back on, and let us get back our lost tails,” they said to the Head Spotter.

Which was just what he did, giving them exactly what they wanted, so they all went back home satisfied.

Mario Ritter, Jr. adapted this public domain story by Carl Sandburg for VOA Learning English.



CHECK UNDERSTANDING

1. Quiz

Give students the printed quiz at the end of this lesson guide, have them use the online quiz, or simply write the questions on the board. If you want to test only their listening skills, say the questions but do not write them.

Questions:

1. What causes the weather to change in the story?
2. What do the animals do in Philadelphia?
3. What shapes do the snow ghosts take?
4. What did the animals ask the Head Spotter of the Weather Makers?

Answer key:

1. The Head Spotter of the Weather Makers got careless.
2. They get on a train in Philadelphia.
3. The snow ghosts are in the shape of men, foxes, and fishes.
4. To change the weather so their tails would once again return to their bodies.

QUIZ

1. What causes the weather to change in the story?

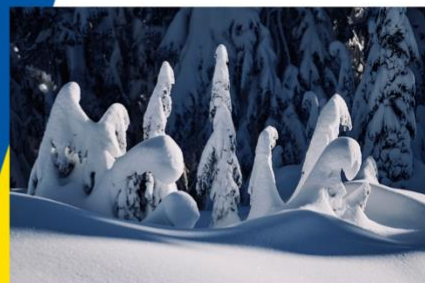
The Head Weather Spotter got



2. They get on a in Philadelphia.



3. The snow are in the shape of men, foxes, and fishes.

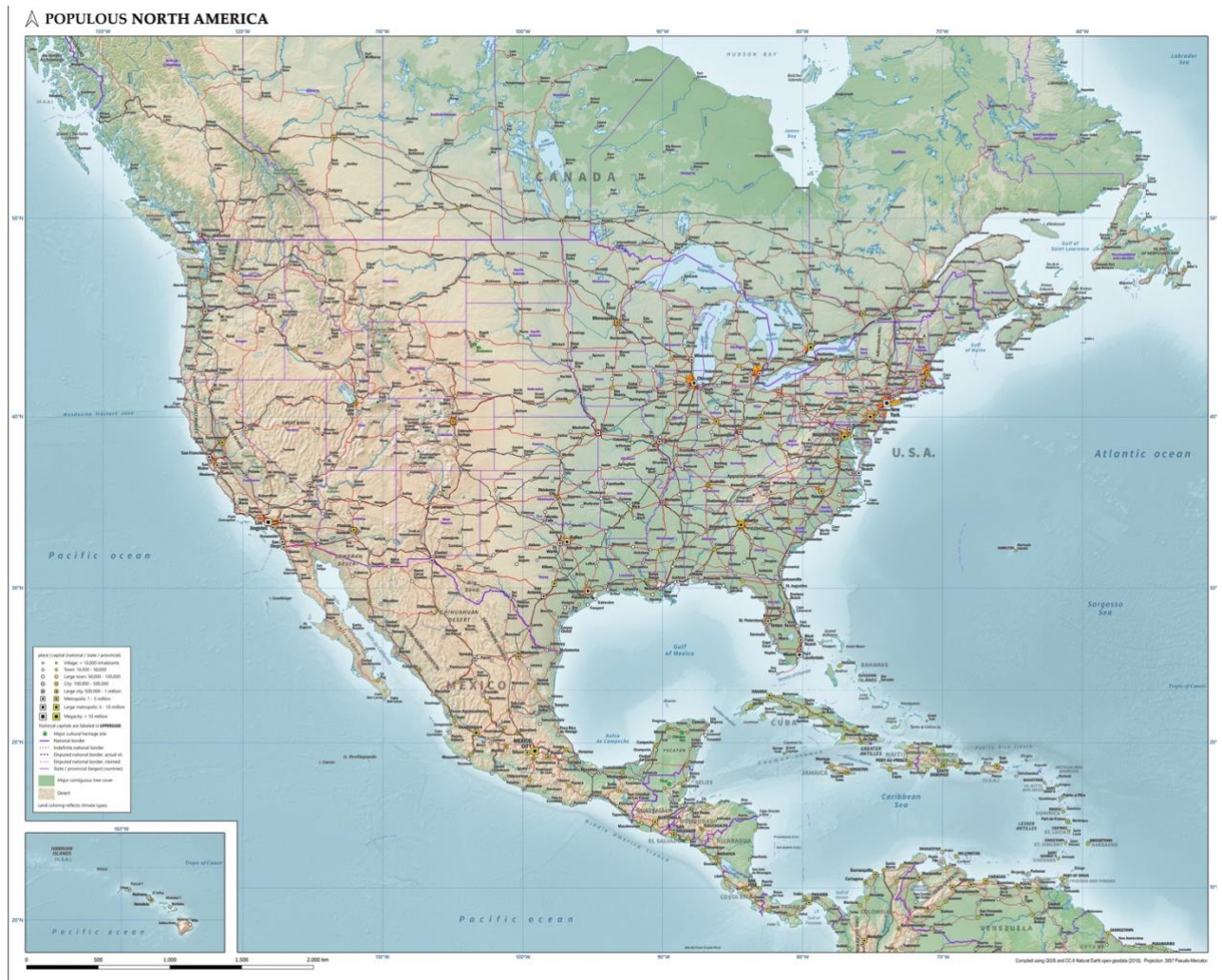


4. The animals ask the Head Spotter to change the .



Word bank: weather, careless, ghosts, train

MAP OF NORTH AMERICA



MAP OF NORTH AMERICA WITH PATH OF THE TRAIN FROM PHILADELPHIA TO MEDICINE HAT

