



JULY/AUGUST 2026

Xplor

ADVENTURE
STARTS
HERE

THIS LITTLE BIRD IS
GOING PLACES



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Halloween won't be here for a few months, but don't tell this dragonfly! It's called a Halloween pennant. The Halloween part of its name comes from its orange and black colors. The pennant part comes from its habit of perching on the tips of plants and waving in the breeze like a pennant — which is a fancy word for a flag.

Xplor

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ON THE COVER

American Redstart

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STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the
**UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND UNBELIEVABLE**
stuff that goes on in nature

Many **LIZARDS** have a third eye, called a parietal eye. Though it can't see anything, biologists believe the extra eye detects light, which helps lizards match their behaviors — like courtship or hibernation — to the changing seasons.



NORTH AMERICAN BULLFROGS sure are *hoppy*. The 6-inch frogs can cover up to 7 feet in a single jump! To accomplish a similar feat, a 5-foot human would need to leap from one free-throw line to the other on a basketball court.



While their flashy, day-flying cousins, the butterflies, seem to get all the attention, not all **MOTHS** are dull and drab. Many — like luna moths, regal moths, and io moths — are as brilliantly colored as any butterfly.



Ants in your pants? **BLUE JAYS** and other birds sometimes crouch over anthills and let the angry insects crawl all over their bodies. Why? Biologists aren't sure, but ants release acid, which may help clean a bird's feathers.

WILD STRAWBERRIES are Missouri's only native plant that wears its seeds on the outside of its fruits. The sweet red "berries" ripen in June and July on prairies, pastures, and woodland edges across the state.



Turn up the AC! If a **BUMBLEBEE** nest gets too toasty in the hot summer sun, worker bees gather at the nest's entrance and flap their wings to fan out hot air.



Members of the **WEASEL FAMILY** are famously funky. American badgers and river otters have scent glands that make them smell bad. Long-tailed weasels and least weasels smell even worse. And American mink emit a sickening scent that rivals a skunk's odor.



WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW? Jump to Page 21 to find out.

- 1 My leaves are covered in wax.
- 2 They shed water like off a duck's back.
- 3 I grow a beautiful flower.
- 4 It looks like the head of a shower.



TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE

Which fascinating fact is actually a fib?

Answer on Page 21



- 1 Timber rattlesnakes are Missouri's largest venomous snake. Most adults are 3 to 5 feet long, but some may grow over 6 feet long.
- 2 Heat-sensing organs located between the nose and eye help timber rattlesnakes sense mice and other warm-blooded prey, even in total darkness.
- 3 A new section grows on a timber rattlesnake's rattle each year. Biologists who are trained to handle venomous snakes count the sections to tell how old a snake is.

HOW TO

WATCH A METEOR SHOWER

The Perseid meteor shower peaks on August 13. Follow these tips to see one of nature's most spectacular nighttime light shows.

SIZZLING SPACE DIRT

Meteor showers happen when Earth collides with a stream of ice, dust, and rocks that was left in space by the tail of a comet. As the space dirt falls toward Earth, it rubs against air in the atmosphere, which makes it get really, really hot (like when you rub your hands together really fast). The super-hot dirt heats the air around it, causing the air to glow. This creates a bright streak in the night sky called a meteor or "shooting star."

GET UP EARLY

The meteor shower really gets going a few hours before sunrise on August 13. If you want to see the best show, set out your clothes and snacks the night before, go to bed early, and plan to be at your viewing spot at 4 a.m.

WATCH THE WEATHER

Although the peak of the shower is predicted to happen before dawn on August 13, a few days before or after will also give you plenty of shooting stars to wish upon. Watch the weather forecast, and plan to go out on a night that isn't cloudy or rainy.

BRING A BUDDY, A BLANKET, AND BUG REPELLENT

Meteor showers are more fun with friends. Spread out a blanket at your viewing spot so you don't have to strain your neck to watch the show. To keep mosquitoes at bay, spray your clothes with bug repellent.

FIND A DARK LOCATION

The darker it is, the more meteors you'll see. So get away from the bright lights of the city and go somewhere that offers a wide-open view of the night sky. Farm fields, a lonely stretch of gravel road, or a secluded campsite are all good spots.

LET YOUR EYES ADJUST

It takes about 20 minutes for your eyes to fully adjust to the dark. Once you reach your viewing spot, turn off car lights, cellphones, and flashlights.

KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

Although meteors will fall across much of the sky during the peak of the shower, you'll see more if you look northeast between the constellations of Cassiopeia and Perseus. Cassiopeia looks like a giant "W," and Perseus looks like a stick figure your baby brother might draw. You can print off a star chart or download a phone app to help you find these constellations.

TRY AGAIN

If you miss the Perseid shower, don't worry! The Leonid meteor shower peaks on November 17, and the Geminid meteor shower peaks on December 13. You'll just need to bundle up in warmer clothes to watch them!



