

Nature's Neighbors – Part 1

Story by Jeff Lockwood

Music by Nadav Amir-Himmel

Editing and production by Willow Belden

Welcome to Once Upon a Meadow. Our stories are written for the ear, so for those able, we recommend listening while reading along. Transcripts may contain minor errors; please check the audio before quoting.

Once upon a time, there lived a community, who shared a meadow, with a stream running through it. There was Rabbit, Deer, the Squirrels, and Elder Oak. One day, Rabbit bounded into the meadow and began dashing in circles, as rabbits tend to do when they are excited. The Squirrels had been foraging for acorns beneath the oak tree and were bowled over by Rabbit.

“Oh goodness, Rabbit,” said Gray Squirrel, from beneath a furry pile of animals. “You need to be more careful.”

“I’m sorry I knocked you down,” said Rabbit. “But I’m *so* excited. I overheard some people talking.” Rabbit’s big and sensitive ears wiggled for emphasis. “The humans are going to create a new state park. And our meadow is going to be in the middle of the parkland!”

Deer had been resting quietly in the forest, listening to the commotion. Now that the animals were less rowdy, she walked gracefully into the meadow.

“That *is* big news, Rabbit,” said Deer. “Becoming a park means that we will be safer, because the humans won’t allow hunting near hikers and campers.” Rabbit’s fluffy tail wiggled in delight. Like Deer, they spent long hours hiding from hunters.

“It also means no more people cutting down the trees,” said Brown Squirrel. Last summer, he had visited a cousin in another state park, where the forest was protected rather than turned into lumber.

“And *that* means there will be lots of big, old trees with hollows for our nest,” said Gray Squirrel, giving his partner a big hug.

During all of the chatter, Elder Oak had been silent. Rabbit wondered why the tree hadn’t joined in the animals’ excitement.

“What do you think about the new park, Elder Oak?” asked Rabbit.

The animals knew that the tree was very, very old—older than any of them could even imagine. And with all of that experience, Elder Oak had grown very, very wise. The animals fell silent because you have to listen extremely carefully to hear the trees.

“I think,” said the oak tree, “that we shall see.”

The wise old oak understood that new events can be thrilling but that change can bring unexpected results.

Over the next year, there were many changes as the humans built their park. They paved roads, made hiking trails, installed picnic tables, created campgrounds, dug fire pits, and built a visitor center. For their part, the animals were mostly happy. They no longer needed to hide from hunters, and old trees provided homes for many creatures. But the Park also brought some big problems.

It all came to a head one afternoon when Brown Squirrel was crossing one of the new roads in search of mushrooms. A car came whizzing down the highway. Brown Squirrel dashed to the

left, and then to the right, and then to the left again, trying to avoid the oncoming car. The driver swerved, but not in time. Brown Squirrel lay alongside the road.

“Oh my goodness!” shouted Gray Squirrel, dashing to his boyfriend. Brown Squirrel’s eyes were open and he was whimpering.

“I think he’s alright,” said Rabbit, hopping to the side of the road with their whiskers twitching in concern. “But it looks like his tail got squashed.”

“That was a close call,” said Deer. She trembled at having witnessed such a scary moment.

“Let’s carry Brown Squirrel to where he’ll be safe.”

It took them until sunset to slowly and gently help their injured friend to the meadow. At last, the animals gathered under Elder Oak. Gray Squirrel tenderly stroked his partner’s wounded tail.

“There are too many new roads,” said Brown Squirrel. He started to twitch his tail but stopped because it hurt.

“Yeah, I hate all the fast cars,” said Gray Squirrel. “And I hate lots of other things about the park, too.”

“Like what?” asked Rabbit.

“People leave behind their trash,” answered Gray Squirrel. “And I’m not very good at resisting their discarded food.” He looked down at his feet.

“That is a hard lesson to learn,” said Brown Squirrel, patting his partner’s shoulder.

“A hard lesson. And a painful one,” said Gray Squirrel. “I ate some potato chips that someone left behind. They made my tummy hurt for hours.” Gray Squirrel rubbed his belly.

The animals fell quiet as they thought about the changes that came with the humans and their park. And then Deer, who was usually reluctant to complain about anything, spoke up.

“I must say, that too many people do not respect the quiet peacefulness of this place,” said Deer.

“When humans gather wood for their campfires, they use a trail near where I used to hide my babies. So, I had to move deeper into the forest.” She glanced over her shoulder, looking into the darkness among the trees.

“And that means you have to walk farther to browse in the meadow, and leave your children all alone while you eat,” suggested Brown Squirrel.

“Indeed,” said Deer giving a graceful nod. “But it’s also nice to know that I am safe from hunters and that my children are nestled among the old trees.”

Gray Squirrel had been tenderly rubbing his partner’s back to take his mind off his aching tail. He paused from his caregiving and scratched his head. “I’m confused,” he said. “Are humans good? Or are they bad?”