

Buster Bear Nearly Breaks Up School

Thornton W. Burgess

"Has Buster Bear a tail?" asked Old Mother Nature, and her eyes twinkled.

"No," declared Whitefoot the Wood Mouse promptly.

"Yes," contradicted Chatterer the Red Squirrel.

"What do you say, Prickly Porky?" Old Mother Nature asked.

"I don't think he has any; if he has, I've never seen it," said Prickly Porky.

"That's because you've got poor eyes," spoke up Jumper the Hare. "He certainly has a tail. It isn't much of a one, but it is a tail. I know because I've seen it many times."

"Woof, woof," said a deep, rumbly, grumbly voice. "What's going on here? Who is it hasn't any tail?"

At the sound of that deep, rumbly, grumbly voice it looked for a few minutes as if school would be broken up for that day. There was the same mad scrambling to get away that there had been the morning Reddy Fox unexpectedly appeared. However, there was this difference: When Reddy appeared, most of the little people sought safe hiding places, but now they merely ran to safe distances, and there turned to stare with awe and great respect at the owner of that deep, rumbly, grumbly voice. It was great, big Buster Bear himself.

Buster stood up on his hind legs, like a man, and his small eyes, for they are small for his size, twinkled with fun as he looked around that awe filled circle. "Don't let me interrupt," said he. "I heard about this school and I thought I would just pay a friendly visit. There is nothing for you to fear. I have just had my breakfast and I couldn't eat another mouthful to save me, not even such a tender morsel as Whitefoot the Wood Mouse."

Whitefoot hurriedly ran a little farther away, and Buster Bear chuckled. Then he looked over at Old Mother Nature. "Won't you tell them that I'm the best-natured and most harmless fellow in all the Great World?" he asked.

Old Mother Nature smiled. "That depends on the condition of your stomach," said she. "If it is as full as you say it is, and I know you wouldn't tell me an untruth, not even timid Whitefoot has anything to fear from you." Then she told all the little people to put aside their fears and return.

Buster, seeing that some of the more timid were still fearful, backed off a short distance and sat down on his haunches. "What was that about a tail I overheard as I came up?" he asked.

"It was a little discussion as to whether or not you have a tail," replied Old Mother Nature. "Some say you have, and some say you haven't. Whitefoot thinks you haven't."

Once more Buster Bear chuckled way down deep in his throat. "Whitefoot never in his life looked at me long enough to know whether I've got a tail or not," said he. "I never yet have seen him until now, when he wasn't running away as fast as his legs could take him. So with me always behind him, how could he tell whether or not I have a tail?"

"Well, have you?" demanded Peter Rabbit bluntly.

"What do you think?" asked Buster.

"I think you have," said Peter. "But if you have you are sitting down on it and I can't tell. It can't be much of a one, anyhow."

Again Buster chuckled. "Quite right, Peter; quite right," said he. "I've got a tail, but hardly enough of a one to really call it a tail."

As Buster sat there, every one had a splendid chance to see just how he looked. His coat was all black; in fact he was black all over, with the exception of his nose, which was brown. His fur was long and rather shaggy. His ears were round. His paws were big and armed with strong, wicked looking claws.

"You all see what a black coat Buster has," said Old Mother Nature. "Now I'm going to tell you something which may surprise you. Just as there are Red Foxes that are black, so there are Black Bears that are brown."

"What's that?" grunted Buster, with the funniest look of surprise on his face.

"It's a fact, Buster," said Old Mother Nature. "A great many of your family live out in the mountains of the Far West, and there quite often there will be one who is all brown. People used to think that these brown Bears were a different kind of Bear, and called them Cinnamon Bears. It was a long, long time before it was found out that those brown Bears are really black Bears. Sometimes one of the twin babies will be all black and the other all brown. Sometimes one of Buster's family will have a white spot on his breast. Buster's branch of the family is found in nearly all of the wooded parts of the entire country. In the Sunny South they live in the swamps and do not grow as big as in the North. Buster, there is a soft spot on the ground; I want you to walk across it so that these little folks can see your footprints."

Good-naturedly Buster dropped on all fours and walked across the soft spot. Right away every one understood why Old Mother Nature had asked Buster to do this. The prints of his hind feet were very like the prints of Farmer Brown's boy when barefooted, only of course very much larger. You see, they showed the print of the heel as well as the rest of the foot.

"You see," said Old Mother Nature, "Buster puts his whole foot on the ground, while all members of the Dog and Cat families walk wholly on their toes. Animals that put the whole foot down are called plantigrade. How big do you think Buster was when he was born?"

"Of course I'm only guessing," said Chatterer the Red Squirrel, "but he is such a big fellow that I think he must have been a bouncing big baby."

