



# Letters to Nature Kids

October 2025 ➦ Number 23

*Dear Nature Kids,*

In Texas, in the month of October we should move into autumn weather with cool days and more rain. What is it like where you are? In North Texas, summer heat is stubborn this year. But pumpkins are here, along with pumpkin-flavored drinks and pumpkins in the stores so we can make Jack-o'-lanterns.

Where did Jack-o'-lanterns come from? The Carnegie Museum of Natural History tells us how, long ago, people in Ireland would go house to house asking for food and drink as part of the rituals of Samhain. (It's pronounced something like "Sow-wen.") Samhain is a Celtic harvest festival, celebrated from the evening of October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup>. That's midway between the start of autumn and the start of winter.

Anyway, the people asking for food were kind of like early trick or treaters, right? And they often hollowed out a turnip to make a lantern with a candle inside to light their way in the night. Sometimes they carved a face into the turnip.



*Three Jack-o'-Lanterns*

This "jack-o'-lantern" got even better in the New World when Native Americans introduced settlers to a kind of squash – the pumpkin. We carve a face on the pumpkin, but we don't have to carry it around and use it for light. But some of us do still go from house to house, asking for food ... well, I guess candy counts as food.

Jack-o'-lanterns, costumes, and candy are part of the fun of Halloween. We enjoy dressing up as the things we fear. For at least one evening, we can be the scary ones and pretend to have their power, only for fun (and a little candy).

In addition to the witches and monsters, we tell stories in which some of the scary things on Halloween are animals. In real life they are just normal animals, but they are frightening in our stories and superstitions—the tales of ravens, black cats, spiders, bats and wolves.

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For example, bats fly like birds, but they do it in the dark of night and can find their way as if by magic. Now we may know that bats find their way around by vocalizing and hearing the sound echo off objects. Sound bounces off



An old illustration of bats

trees, buildings, even off the insects that they hunt to eat, and the echoes tell the bat where things are. Those sounds are so high pitched that our ears cannot hear them. Unless we study and understand bats, they might seem like animals with supernatural powers.

When something seems weird and unexplainable, people try to find some way to make it make sense. Sometimes we figure out the truth about it, like bats using echoes to find their way around. But there are plenty of times that people come up with strange and even frightening explanations.

An old folk belief was that if a bat flies into your house, someone will die. Another belief was that bats were like ghosts or souls who were not at peace. In such stories, a bat is a sort of a dark, leathery version of an angel. Instead of an angel's wings, there is skin stretched over the bony fingers of a hand. Instead of an angelic face, there may be tiny eyes and what looks to us like a big, grotesque nose and ears. These things are normal for a bat, but they seem weird to us.

Most bats eat flying insects like moths, flying beetles, or even mosquitoes. On a good night Mexican free-tailed bats can catch an amazing number of insects, and they might increase their body weight by more than half. If you weighed 50 pounds, and you ate that much, you might weigh 80 pounds by the end of the night. Of course, no bat weighs that much. The Mexican free-tailed bat is one of our medium-sized bats and it weighs only about a half-ounce.

When I mention that insect diet, you might say, "what about vampire bats?" There are such bats, though they do not drain all the blood from their prey. They are small and could not take in much blood. Often they feed on farm animals like cattle, but some vampire bat species like birds. And none of them live far enough north for us to see them in Texas.



I'm pretty sure you have heard scary stories about bats or watched a movie about Dracula. In that story, Count Dracula is a vampire and can turn into a bat. There are other stories of humans turning into something else – like the wolf-man. And people long ago thought that witches could turn themselves into black cats so we would not notice them.

What about owls? Some old stories link witches to owls and even say that they



*An old illustration of owls*

could change into owls. Sitting up in a tree, looking around in the darkness with eyes that face forward like ours do, someone might think it is part human, part bird. Or that it could change from one into the other. There used to be a belief among some people that the nighttime call of an owl was really made by the soul of a deceased person. All this is just story-telling. Owls are just birds whose appearance and habits really spark our imaginations.

If you go out for trick or treat, I hope you have a good time. It can be fun to be scared just a little, when we're with friends and we know the scary thing isn't real. For some people it's a little bit like facing our fears, and once the jolt of fear passes, the relief feels pretty good.

However, some people want to scare others because it makes them feel more powerful or stronger than the person that they scared. They might look at the person they scared and laugh at them. This is not the same as kids having fun with each other. I'm talking about a person who enjoys seeing someone *really* afraid in a way that's not fun. That's bullying and it is not OK. Stay away from someone like that.

On Halloween, I hope you have fun and also stay safe. Don't let anyone scare you unless you are *both* just playing and having fun. And remember that all the scary Halloween stories about animals like bats or spiders are just make-believe, even if they are based on a real animal. When you get to know the actual spiders or the real bats, they're not scary at all.

✍ Michael



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