

An artistic illustration of an owl peering out from a hole in a tree trunk. The tree bark is textured and greenish-brown. The background is a dark blue night sky with white stars and stylized white trees. Red, hand-like shapes are scattered around the tree trunk. The title 'ELF OWL!' is written in large, white, stylized letters across the top.


ELF OWL!

• AND HIS ECOSYSTEM •

Megan Noel



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A glorious rainbow of brilliant colors streaks the sky as the burning sun begins to sink behind the hot, sandy dunes of the Sonoran Desert. Suddenly, as the first stars begin to twinkle overhead, a rather high-pitched chuckling sound breaks the evening stillness. It continues on and on, as if something is very funny. Who could that be?

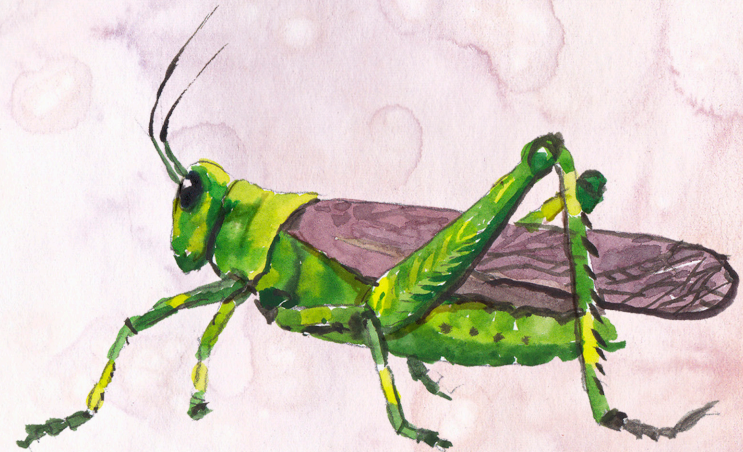


The curious noises can be traced beyond a riot of colorful wildflowers to a nearby forest of towering saguaro cacti, which are not found naturally anywhere else in the world. A closer look reveals that this “laughter” doesn’t belong to a person at all. This is the call of the smallest of all owls—the elf owl! Can you spot him?




A watercolor illustration of a desert night scene. The sky is a mix of deep blue and purple, with a bright white star shining from a hole in a saguaro cactus. The ground is a light, dusty purple. In the foreground, there are several saguaro cacti, some with small yellow flowers. The overall style is soft and artistic.

There he is! It is springtime, and Elf Owl has just recently returned to his breeding grounds here in the arid desert ecosystem of southern Arizona. Elf owls never build their own nesting sites, so he has chosen to move into an abandoned Gila woodpecker hole, high in this sturdy saguaro. Now he must defend his territory and attract a mate with which to share his new home, so he calls out across the moonlit landscape.



