

FOR JOSEPH AND BETHAN
B. L.



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**“IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE NATURAL WORLD
IS THE GREATEST SOURCE OF EXCITEMENT . . .
IT IS THE GREATEST SOURCE OF SO MUCH IN
LIFE THAT MAKES LIFE WORTH LIVING.”**



Sir David Attenborough

INTRODUCTION

What jumps into your mind when you think about the animal kingdom? It might be a lion prowling across the savannah. It might be a whale diving in the deep. It might be a puppy curled up on your lap or an eagle soaring over the mountains. It might be a fox or a frog, a baboon or a bear, a tiny turtle or a terrifying tiger. Nature is full of incredible creatures, and we're unbelievably lucky to share our planet with them all. Animals are amazing.

There are more than a million recorded animal species in the world, from the smallest tiddlers in the shallows to the biggest beasts in the jungle. Every single one of them is fascinating, but sometimes we hear about animals that have lived extra-special lives. Animals that have made important discoveries, taught us more about the world or even saved the lives of others. Animals that have made history.

This book is a celebration of some of the most famous and unforgettable animals of all time, and the remarkable lives that they've lived. The 50 stories here are all true. Some of them might make you laugh. Some of them might make you stop and think. All of them will help you to see just how brave, clever and fantastic animals can be.

Of course, despite the title of this book, not all animals live in the wild. Many live at home with humans, while others live on farms, in zoos or in other man-made places. Many of the animals included here have done incredible things despite having very little choice about how and where they lived. In lots of ways, it makes their achievements and adventures even more astonishing.

There are 50 history-making stories in this book, but there could easily have been 500. They tell the tales of small animals and tall animals, animals that swim and animals that fly, animals that we see every day and animals that are much rarer. All of them, however, deserve to have their life stories told here. So, the next time you're admiring one of nature's courageous creatures, make sure you remind yourself that wild lives are often wonderful lives – because animals can do truly extraordinary things.

CHER AMI

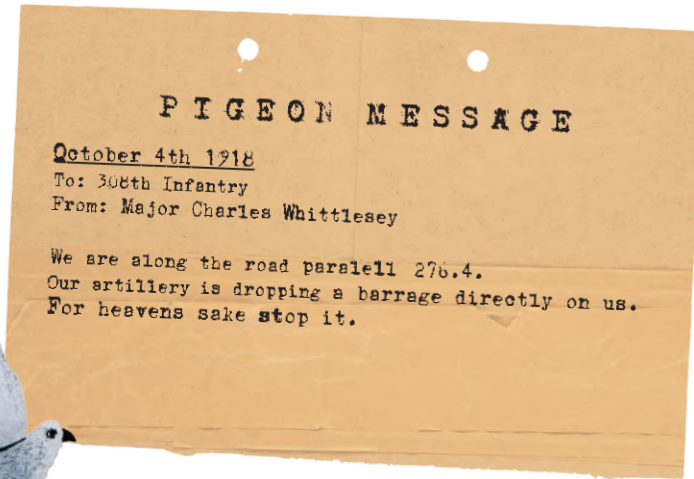
The pigeon who saved the lives of soldiers



FLY AWAY HOME

War heroes don't often have wings. When we talk about bravery in battle, we usually think of people who have risked their lives to help others. We don't often think of birds, which is why the tale of Cher Ami is so extraordinary. In 1918 in France, during the First World War, the little pigeon managed to save almost 200 lives.

Homing pigeons like Cher Ami are incredible birds. Each one learns to know where its home is, and will return there even when that home is many, many miles away. For this reason, homing pigeons – also called carrier pigeons – have been used for hundreds of years to send messages across long distances, with small notes attached to their legs.



The message Cher Ami carried for many miles

BRAVERY IN BATTLE

In the First World War, the United States Army used over 600 birds to carry messages across the battlefields of France. None of them was quite as heroic as Cher Ami. She had already delivered more than ten important messages during the war, but her final mission was her most famous.

