

How the Robin got it's red breast, or "Do the best you can with what you've got."

I first heard a version of this story from Charlene Collison when working on a project called Tales to Sustain, which 'gave birth' to a book called Storytelling for a Greener World. Charlene told the story of Quetzalcoatl, a multicoloured bird that saved the day by doing the best it could with what it had. I was asked to do some storytelling during Heath Week up on Woodbury Common in East Devon, for the RSPB, and so I changed the character of Charlene's story to a local heath resident.

In the time before time Robins were dull brown birds. No red breast, just dull brown feathers all over. However Robins have always been bold, inquisitive, full of courage and will fiercely protect their territories.

One day Robin was on the edge of the heath, down by the river having a little drink. Every time he sipped, "slurp" he popped up, looked around then and bent down for another sip. "Slurp." Every time he looked around he sniffed the air a little bit recently noticed the smell of woodsmoke thought perhaps the humans are having a fire to cook their lunch on.

Just then a black bird came flying out of the bushes screaming 'Robin! Flee for your life there's a fire up on the heath! The black bird flew past disappeared into the woods.

The robin thought "Oh no! That's my home! That's where I go in collect spiders to eat and that's where I make my nests I've got to do something! What can I do? Aha! Here is some water! I'll will take some water to put the fire out!" So he sipped up some water and flew towards the fire. When he got there he spat out the water "spit-fssss!" A tiny bit of the fire went out!

Robin flew back to get more water. "flrrrrrrr"

He collected more. "slurp"

He flew back to the fire, "flrrrrrrr" and spat out the water "spit-fiss"

He went back to the river to get more water.

Just then a (I ask the audience what other creatures live up on the heath?) Deer came running off the heath shouting, "Robin! Robin! Run for your life there is a fire upon the heath!"

"I can't just run away! The heath is my home!" It's where I eat and sleep! I can't just run away! I am doing the best I can with what I've got. Why don't you help me get some water and let's try to put the fire out!"

"Oh! Okay. Good idea!" Exclaimed the deer and they both took mouthfuls of water, "slurp", went to the edge of the fire and spat out the water "spit-fiss". A tiny bit more of the fire went out! As the robin went close to the fire the feathers on his chest became a little redder.

Robin and deer looked at one another. A look of "we can do this!" passed between them and they hurried back to get more water.

Just as Robin and Deer were bending down to get more water another animal came running off the heath!

[Eg 'A fox came running out of the heather. "Run! Flee! There is a fire on the heath! What are you doing, having a drink?!"

"We're not having a drink. We are doing the best we can with what we've got. We are putting the fire out with water from the river. Come and help us!"

'Oh! Okay!'"

So the three animals each took a mouthful of water, "slurp", hurried back to the fire and spat out the water, "spit-fisss". A little bit more of the fire went out! As the robin went close to the fire the feathers on his chest became a little redder.

They all rushed back to the river. Just as they were about to slurp up some more water...] another animal came off the heath!

(I usually repeat this for five or six animals , or as long as the audience are willing and able to go along with the story)

Eventually, with all the animals working together the fire was put out, Yippee!

Robin saved the day and Robin's feathers have remained red to this day. And that is one of the stories of how Robin got its red breast.

Suggested activities:

"What do you stand for?" stories.

Ask the listeners about local landmarks or favourite places they play in. What would they want to protect and stand for?

Ask them to make up a story, in small groups, about some creatures or people who were willing to save the day somehow. If you have percussion instruments to help with sound effects then all well and good, bring them out, but I suggest you wait until the groups come to you with a storyline before letting them choose an instrument or two.

Allow time for each story to be shared and witnessed by the rest of the group, or at least by another group.

Fill the bucket

With younger children we play the team game of transferring water from one full bucket to an empty one using small containers- for example mini yoghurt pots. If there are a lot of children it can be a competition using multiple pairs of buckets and the team with the most water transferred wins!

Animal forms movement

Another game we have played is where we talk about the animals that live in the places the children would like to protect. Then we practice moving around like that animal before choosing a place to go to and have a pretend slurp of water and come back to the start... and choosing another animal to pretend to be.