

Animals in Myths and Legends

A Wildwood Teachers' Resource Pack for:

- English (creative writing)
- History (the Vikings)



Setting the scene

Norse Mythology

The Vikings believed that there were nine worlds, all supported by the World Tree, a magical ash tree called Yggdrasill, which stood at the centre of the universe. At the top of the tree was a wise eagle that carried the messages of the gods within their realm, Asgard, high in the tree's branches. Men lived in Middle Earth or Midgard and their land was surrounded by seas encircled by Jormungand, the Midgard Serpent, holding his tail in his mouth. At the bottom of the tree in the realm of the dead a dreaded serpent, Nidhogg, gnawed at the roots to try to destroy the tree whenever he grew tired of gnawing on the bodies of the dead. Other realms included those of the giants, the light elves, the dark elves and the dwarves.

Odin was the ruler of the gods and the Vikings believed that when he died in the Last Great Battle on the day of doom, called Ragnarok, the rule of the gods would come to an end and it would be time for the rule of Man. They told many stories of what would happen on that fateful day, using many of the Northern European animals they knew to explain where they came from. They also used many of these creatures to explain everyday natural happenings, such as the sun rising and crossing the sky.

The Celts

The Celts believed in animal spirits and that each animal represented certain human qualities, either for good or evil. They too wove stories and legends around the animals they saw living in the forests around them.

Useful texts:

Aburrow, Yvonne (2000), *The Magical Lore of Animals*, Capall Bann Publishing, Chieveley.

Cotterell, Arthur (2000), *Norse Mythology, The Myths and Legends of the Nordic Gods*, Lorenz Books, London.

Ellis, Peter Beresford (1992), *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Constable, London.

Green, Miranda (1992), *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, Routledge, London.

***Green, Roger Lancelyn** (1994), *Myths of the Norsemen*, Puffin Classics, London (see especially *Loki Makes Mischief* - the story of the Fenris Wolf, and *The Curse of Andvari's Ring*, the story of Otter).

Palmer, Jessica Dawn (2001), *Animal Wisdom: the definitive guide to the myth, folklore and medicine power of animals*, Thorsons, London.

Pickering, David (1999), *The Cassell Dictionary of Folklore*, Cassell, London.

Wootton, Anthony (1986), *Animal Folklore, Myth and Legend*, Blandford Press, Poole.

*Most of the books on this list are useful reference guides but *Myths of the Norsemen* is written in story book format.



Deer

Folklore

The Celts respected deer: stags were symbols of renewal and rebirth because they shed their antlers every spring and these immediately started to grow again while hinds (females) represented fertility. The Celts also thought they were fairy cattle and were milked on the mountain tops. The enchanted Stag of Rhedynfre was regarded as one of the five oldest animals in the world and therefore was one of the wisest. Burials of teenage boys from this period have often revealed the boys were buried holding antlers as symbols of rebirth. The large number of pubs still called *The White Hart* reflect old beliefs in the magical qualities of a white stag (hart). Characters in a number of stories around the world were transformed into stags or hinds by magic - in England the famous legend of Herne the Hunter, a mythical huntsman who appears in time of trouble, depicts him wearing antlers and some ancient tribes performed dances and rituals wearing antler headdresses.

Superstitions

- Stags can be charmed by the music of pan pipes
- Deer cry when they lose their antlers or when they are mortally wounded
- Deer eat snakes in summer and so their meat is poisonous
- Burning antlers keeps snakes away
- Hinds can turn themselves into beautiful women to distract young warriors from their cause
- If a deer is wounded by a hunting arrow, it searches for the herb dittany *Dictamnus albus* which makes the arrowhead leave its body (dittany has slightly arrow-shaped leaves).

Folk Medicine

- Epileptics were sometimes given a ring containing a fragment of deer hoof as an alleged cure
- Ointment made from stag bone marrow cures fever
- The right antler has healing power

