

12<sup>th</sup> July

**Memory Verse:** In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Genesis 1:1

This is a very well known verse and if you already know it, add to it by learning some of the verses that follow. This is also a breath taking verse because it tells us where *everything* comes from! Nothing else in the Bible makes sense without it – which is why it has to come first.

Today's story is about someone who was a very acute observer of the created things around him. However, as you read you will notice something about what he observes that is very different from things as they were “in the beginning”. What is this difference and how do we account for it?<sup>1</sup>

**Be a naturalist<sup>2</sup>**

In 1771 Gilbert White wrote from his home in the village of Selborne, Hampshire, to his friend and fellow naturalist Thomas Pennant of Whitford near Holywell in Flintshire, describing the observations he made at this time of year:



On the **twelfth of July** I had a fair opportunity of contemplating the motions of the *caprimulgus [europaeus]*, or fern-owl [Nightjar], as it was playing round a large oak that swarmed with *scarabaei solstitiales*<sup>3</sup>, or fern-chafers [Maybugs]. The powers of its wing were wonderful, exceeding, if possible, the various evolutions and quick turns of the swallow genus. But the circumstance that pleased me most was that I saw it distinctly, more than once, put out its short leg while on

the wing, and, by a bend of the head, deliver somewhat into its mouth. If it takes any part of its prey with its foot, as I have now the greatest reason to suppose it does these chafers, I no longer wonder at the use of its middle toe, which is curiously furnished with a serrated claw.

Gilbert White (1720-1793) was a parson, or Church of England vicar of Selborne. His book *The Natural History of Selborne*, which was a collection of his letters to Thomas Pennant, has never been out of print since it was first published in 1789.



About **the same time in July** 1773 he wrote to Thomas Pennant about some Barn Owls (“White Owls” is his name for them and you can see why from the picture) who were nesting at that time under the eaves of Selborne Church:

About an hour before sunset (for then the mice begin to run) they sally forth in quest of prey, and hunt all round the hedges of meadows and small enclosures for them, which seem to be their only food. In this irregular country we can stand on an eminence and see them beat the fields over like a setting-dog, and often drop down in the grass or corn. I have minuted these birds with my watch for an hour together, and have found that they return to their nests, the one or the other of them, about once in five minutes; reflecting

<sup>1</sup> Answer on the last page.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Owen, Evan, *What Happened Today* Volume 2, available on the *Mothers' Companion* Flashdrive. <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Scientific names have often changed since Gilbert's White's times. The scientific name for this creature is now *Melolontha melolontha*.

at the same time on the adroitness that every animal is possessed of as regards the well-being of itself and offspring. But a piece of address, which they show when they return loaded, should not, I think, be passed over in silence. – As they take their prey with their claws, so they carry it in their claws to their nest: but, as the feet are necessary in their ascent under the tiles, they constantly perch first on the roof of the chancel, and shift the mouse from their claws to their bill, that the feet may be at liberty to take hold of the plate on the wall as they are rising under the eaves.

White owls seem not (but in this I am not positive) to hoot at all: all that clamorous hooting appears to me to come from the wood kinds. The white owl does indeed snore and hiss in a tremendous manner; and these menaces well answer the intention of intimidating: for I have known a whole village up in arms on such an occasion, imagining the church-yard to be full of goblins and spectres. White owls also often scream horribly as they fly along; from this screaming probably arose the common people's imaginary species of screech-owl, which they superstitiously think attends the windows of dying persons. The plumage of the remiges [flight feathers] of the wings of every species of owl that I have yet examined is remarkably soft and pliant. Perhaps it may be necessary that the wings of these birds should not make much resistance or rushing, that they may be enabled to steal through the air unheard upon a nimble and watchful quarry.

Gilbert White combined the ability to write vivid description with acute observation of details. Many readers enjoy his book just for “the peace and restfulness of this most delightful of books”<sup>4</sup> Others prize the book because of White's minute observations of living things. About a hundred years later Grant Allen (1848-1899) was able to write, “Most of [White's] observations are of such accuracy that they are still among the best we possess”. Can you find out if Gilbert White was correct about Barn Owls not hooting?

It must be admitted that eighteenth century country parsons often did very little pastoral work and their parishes were mostly uncared for spiritually. We get a glimpse of this when Parson White writes, “ I have known a whole village up in arms on such an occasion, imagining the church-yard to be full of goblins and spectres....” and talks of “...the common people's imaginary species of screech-owl, which they superstitiously think attends the windows of dying persons.” The people were starving for spiritual food and when Whitefield, Grimshaw, the Wesleys and others went among them preaching in the open air many came, glad to listen.<sup>5</sup> Gilbert White had so much time for observing nature perhaps because he did not take the responsibilities of his job seriously.