SHOW-ME SKINKS

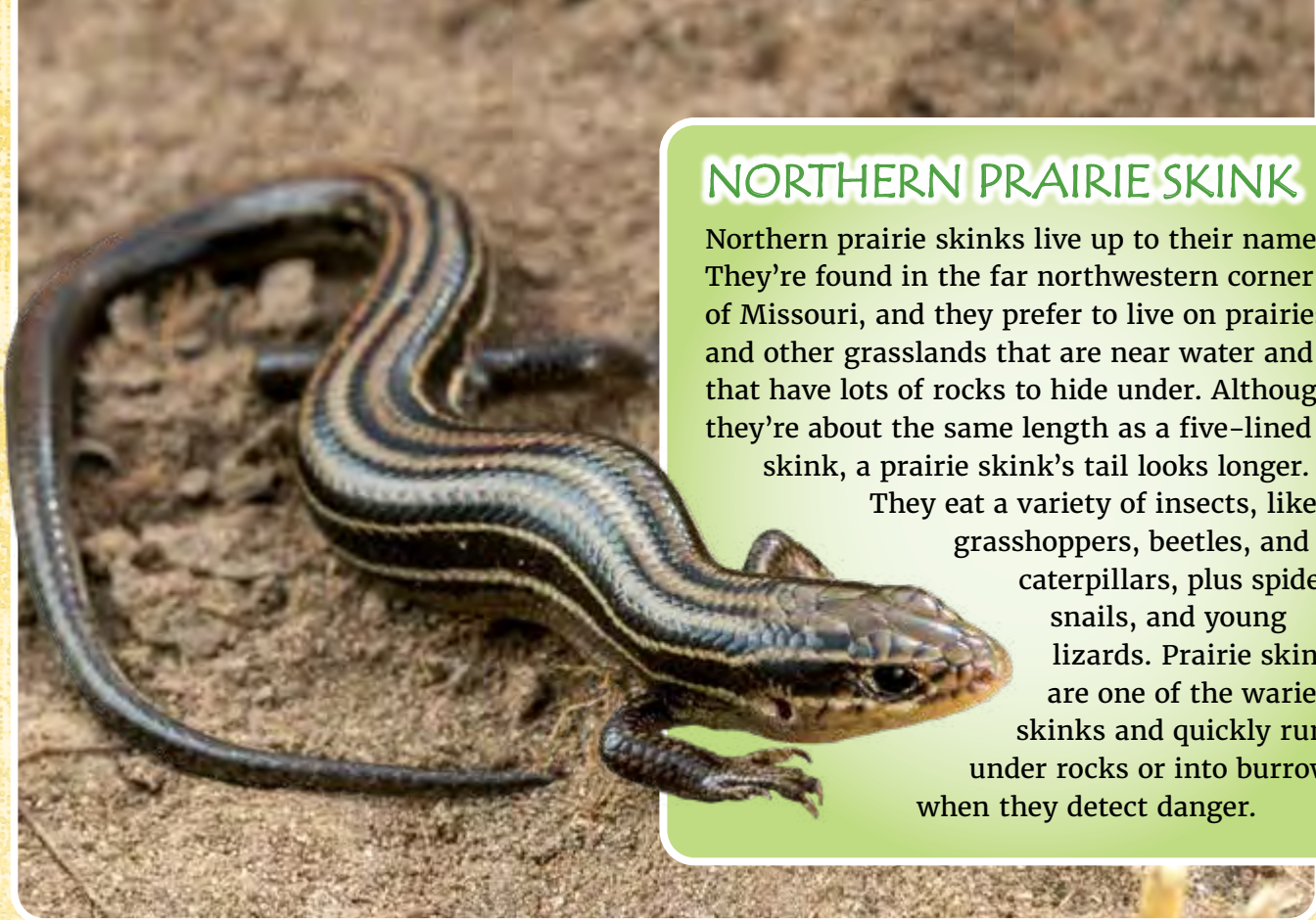
Join us for a tour
of Missouri's
littlest lizards.

Skinks are a large group of lizards that are found on every continent except Antarctica. Most skinks are small, skinny, and sleek — the perfect size and shape to crawl under rocks and into narrow nooks and crannies. There are over 1,500 kinds of skinks worldwide. Six species scurry across the Show-Me State.

COMMON FIVE-LINED SKINK

This common skink takes its name from the five bright stripes that run from the head to the base of the tail on hatchlings and young adults. The stripes fade to tan and become harder to see when the little lizards grow up. Like most of Missouri's skinks, young five-lined skinks have bright blue tails. (That's why some people call them "blue-tailed skinks.") Biologists think the bedazzling back end protects youngsters from being attacked by grown-up males. It acts like a neon sign to say: "Calm down! I'm not old enough to steal your girlfriend."





NORTHERN PRAIRIE SKINK

Northern prairie skinks live up to their name. They're found in the far northwestern corner of Missouri, and they prefer to live on prairies and other grasslands that are near water and that have lots of rocks to hide under. Although they're about the same length as a five-lined skink, a prairie skink's tail looks longer.

They eat a variety of insects, like grasshoppers, beetles, and caterpillars, plus spiders, snails, and young lizards. Prairie skinks are one of the wariest skinks and quickly run under rocks or into burrows when they detect danger.

Marvelous Moms



Many mama reptiles lay their eggs and leave. Mama skinks — with the exception of little brown skinks — guard their eggs until they hatch. In a nest under a rock or in a decaying log, mom curls her body around her clutch of eggs. She turns her eggs often so the babies inside grow the way they should. If an egg becomes spoiled, mom eats it so the smell doesn't attract predators. When the eggs hatch, guard duty is over, and mom splits, leaving the newborn lizards to fend for themselves.