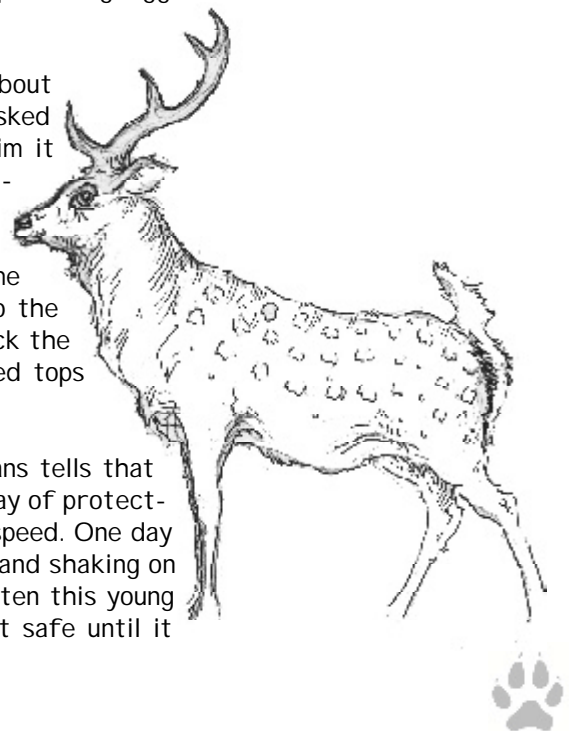
Legends

1. In Kent, legend has it that one of the Saxon kings offered his daughter a gift of land when she married, the gift comprising the area circled by a hind as she ran. The hind ran along the banks of the River Wantsum, which at that time was a wide channel running from Reculver on the North Kent coast to Sandwich on the south coast, separating the Isle of Thanet from the rest of Kent, and so the princess won the island for her dowry.

2. The Vikings believed that four stags - Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneýrr and Durathorr - nibbled continually on the leaves and branches of the World Tree, Yggdrasill, and intricate stone and wood carvings often show these deer with the wise eagle at the top of the tree and the serpent, Níhogg, gnawing on the tree's roots.

3. A Siberian folk story tells of a hunter, Mergen, who was about to shoot a deer trapped in a swamp when it spoke to him and asked him to pull it to safety. When he did so, the deer promised him it would help if he was ever in need. Later he met a magician's daughter and wanted to marry her, but the magician would only agree if he completed an impossible task - to wear out a pair of solid iron boots in one night. So Mergen called on the deer, which came to him, pulled the boots on to its hind legs and rushed off into the hills, leaving a trail of stars and comets behind as the iron struck the ground. In the morning the deer returned with only the tattered tops of the boots left.

4. A legend from the Lakota tribe of North American Indians tells that when the world was new, a friendly spirit gave to each animal a way of protecting itself, so to the wolf he gave teeth and to the deer he gave speed. One day a doe walked slowly past the spirit with her new fawn, wobbling and shaking on his weak spindly legs, and the spirit realised that he had forgotten this young animal. So he gave the fawn spots to camouflage it and keep it safe until it grew into its legs.



Owls

Folklore

Owls were regarded as wise birds and, like other birds of prey, were thought to be courageous - warriors once carried owls' hearts with them when going into battle. The bodies of dead owls were thought to protect humans against evil - dead owls were also often nailed to barn doors to protect livestock and to keep the buildings safe from lightning strikes. But, like most nocturnal creatures, the owl has also been regarded with mistrust. Seeing or hearing an owl call was thought to be a bad omen or even a forecast of imminent death, particularly if the owl was seen in daylight. This story is probably based on historical fact - the Vikings often used an owl hoot on raiding parties, therefore the sound of a hoot rapidly became associated with imminent disaster.

Superstitions

- Looking into an owl's nest sentences you to a life of melancholy
- An owl perched on a rooftop brings bad luck to everyone inside
- If an owl hoots near a pregnant woman, she will give birth to a girl (France)
- If an owl hoots near houses, this suggests an unmarried girl is in danger (Wales)
- One of the worst fates for a human is to be turned into an owl by magic.

Folk medicine

- Owl soup was thought to cure whooping cough and to turn grey hair back to its original colour
- Weak eyesight would be helped by eating charred and powdered owl eggs
- Carrying an owl's right foot and heart protected humans from contracting rabies if they were bitten by a mad dog.

Stories

Harry Potter - Hedwig (Snowy Owl) and Pigwidgeon (Scops).

Ravens

Folklore

Ravens were believed to have the gift of seeing into the future, the power to travel between this world and the next and the gift of magic. The Celts seem to have killed and buried ravens as some kind of ritual - for example, a raven with its wings outspread was found buried at Winklebury, a Hampshire hill fort. They were also seen as symbols of war - one Celtic warrior's helmet had a raven on top with hinged wings, so that when he ran the wings flapped up and down to unnerve his enemies, who believed that the arrival of a raven on the battlefield foretold their own defeat. However, white ravens were believed to be birds of good omen.