To be a true naturalist one needs great patience, unending curiosity, a keen eye, and a notebook in which to record observations and make diagrams and drawings. Even if you live in the town you will be surprised how much you can observe. You will find some birds that can find a living in the most crowded cities and a few “weeds” always escape the efforts of local councils to destroy them. No one minds if you pick them and take them home to look them up in a nature book either! In some city areas you will be able to observe mammals such as those banes of suburban gardeners, the urban fox and the grey squirrel.

### Wildlife drawing

Drawing the things you see is always a good thing to do too. Ask at you local library for a book on wildlife drawing that will help you get your observations down on paper well.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Richard Bowdler-Sharpe (1847-1909), British museum ornithologist.

5 See 1<sup>st</sup> July's lesson.

6 Older children may find some helpful hints here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUBdI95DgXM> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwnwJSi-yD8>

The Nightjar is a migratory bird, arriving in Britain from Africa to breed in April and May.<sup>7</sup> They have declined in number greatly since Gilbert White's day, although there is a slight increase again now. Find out about the food source that White describes, the Maybug, for a clue as to one reason why they might not be so numerous as in his day.<sup>8</sup> Look out for more about migrating birds in 17<sup>th</sup> July's lesson.

### Something to make<sup>9</sup>

God created the various kinds of land and sea wildlife and domestic animals on two different days of the creation week. Can you remember which days and which kinds of animals were created on each?

Younger children could make a Days of Creation frieze of seven A4 panels. Older ones could help them. Number the days one to seven. Write "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" underneath or on the top and use greetings cards, magazine pictures etc. – anything you can cut out to illustrate the things created on the various days. This is an excellent project for someone who is just learning to count and to understand ideas like "beginning".

### Make your own museum

Another of Gilbert White's letters contains the following interesting description:

A certain swallow built for two years together on the handles of a pair of garden-shears, that were stuck up against the boards in an out-house, and therefore must have her nest spoiled whenever that implement was wanted: and, what is stranger still, another bird of the same species built its nest on the wings and body of an owl that happened by accident to hang dead and dry from the rafter of a barn. This owl, with the nest on its wings, and with eggs in the nest, was brought as a curiosity worthy the most elegant private museum in Great Britain. The owner, struck with the oddity of the sight, furnished the bringer with a large shell, or conch, desiring him to fix it just where the owl hung: the person did as he was ordered, and the following year a pair, probably the same pair, built their nest in the conch, and laid their eggs. The owl and the conch make a strange grotesque appearance, and are not the least curious specimens in that wonderful collection of art and nature.

The museum mentioned belonged to Sir Ashton Lever (1729-1788) and it was he who provided the conch shell. He began his grand collection of natural curiosities by collecting sea shells but moved on to all sorts of other things, including live animals, until he had a huge collection which he opened to the public, first in Manchester and later at his home, Alkrington Hall, near Rochdale. Later he moved the collection, which he called the *Holophusikon*, meaning "the whole of nature", to London's Leicester Square where visitors could view it for a fee. You can see a detailed picture of the *Holophusikon* on the next page. Captain Cook supplied some of the exhibits from his expeditions. I wonder if the canoe that can be seen near the top was one of his gifts? All the squares that look like tiles with beautiful birds painted on them are actually glass cases with stuffed birds in them. In those days there was no other way for people to see animals from other parts of the world so stuffed specimens were very important.

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7 Their distinctive churring sound can be heard here: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/nightjar/>.

8 You can find out more about migration here: <https://creation.com/moths-navigating-by-the-stars>  
<https://answersingenesis.org/animal-behavior/migration/journey-home/>.

9 Adapted from "Diary for Year 4" available on the *Mothers' Companion* Flashdrive.  
<https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>





Can you find the pelican and the flamingo with – can it be? – a penguin in the next case along. Something makes me think that whoever had the job of stuffing the elephant had not seen a live one! Or perhaps he was a carved elephant brought back someone from the East India Company as a curiosity. Is it my imagination or can I see a bird sitting on a big shell just below the elephant's mouth that might be the one Gilbert White mentioned? It is not a conch shell so perhaps not.

Although you will not be able to have such a grand display as Sir Ashton Lever, even he probably started off his collection with one modest sized case of shells. You can make quite a nice display case for shells, cones, feathers, interesting stones, and even pressed flowers by dividing a cardboard box into sections with pieces of cardboard. Sometime you can even find a box that has held small items which is already divided up. Paint your box dark brown outside and white inside if you want it to look like one of Sir Ashton Lever's mahogany cases and wrap it in cling film when you have filled it, to look like glass.

Answer:

Gilbert White observed birds eating other creatures – death in other words. There was no death in the beginning, no suffering and no pain. Everything was “very good” in God's eyes. It was not until sin entered the world that death and suffering began.<sup>10</sup> See Genesis Chapter 1 v 30.

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<sup>10</sup> For more detailed information see for instance: <https://creation.com/animals-eating-animals>