BROAD-HEADED SKINK

Broad-headed skinks spend most of their time near trees. They climb well and often hide in tree cavities or abandoned woodpecker holes to avoid danger on the forest floor. During mating season, a male's head swells up and turns reddish-orange. Female skinks seem to prefer the males with the biggest and brightest heads. Young broad-headed skinks look nearly identical to common five-lined skinks. Biologists tell them apart by counting the scales on a skink's upper lip.



GREAT PLAINS SKINK

The Great Plains skink is the largest skink in the United States, with adults growing over a foot long. Their tan scales are edged with dark brown or black, which makes them look speckled. One of Missouri's rarest reptiles, Great Plains skinks are found in prairies on the far western edge of the state. They're excellent diggers and spend most of their time underground, which makes them even harder to find!



SOUTHERN COAL SKINK

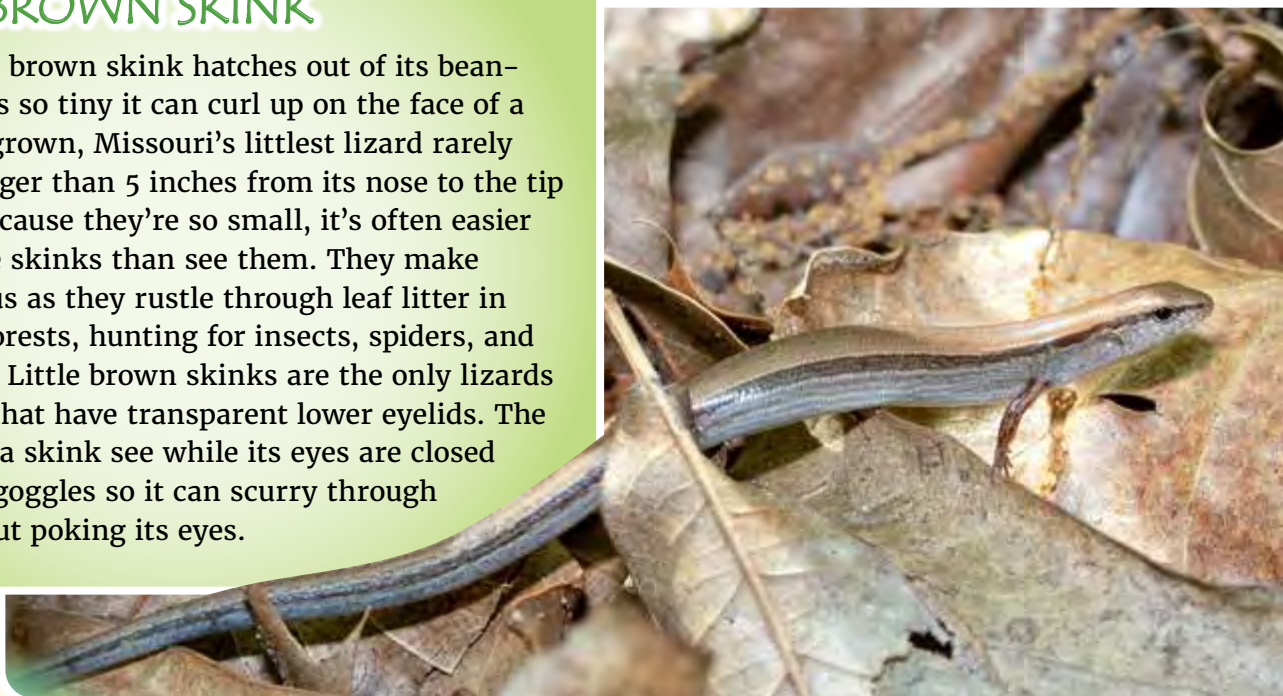
This secretive skink lives in rocky glades and forests, mainly south of the Missouri River. Although coal skinks are fairly common, they're rarely seen because they dart under rocks, logs, or leaves at the first sign of danger. They have good reason to be wary. Like most skinks, they're preyed upon by dozens of predators, including snakes, other lizards, shrikes, hawks, shrews, skunks, and badgers. Newborn coal skinks have shiny black bodies, which is where they get their name. As they grow, they turn brown, except for a coal-black stripe that runs down each side of their body.

Tricky Tails

If a predator grabs a skink by the tail, the little lizard leaves its behind behind. By tightening special muscles, the skink snaps off its back end and pinches blood vessels shut so it doesn't bleed much. While the detached tail twitches to keep the predator busy, the stumpy skink slinks to safety. A new tail eventually grows back, but it's often shorter than the original and not as brightly colored.

LITTLE BROWN SKINK

When a little brown skink hatches out of its bean-sized egg, it's so tiny it can curl up on the face of a dime. Fully grown, Missouri's littlest lizard rarely stretches longer than 5 inches from its nose to the tip of its tail. Because they're so small, it's often easier to hear these skinks than see them. They make quite a ruckus as they rustle through leaf litter in woods and forests, hunting for insects, spiders, and earthworms. Little brown skinks are the only lizards in Missouri that have transparent lower eyelids. The clear lids let a skink see while its eyes are closed and act like goggles so it can scurry through leaves without poking its eyes.



EASTERN HERCULES BEETLE

JUMBO JETS

Despite being one of Missouri's heaviest insects, Hercules beetles can fly. They're sometimes found near porch lights on summer nights.





PUSHY, PUSHY!

Males use their rhinoceros-like horns to fight each other. The strongest, pushiest beetle gets more girlfriends.