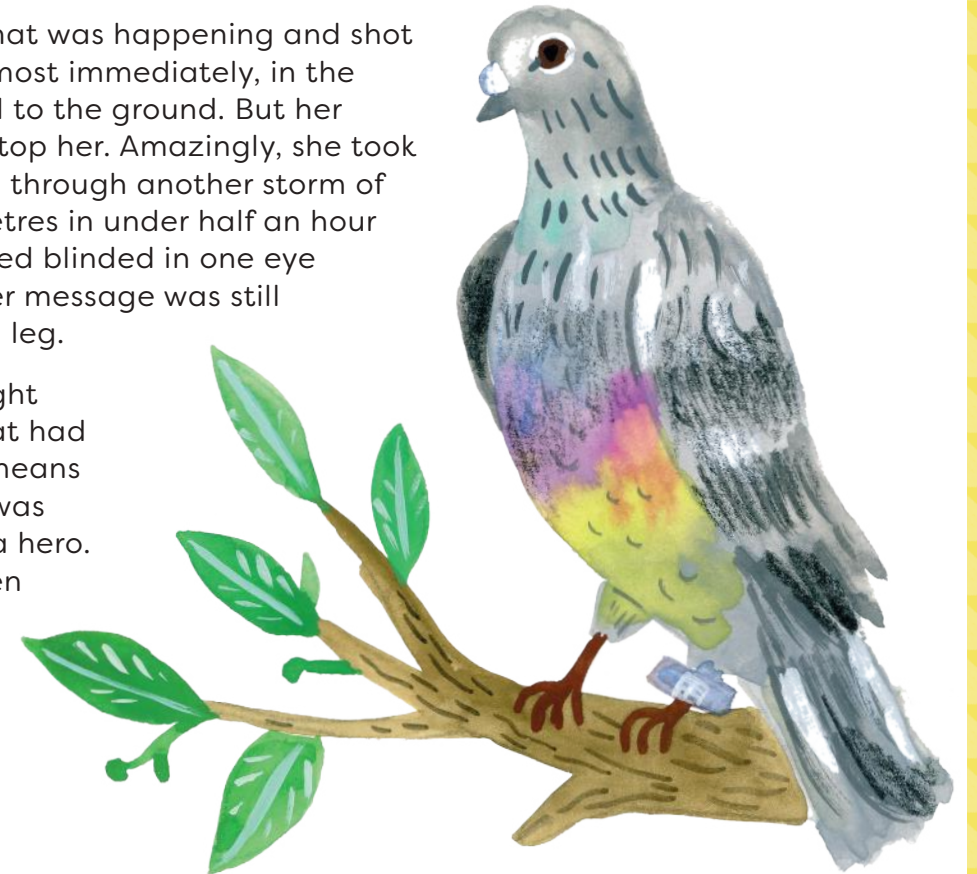


Cher Ami was awarded the 'Croix de Guerre' medal for bravery

Orders were given to stop the attack straight away, and 194 of the American soldiers that had been surrounded were rescued. Cher Ami means 'dear friend' in French, so the bird's name was a very good one – she was celebrated as a hero. The medics at the base made her a wooden leg to replace the one that had been shot and she was given the French 'Croix de Guerre', a war medal.

MAKING HISTORY

Whole books have been written about Cher Ami. Her story has even appeared in films. After the war, she returned to America by boat and was made part of the Racing Pigeon Hall of Fame. Her one-legged body is still on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington DC. It's a fitting way to remember a very determined bird and the long, courageous flight she made while the battle raged around her.



*“So with the message tied on tight,
I flew up straight with all my might;
Before I got up high enough,
Those watchful guns began to puff.*

*Machine-gun bullets came like rain,
You'd think I was an aeroplane;
And when I started to the rear,
My! the shot was coming near!*

*But on I flew, straight as a bee,
The wind could not catch up with me.”*

Extract from the poem 'Cher Ami',
by Harry Webb Farrington





SIMON



The cat who made his home on a warship

CATCHING RATS AND SAILOR'S HATS

Sometimes, small animals can make a big difference. You might not think a cat could ever help the sailors of a huge British warship, but that's exactly what one little black-and-white cat did. It was 1948 when the ship, HMS *Amethyst*, sailed into the Asian port of Hong Kong. Here, among the city's colourful temples and noisy markets, a 17-year-old sailor called George Hickenbottom found a tiny, hungry cat on the dockside. This is how Simon's story began.

George decided to look after the thin young cat. He hid Simon under his clothes and smuggled him on to the ship, then made a place in his cabin for him to rest. George was worried about what the ship's captain would say once he saw the cat. But when Captain Griffiths noticed Simon, he was happy rather than angry. The ship needed a cat to help get rid of all the rats that had got on board. Rats can spread germs and damage food supplies – and the sailors soon learned that Simon was a very good rat-catcher indeed.

He chased the rats everywhere, scampering across the decks and pouncing under tables, covering the ship from top to bottom. When he trapped a rat – which was often – he liked to carry the body in his mouth and lay it at the captain's feet. Sometimes he even left dead rats on the captain's bed! And when the captain took his hat off, Simon loved curling up inside his gold-braided cap. He was becoming a popular part of the ship's crew.