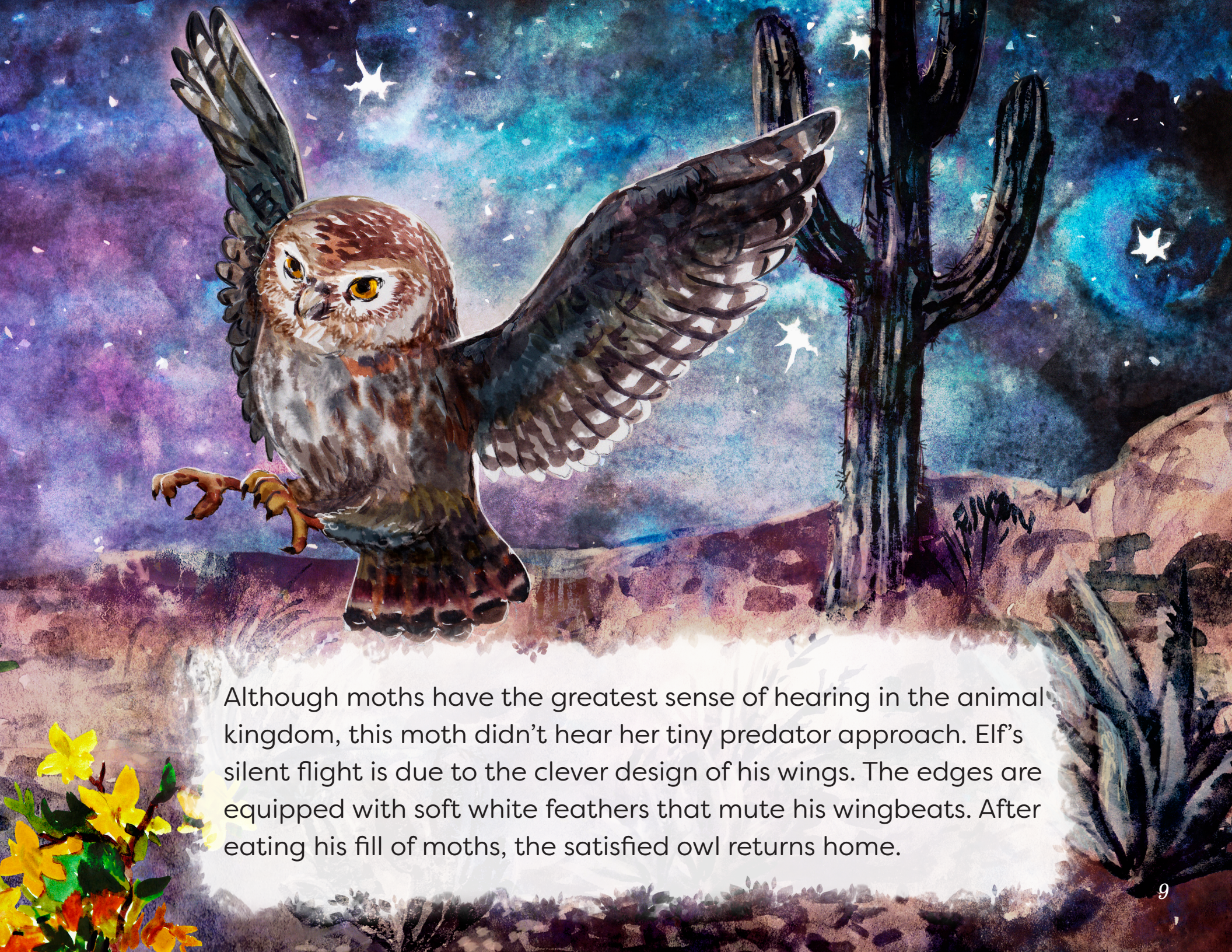
Because the bright desert days are hot, many other creatures are also just beginning to stir as the daylight fades away. Crickets, katydids, and other nocturnal insects raise their chirping chorus. They sustain elf owls and many other creatures in this hot, dry climate with their protein and water content.



An antelope jackrabbit emerges from his shady daytime hideout beneath a palo verde tree, bounding across the sand in search of a prickly pear cactus to nibble on. His enormous ears are ever on the alert for dangerous predators. In the distance, a coyote's eerie moan echoes off the walls of a canyon and is answered with barks and wails from his pack.



Darkness has almost settled-in, but Elf's large, round, yellow eyes have no trouble spotting the flutter of a moth's wings as it flits around a clump of brittlebushes, busily pollinating the yellow blooms. Elf patiently waits for the ideal opportunity before swooping down to claim his dinner.



Although moths have the greatest sense of hearing in the animal kingdom, this moth didn't hear her tiny predator approach. Elf's silent flight is due to the clever design of his wings. The edges are equipped with soft white feathers that mute his wingbeats. After eating his fill of moths, the satisfied owl returns home.



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The Sonoran Desert stretches from the southwestern United States through western Mexico and is home to many creatures, including one of the world's tiniest and cutest birds of prey: the elf owl. We will follow him through his ecosystem as he goes about his nightly business and then join him as he ventures out on his own during the day. There is always something interesting to observe at any time of day or night in this surprisingly biodiverse ecosystem.

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL
goodandbeautiful.com

ISBN 978-1-952920-37-0 \$6.99
5 0699 >



9 781952 920370

SKU 736