GRUB FOR GRUBS

Mama beetles lay dozens of eggs near decaying trees and logs. Baby beetles, called grubs, recycle rotting wood by eating it.

SUPER STRONG

A Hercules beetle can carry more than 100 times its weight. If you were that strong, you could easily pick up a pickup.

ONE BEEFY BEETLE

Hercules beetles are Missouri's biggest beetle. Males can grow up to 2½ inches long.

Adventures of a Wayward Redstart



Imagine going on a trip. You have neither a suitcase, a phone, nor a map. To reach your destination, you must fly over a thousand miles and pit your wits against hungry predators and violent storms. And, oh yeah, you weigh less than two U.S. nickels.

Wow, what a summer!

It seems like only yesterday it was spring, and you had just arrived in northeast Missouri at this charming patch of woods on the banks of the Mississippi. You're an American redstart, a colorful, insect-munching, sweet-singing songbird.

Over a few weeks — it's all a blur, now — you met a mate, settled down, raised a nest of youngsters, sent them out into the wide, wild world, lost a few well-worn feathers, and grew a few new, sturdier ones. Now, after all of that, you feel restless, like there's something else you need to do.

Heat waves make trees on the horizon shimmer as if they were underwater. It's August — the hottest month of summer — but you sense the days are growing shorter and winter will soon be here. Time flies, and now, you should too. The only question is where?

- ▶ Fly north. You've heard Canada is lovely. [Go to 1.](#)
- ▶ Fly south. The beach sounds better. [Go to 2.](#)



1

You were right, Canada is delightful. You loved how the sugar maples blazed in autumn like their leaves were on fire. And how snowflakes seesaw out of the sky and pile up on spruce boughs like puffy, little pillows. Wait a second. *Snow?!*

Cold you can handle. You wear a coat of cozy feathers after all. But you know who doesn't do well in the cold? Insects. And you know what you stuff in your beak hundreds of times a day? Insects.

A rumble in your tummy reminds you it's been a bit since your last meal. You realize you made a terrible mistake.

► *Maybe it's not too late to fly south. Go to 8.*

2

Some birds, like barn swallows and hawks, migrate during the day. But you, like most songbirds, migrate at night when the wind is calmer, the air is cooler, and darkness hides you from predators.

Somehow, you know which way to go. Itty-bitty bits of metal in your beak feel the pull of Earth's magnetic field. The movement of stars across the night sky also offers clues about which direction you're heading.

That is, when you can see them.

Ahead, the lights of a city blaze brightly, extinguishing your star map. Before you can change course, you've sailed directly into downtown St. Louis.

Suddenly, the wide-open sky becomes a canyonlike maze of strip malls, ballparks, and skyscrapers. Headlights of cars streak through the streets below. It's very confusing! Panic flutters in your stomach like a June bug popping against a porch light. You'd better do something before you get hopelessly lost ...

- *Those lights up ahead might, uh, shed some light on your problem. Go to 3.*
- *A large, light-free section of the city looms off your left wing. Darkness seems safer, right? Go to 4.*

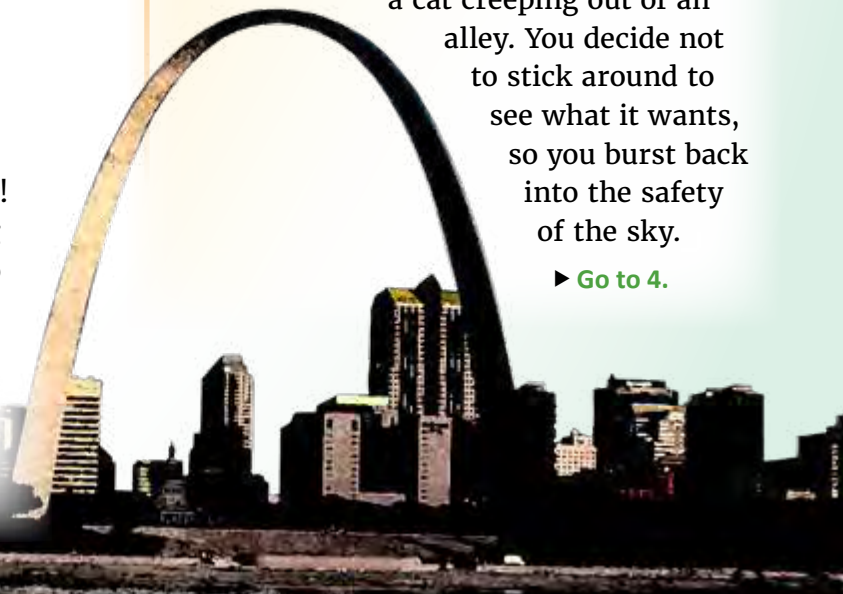
3

What happened?! You remember flying toward the light and then ... CRASH! The next thing you know, you're lying on the sidewalk at the base of a towering skyscraper. As you shake your head groggily, you realize you must have crashed into a window.

Luckily, you don't seem to be hurt, just stunned. Sadly, you can't say the same for the wood thrush that lies crumpled and still nearby.

Out of the corner of your eye, you spot a cat creeping out of an alley. You decide not to stick around to see what it wants, so you burst back into the safety of the sky.