DANGER ON THE RIVER

The other sailors adored having Simon around. He boosted their morale, which means he made them feel happier about life at sea. Even when George and Captain Griffiths had to leave the ship, Simon stayed on board. The new captain, Captain Skinner, quickly became fond of the playful cat. But one day, while sailing up the hot, winding Yangtze River in China, Simon's ship found itself in big trouble.

It was 1949 and a time of war in China. Suddenly, from the green mountains on either side of the river there came missiles and gunshots. The fighters on the shore thought HMS *Amethyst* was an enemy boat. The ship was very badly damaged. Many sailors died, including Captain Skinner, and lots more were hurt. Simon had nasty injuries on his back and his legs, and when some sailors found him, he was tired, burned and weak. But the ship's doctor helped him to get better.



Simon with the crewmen of HMS *Amethyst*

The ship was still in a lot of danger. It wasn't safe to sail back down the river, so it became trapped where it was. But slowly, bravely, Simon returned to his normal life on board. He caught rats, patrolled the decks and sat on the beds of the injured sailors, helping to keep their spirits up in what was a very scary situation.

“Simon's company and expertise as a rat-catcher were invaluable during the months we were held captive. During a terrifying time, he helped boost the morale of many young sailors.”

Ship's Commander Stewart Hett, who was appointed 'cat officer'

MAKING HISTORY

It took more than 100 days for HMS *Amethyst* to escape the heat and gunfire of the Yangtze River. Everyone on board had to survive on very little food and water. When the ship finally reached the safety of the sea, the crew members were treated as heroes. Simon was given the Dickin Medal, a special award for animals who do great things in wartime. Even today, he is still the only cat to ever receive this honour.

Simon's life was short, and not easy. He lived for only a few more weeks after arriving in England and was buried at a cemetery in London. The stone above his grave is a fine tribute to a very faithful cat. It reads: "In memory of Simon. Awarded Dickin Medal August 1949. Throughout the Yangtze Incident his behaviour was of the highest order."





WOJTEK

The bear who became a soldier



FROM CUB TO CAMPMATE

During the Second World War, the Polish Army had one soldier who was different from all the rest. He had four legs, sharp claws and shaggy brown fur. His name was Wojtek (pronounced Voy-tek) and he was a bear who lived a very unexpected life. His story is incredible, although if he hadn't been spotted on the roadside as a cub, he might never have had much of a story at all.

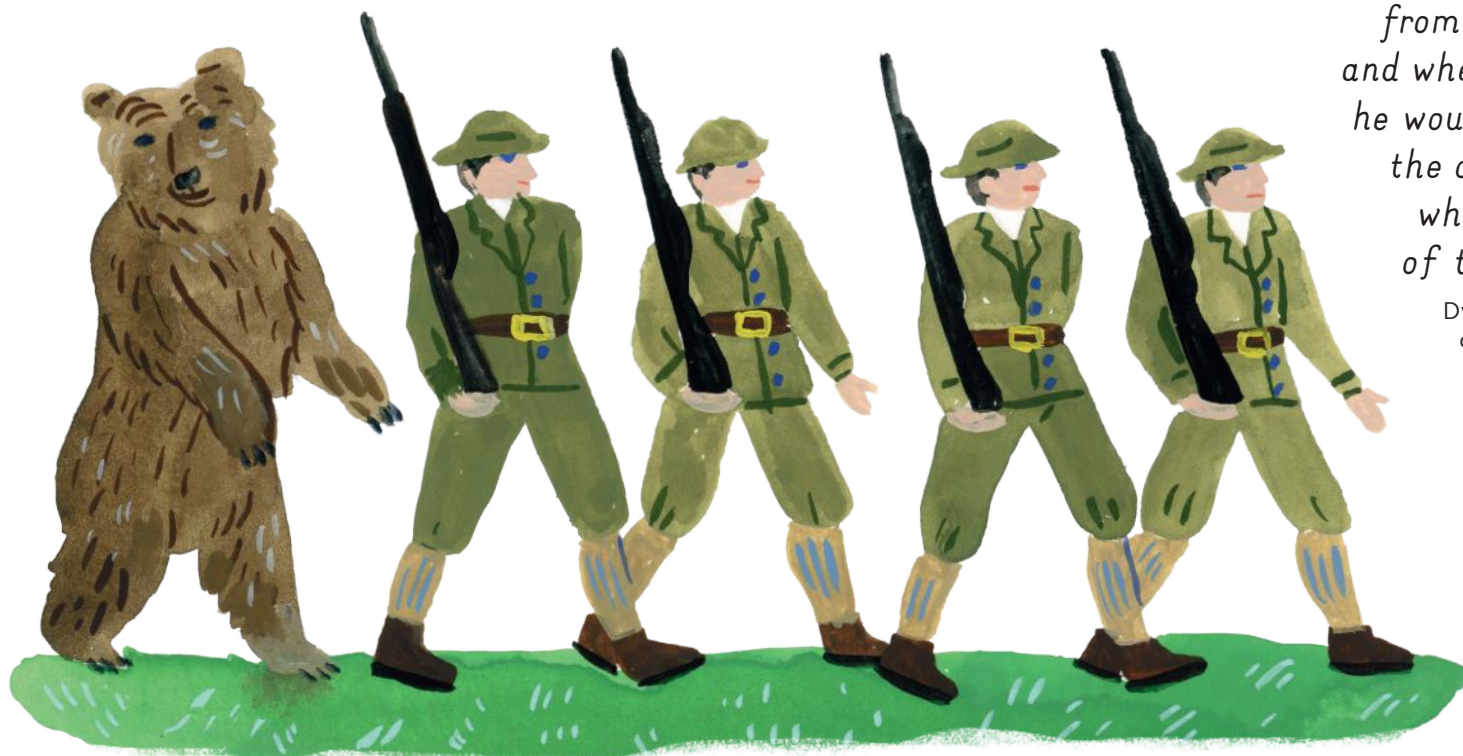
In April 1942, thousands of Polish soldiers were being taken from Russia to the Middle East. One day, as they were passing through Persia – a country now called Iran – they met a young boy holding a sack. Inside was a tiny bear cub. Its mother had been shot by hunters in the hills, and the cub looked thin and frightened.