Old Mother Nature smiled. "I don't wonder you think so," said she. "The fact is, however, Buster was a very tiny and very helpless little chap. He was just about the size of one of Prickly Porky's babies. He was no bigger than a Rat. He was born in the middle of winter and didn't get his eyes open for forty days. It was two months before he poked his head outside the den in which he was born, to find out what the Great World was like. At that time he wasn't much bigger than Peter Rabbit, and he and his twin sister were as lively a pair of youngsters and as full of mischief as any Bears the Green Forest has ever seen. You might tell us, Buster, what you live on."

Buster's eyes snapped. "I live on anything I can eat, and I can eat most everything. I suppose a lot of people think I live almost wholly on the little people who are my neighbors, but that is a mistake. I do catch Mice when I am lucky enough to find them where I can dig them out, and they certainly are good eating."

At this Whitefoot the Wood Mouse and Danny Meadow Mouse hastily scurried farther away, and Buster's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Of course I don't mind a Rabbit either, if I am lucky enough to catch one," said he, and Peter Rabbit quickly backed off a few steps. "In fact I like meat of any kind," continued Buster. "But the greater part of my food isn't meat at all. In the spring I dig up roots of different kinds, and eat tender grass shoots and some bark and twigs from young trees. When the insects appear they help out wonderfully. I am very fond of Ants. I pull over all the old logs and tear to

pieces all the old stumps I can find, and lick up the Ants and their eggs that I am almost sure to find there. Almost any kind of insect tastes good to me if there are enough of them. I love to find and dig open the nests of Wasps that make their homes in the ground, and of course I suppose you all know that there is nothing in the world I like better than honey. If I can find a Bee nest I am utterly happy. For the sake of the honey, I am perfectly willing to stand all the stinging the Bees can give me. I like fish and I love to hunt Frogs. When the berry season begins, I just feast. In the fall I get fat on beechnuts and acorns. The fact is, there isn't much I don't like."

"I've been told you sleep all winter," said Johnny Chuck.

"That depends on the winter," replied Buster Bear. "I don't go to sleep until I have to. I don't have to as long as I can find enough to eat. If the winter begins early, with bad weather, I make a comfortable bed of leaves in a cave or under a big pile of fallen trees or even in a hollow log, if I can find one big enough. Then I go to sleep for the rest of the winter. But if the winter is mild and open and there is a chance of finding anything to eat, I sleep only in the really bad weather."

"Do you try to get fat before going to sleep, the way I do?" asked Johnny Chuck.

Buster grinned. "Yes, Johnny, I try," said he, "and usually I succeed. You see, I need to be fat in order to keep warm and also to have something to live on in the spring, just the same as you do.

"I've been told that you can climb, but as I don't live in the Green Forest I have never seen you climb. I should think it would be slow work for such a big fellow as you to climb a tree," said Johnny Chuck.

Buster looked up at Happy Jack Squirrel and winked. Then he walked over to the tree in which Happy Jack was sitting, stood up and suddenly began to scramble up the tree. There was nothing slow about the way Buster Bear went up that tree. Happy Jack squealed with sudden fright and started for the top of that tree as only Happy Jack can climb. Then he made a flying jump to the next tree. Halfway up Buster stopped. Then he began to come down. He came down tail first. When he was within ten feet of the ground he simply let go and dropped.

"I did that just to show you how I get out of a tree when I am really in a hurry," explained Buster. "I don't climb trees much now unless it is for honey, but when I was a little fellow I used to love to climb trees."

Suddenly Buster sat up very straight and pointed his nose up in the wind. An anxious look crept into his face. He cocked his ears as if listening with all his might. That is just what he was doing. Presently he dropped down to all fours. "Excuse me," said he, "I think I had better be going. Farmer Brown is coming down the Lone Little Path."

Buster turned and disappeared at a speed that was simply astonishing in such a clumsy-looking fellow. Old Mother Nature laughed. "Buster's eyes are not very good," said she, "but there is nothing the matter with his nose or with his ears. If Buster says that Farmer Brown is coming down the Lone Little Path, there is no doubt that he is, although he may be some distance away yet. Buster has been smart enough to learn that he has every reason to fear man, and he promptly takes himself out of the way at the first hint that man is near. It is a funny thing, but most men are as afraid of Buster as Buster is of them, and they haven't the least need of being afraid at all. Where man is concerned there isn't one of you little people more timid than Buster Bear. The faintest smell of man will make him run. If he should be wounded or cornered, he would fight. Mrs. Bear would fight to protect her babies, but these are the only conditions under which a Black Bear will face a man. You think Buster is big, and he is, but Buster has relatives very much bigger than he. He has one beside whom he would look actually small. I'll tell you a little about these cousins of Buster."

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Buster Bear Nearly Breaks Up School. *The Burgess Animal Book for Children*. Electronic.