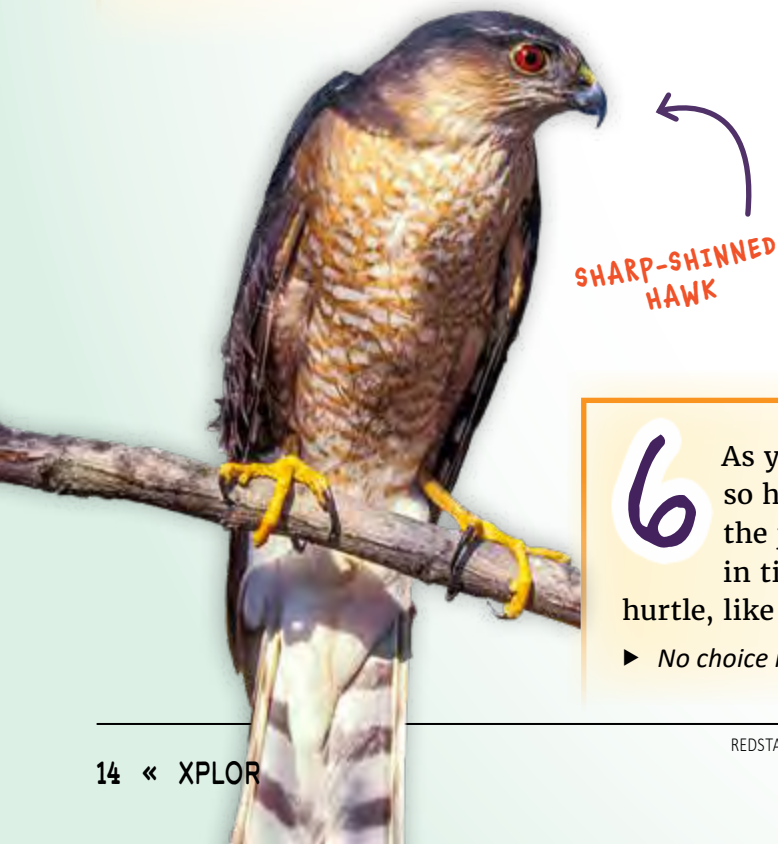
► *Go to 4.*





4 Whew! You made it out of the maze of the city and found a comfortable oak tree to perch in. You seem to be in a city park. The sun is peeking over the eastern horizon, so you decide to stop here to rest. As your eyelids begin to droop, you hear a flock of blue jays shrieking at something. They sound upset! Maybe you should fly over and see what's up?

- ▶ *Hard pass. You're ... really ... tired. Zzzzzz. Go to 8.*
- ▶ *On the other wing, it might be fun to see what trouble those loud-beaked birds are getting into. Go to 5.*



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

5 The jays, nearly a dozen of them, are fluttering around a hickory tree. Every so often, one of them drops into the foliage and then quickly swoops back out. They seem to be dive-bombing something. You fly to a nearby tree for a closer look ...

Oh, bird droppings! It's a sharp-shinned hawk!

Sharpies are the cheetahs of the bird world. They use speed and agility — along with bone-crunching talons and a meat-shredding beak — to snatch songbirds about the size of, well, you. While you watch, frozen in fear, the hawk turns its head and pierces you in the gaze of its blood-red eyes.

- ▶ *Quick, duck behind a leaf! Maybe the hawk didn't see you. Go to 6.*
- ▶ *Fly away! With a head start, maybe you can outrun it. Go to 7.*



6 As you hide behind the leaf, your heart begins to pound so hard you worry the hawk might hear it. You notice the jays have become eerily quiet. You peek around just in time to see the sharpie launch off its branch and hurtle, like a feathered missile, toward the tree you're hiding in.

- ▶ *No choice now. You've got to get out of here! Go to 7.*



7 You fly away as fast as your little wings will carry you, zigzagging around trees. The hawk crashes through the foliage in hot pursuit, using its long tail to steer around branches. You feel the *whump* of its wings and hear the *clack* of its beak. Closer and closer it gets. You can't shake it. Just when the sharpie is reaching out its claws to put an early end to your trip, a blue jay dives out of the sky and pecks the hawk on the head. Surprised and enraged, the hawk forgets about you and wheels toward the shrieking flock of jays.

- ▶ You don't stick around to see what happens next. [Go to 8.](#)

8

The days drift by, and you fall into a routine. At night, you fly as far as you can. In the morning, you find a patch of woods, eat a few bugs, and rest your weary wings during the heat of the day. When night falls, you set off again.

The calls of other migrating birds ring out in the darkness, urging each other on, warning of hidden dangers ahead. Night by night, the feathered parade makes its way south. Usually you cover about 40 miles a night, but with the wind at your tail, you can make nearly 100.

Eventually, you reach the Gulf Coast. Angry waves crash onto the shore, throwing seaweed onto the sandy beach. Though the sky looks clear, you hear an eerie, low-pitched rumble far out over the ocean.

- ▶ *It sounds like a storm. Maybe it's best to get out of its way.* [Go to 9.](#)
- ▶ *You've flown so far! There's no way you're turning around now.* [Go to 10.](#)

9

It's a good thing you flew inland! Two days after you left the coast, Hurricane Gabriel churned through Alabama, ripping off roofs and tearing out trees. By the time it reaches you, hunkered down in a patch of pine woods, the Category 4 hurricane has weakened into an only-slightly-scary band of thunderstorms.

- ▶ *Once the lightning, wind, and rain has passed, you return to the coast.* [Go to 12.](#)



10

You took a terrible risk, and it could be your last.