The soldiers decided to buy the bear from the boy and look after it themselves. So they traded some money, a penknife, some chocolate and a tin of beef for the boy's sack with the orphan cub inside. But do you think, on that day, any of them ever imagined that the little bear would grow up to become a soldier?



“He loved to drink from a beer bottle, and when it was empty, he would look through the opening to see where the rest of the beer was.”

Dymitr Szawlugo, a Polish soldier



“He had a pay book. He didn't receive money, but was officially a Polish soldier. I felt like he was my older brother.”

Wojciech Narebski, a Polish soldier

The men called him Wojtek, which means 'happy warrior', and they began to feed him. They gave him milk and kept him warm at night by wrapping him in a big army coat. By the time they reached their next camp, the bear was already growing fast. He liked jumping in and out of the army trucks and trying to climb trees. The commanding officer noticed that lots of the soldiers were much happier when Wojtek was around.

As the Polish soldiers travelled around the Middle East, they kept Wojtek with them and he soon became part of the family. He was given double rations, which means he had twice as much to eat as the soldiers. Like all bears, he loved eating fruit and honey, but he also liked drinking beer when it was given to him! Wojtek enjoyed play-wrestling with the men and at night he sometimes even slept in their tents. But the bear often got into mischief too – he kept cool by turning on the showers when he wasn't allowed to and once he even pulled a load of underwear from the camp washing line!

A BEAR IN BATTLE

Then the war meant that the soldiers had to sail to Italy. They wanted to take Wojtek with them, but for him to be allowed on the ship, he had to have special permission from the leaders of the army. They decided that the brown bear did such a good job of cheering up the men that this would be a great idea. So, on 13 February 1944, the ship set sail from Egypt carrying Poland's newest soldier: 'Private Wojtek', who now weighed around 200 kilograms and could stand almost two metres tall.

He would have been a very scary sight on the battlefield – and unbelievably, three months later, that's exactly where he was. At the Battle of Monte Cassino in Italy, where the Polish soldiers fought against the Germans, Wojtek helped by carrying heavy boxes of bullets and bombs while standing upright! The noise and panic of the battle would have been terrifying and very confusing for a bear, but he stayed close to his human friends and survived.



Wojtek playing with troops (above) and the badge of the Second Polish Corps, showing Wojtek carrying a bomb (right)



MAKING HISTORY

When people found out about Wojtek's bravery in battle, he became a hero. The Polish soldiers had a special logo made that showed a bear carrying a bomb. He appeared on television, and had many books written about him. After the war, he was taken to Scotland, along with some of the Polish soldiers, and he spent the rest of his life in Edinburgh Zoo. Wojtek had never been able to live the normal life of a bear, but his story will never be forgotten – and during a dangerous war, he made an enormous difference to the people who knew him.