You set off at dusk across the angry

ocean and flew headfirst into Hurricane Gabriel.

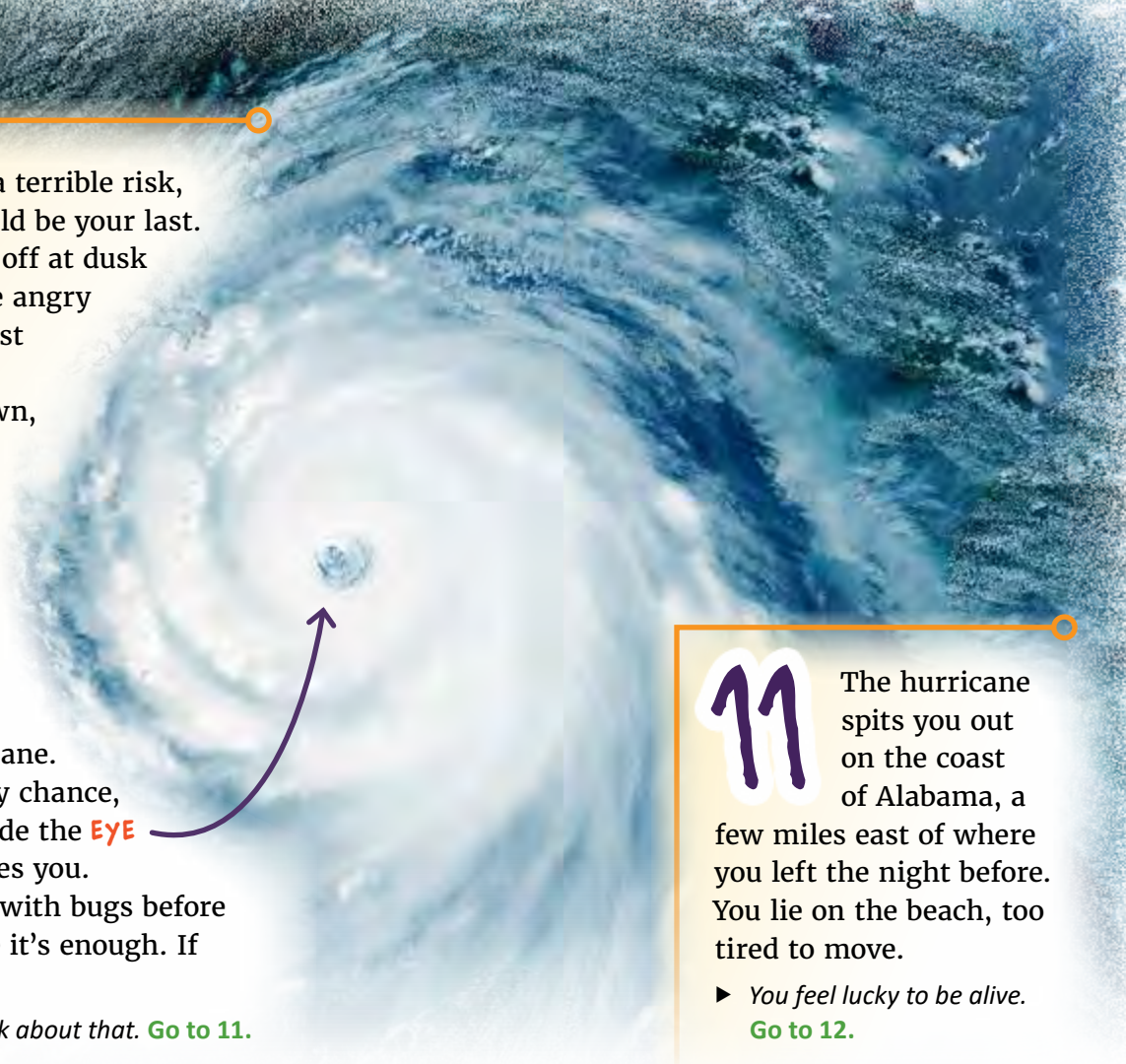
Winds toss you up, down, and sideways like a plastic grocery sack.

Somehow you manage to fight through the torrential rain and reach the calm eye of the storm. The only problem is now you're surrounded by a hurricane.

To survive — your only chance, really — is to stay inside the **EYE** and go wherever it takes you.

You filled your belly with bugs before you left land. You hope it's enough. If you run out of fuel ...

▶ *Well, it's best not to think about that. Go to 11.*



11

The hurricane spits you out on the coast of Alabama, a few miles east of where you left the night before. You lie on the beach, too tired to move.

▶ *You feel lucky to be alive. Go to 12.*

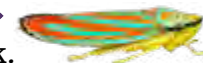


12

Nom, nom, nom. So much to eat, so little time.

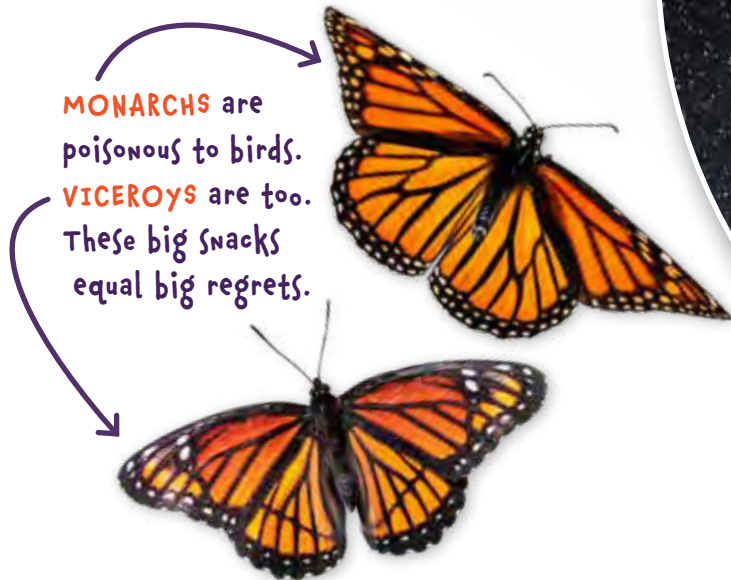
Crossing the ocean is the riskiest part of your journey. To make it, you need extra fuel in your tank. So, for the next few days, you creep through the canopy, hunting insects.

Like all redstarts, you have a trick to catch your prey. As you hop from branch to branch, you droop your wings and flick open your tail, revealing bright patches of color. Male redstarts have Halloween-orange spots; females and youngsters have lemon-yellow spots. The sudden flash of color startles **LEAFHOPPERS** and other insects, which flush from their hiding places, only to be snapped up by your hungry beak.



You're hard at work bagging bugs when a supersized snack flutters by. It's an orange-and-black butterfly, and it's nearly as big as you. It would be quite a feast ...

- ▶ *What are you waiting for? Grab it before it gets away! Go to 13.*
- ▶ *Something feels wrong. You'll stick to leafhoppers. Go to 14.*



MONARCHS are poisonous to birds. **VICEROYS** are too. These big snacks equal big regrets.



13

As soon as you swallow the butterfly, you know you've made a mistake. Your stomach gurgles and churns. You feel like you're going to be sick. Ugh. No. Oh, no! *Barf!*

Once you're done throwing up, you swear you'll never eat another butterfly. Those orange-and-black colors must have been a warning. They taste awful!

► *Lesson learned. Go to 14.*

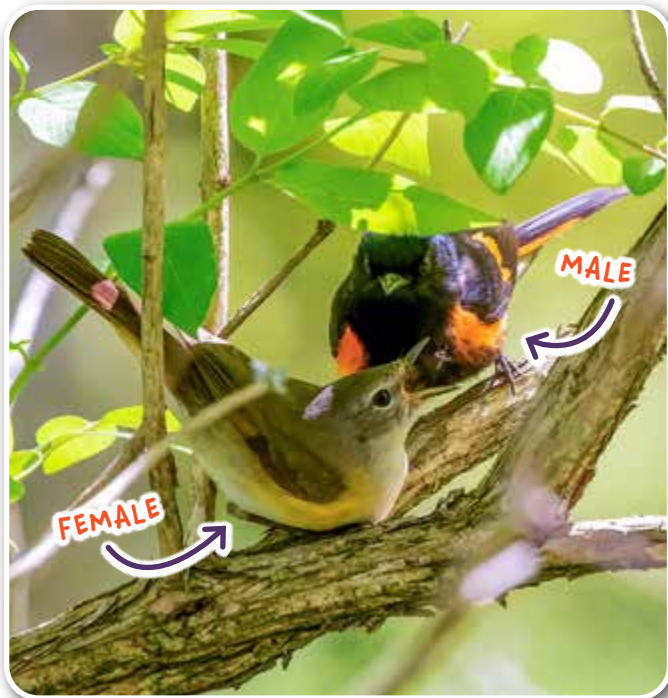
14

With the wind at your back and a bowl of stars twinkling overhead, you point your beak south and take flight. Over 600 miles of shark-filled seas lie between you and the next speck of land — and you can't swim.

The lights of fishing boats and cruise ships ripple across the ink-black water. You zip past them unseen, high overhead, flapping your wings for all you're worth.

At sunrise, you make landfall on the west coast of Cuba. The mangroves here squirm with bugs.

► *You top off your tank and drift into a deep, well-earned sleep. Go to 15.*



15

You hopscotch down the spine of the island until you reach a beach on the southeast coast. There, you strike out over the open ocean once more. After making it across the empty, enormous Gulf, this feels like hopping over a puddle.

In no time, you're sailing over the palm-lined beaches of Jamaica. Though they look tempting, you push past them. Up, up, up you go, into the lush jungles of the Blue Mountains, where, at long last, you come to rest in the shade of a coffee plantation. Home sweet home!

And here, your adventure comes to an end — at least until you return north next spring.

XPLOR MORE

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MOUSE

A deer mouse is missing and three mouse-munching predators look suspiciously well-fed. Which hungry hunter ate the little squeaker? Where did the dining go down? And how did the predator attack its snack? Use the clues to help Detective Hoot solve the mystery.



SUSPECTS (WHO?)



Coyote

Crafty and quick, this wild dog uses its excellent hearing to find mice and pounce on top of them.



Western Ratsnake

A forked tongue helps this 3-foot serpent taste the air to find its next meal.



Red-Tailed Hawk

This sharp-eyed bird soars high overhead and then swoops down to snatch a snack.

HABITATS (WHERE?)



Forest

Oak and hickory trees keep this habitat cool and shady.















Pasture

A herd of moo cows graze on short grass, and a few wildflowers grow along a fence.



Prairie

Riots of wildflowers and head-high grasses grow in this sun-kissed habitat.

		WHO			WHERE		
							
HOW							
							
							
WHERE							
							
							






CLUES

Each suspect was in only one habitat and used only one method of attack. Read the clues and draw a checkmark in each box that you know is true. Based off what you know is true, draw X's in the boxes that you know are false. Use the grid to figure out who ate the mouse, where it happened, and how the predator attacked.

- 1 The snake said it had given its last meal a big squeeze and then swallowed it whole.
- 2 The hawk had been soaring over the pasture when the mouse went missing.
- 3 The mouse's tail was found on the prairie. It looked like a quick bite had taken it clean off.

ATTACK METHODS (HOW?)

-  **Claw**
Sharp claws (like those on a hawk or coyote) can puncture prey just as well as teeth.
-  **Bite**
One snap from a mouthful of teeth or a sharp beak is usually all it takes to make a mouse a meal.
-  **Squeeze**
If you hold prey tight enough — with paws, claws, or coils — it can't catch a breath.

SOLVE THE CASE

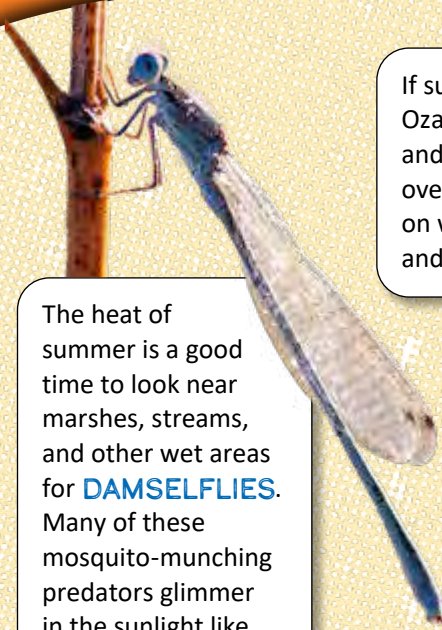
WHO: _____

WHERE: _____

HOW: _____

GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE



The heat of summer is a good time to look near marshes, streams, and other wet areas for **DAMSELFLIES**. Many of these mosquito-munching predators glimmer in the sunlight like flying gemstones. Although they look similar to dragonflies, damselflies hold their wings together when perched, while dragonflies spread their wings out flat.

If summer's heat has you beat, escape to a cool Ozark stream. **FLOAT A CANOE** in the current and you'll squeal with excitement as you rush over rapids and pinball around rocks. For ideas on which stream to float, head to the library and check out *A Paddler's Guide to Missouri*.



In July, many **YOUNG BIRDS LEAVE THEIR NESTS** for the first time. Although they can technically fly, they haven't quite gotten the hang of it and still need care from mom and pop. If you find a fledgling, the best thing to do is keep your pets indoors and leave the young bird alone. Chances are it will be fine after it rests for a bit.

When it's hot and humid, check the mulch in your flower beds for one of Missouri's weirdest creatures. **SLIME MOLD** looks like a yellow or tan blob of scrambled eggs or dog vomit. The blob creeps slowly across the ground, eating bacteria and fungi as it goes. Although it looks gross, slime mold is harmless.



In August, **BOX TURTLES BEGIN HATCHING** out of their leathery eggs and digging out of their underground nests. Not all baby box turtles hatch out in the heat of summer. Some hatch in autumn, stay underground through winter, and emerge the following spring.

Three-toed box turtle

SLIME MOLD: SANDRA TENSEN, CORNELL UNIVERSITY, BUGWOOD.ORG

Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at mdc.mo.gov/events.



WHAT IS IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



AMERICAN LOTUS

American lotus grows in marshes, sloughs, and ponds across Missouri. Its large leaves, which can grow up to 2 feet wide, are covered with a waxy substance that makes water bead up and run off. Stunning yellowish-white flowers bloom from June to September. The flower petals eventually fall off, leaving behind a green seedpod that looks like the head of a bathroom shower. Over time, the pod turns brown, holes in the top open up, and seeds drop out.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside. How many of the things on the card can you find?

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH



Female



Male

NEST: © VAN KUZMIN / STOCK.ADOBE.COM

LATE NESTERS

Goldfinches nest later than most birds. They wait until July and August, when thistles and milkweeds make seeds.

COMFY NEST

Females collect the fluffy fibers from thistles and milkweeds to weave into a cup-shaped nest held together by spider silk.

STRICT VEGETARIANS

Most birds feed their babies bugs. But not goldfinches. They eat seeds and vomit them into the mouths of their chicks. *Yum!*

BOUNCY AND BLABBY

Goldfinches fly in a bouncy, up-and-down motion and usually call while in flight: *sue-weeeet!*

AGILE AND ACROBATIC

Weighing just a bit more than two U.S. quarters, a goldfinch often balances on sunflowers, thistles, and dandelions to pluck out seeds.

ONE LIE

— FROM PAGE 3 — Lie: 3 (A rattlesnake adds a new section to the base of its rattle each time it sheds its skin. Rattlesnakes shed multiple times a year.)

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FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

GO FIND IT!

American goldfinches are found in prairies, weedy fields, city parks, and backyards throughout Missouri. For more on these brilliantly-colored birds, flit over to mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