Superstitions

- If a raven landed on a rooftop, it foretold the death of an occupant beneath
- In Scotland, hunters believed that if they heard one raven caw before a hunt, that promised a good day and plenty of deer
- In Cornwall, it is believed that killing ravens is a crime because King Arthur lives on in the form of a raven
- Charles II said that if ravens ever left the Tower of London, the monarchy would fall; the Tower's ravens still have their wings clipped to this day to ensure this never happens.

Legends

1. Odin, the king of the Norse gods, had two ravens, Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory) which he used as messengers.
2. Oddune, Earl of Devonshire, killed Hubba the Dane for the enchanted standard *Reafen*. This ancient tapestry depicted a raven which had been woven with magical charms. The Danes believed that it foretold, by its movements, the success or failure of any activity.
3. Ovid, the Roman story teller, claimed the raven was originally silver in colour, but it turned black because of its delight in carrying bad news.

Stories: Aesop's Fables, *The Fox and the Grapes*.



Badgers

Folklore

This animal was regarded as the keeper of stories in the animal kingdom and was revered for its wisdom, strength, courage and persistence. An Iron Age prince was laid to rest in a fantastically rich barrow at Hochdorf in Germany on a bronze couch covered in a badgerskin to give him the courage and wisdom he needed for the afterlife - the badger hairs were found preserved, embedded in the bronze. The badger was also thought to have magical powers as it was nocturnal.

Native American Indians believed a badger's paw or claw or a rattle edged in badger fur would dig out disease from the infected part of someone's body and badgers were often thought to have healing powers. Badgers also taught Man which roots and herbs were good to eat.

Superstitions

- 15th Century witches boiled up badgers to smear their grease on their broomsticks to make them fly better - if they couldn't get newborn baby grease!
- Gamblers carried badger claws, teeth or hair to bring them luck
- The Japanese believed the badger could change its shape at will
- The Chinese believed the badger could turn himself into a fat old monk, beating his stomach with excitement
- Badger skin could be made into bridles to give the rider magical powers over horses
- In Yorkshire, country people believed the badger had shorter legs on one side than the other so that it could run along the side of hills completely upright - the story does not explain what happened when the badger turned round after its evening stroll to go home and found its longer legs were facing up the hill instead of down!
- Badgers have holes in their tails - one for every year of life.

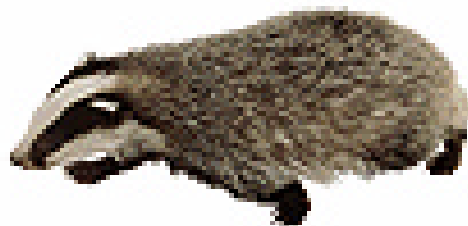
Folk Medicine

- Badgers were thought to cure rheumatism, snakebite and arthritis
- Badger bood helped to cure leprosy.

Stories

Kenneth Grahame - *The Wind in the Willows*

Brian Jacques - *The Legends of Redwall* (e.g. *Salamandastron*)



Foxes

Folklore

In most countries, the fox is almost always portrayed as a cunning and clever animal, outwitting animals stronger and more powerful than itself (such as bears, wolves and lions), or using its cunning to trap its prey. Witches were believed to be able to turn themselves into foxes. The Celts were thought to worship the fox for its fiery coat and cunning nature and there is evidence of this in Celtic burials - Lindow Man, whose body was found perfectly preserved in a peat bog after he was ritually murdered during the first millennium BC, was wearing nothing but a fox fur armband.

Superstitions

- A fox troubled by fleas swims into a river with a ball of wool or grass in its teeth. As the water rises, the fleas climb along the body, on to the head and finally on to the ball of wool, which the fox then releases to float away downstream.
- Scottish farmers nailed fox heads to barn doors to frighten away witches
- The Welsh believe it is lucky to see a single fox but unlucky to see several at once
- Foxes seen near a house signify the coming of disaster and death
- If you are bitten by a fox, you will not live more than another seven years
- If it rains while the sun is shining, it is a sure sign that a fox's wedding is taking place
- A fox's pelt contains great magic
- A fox carries a magical pearl, which will bring good luck to whoever finds it
- A fox will play dead to attract curious birds, then leaps up and kills them.

Folk medicine

- **Fox fat was used to cure gout and rheumatism**
- **Mixing fox droppings with vinegar was believed to be a cure for leprosy**
- A fox tongue laid on the skin at bedtime will extract a deeply embedded thorn
- A fox tongue laid across the eye cures cataracts
- A cooked fox tongue can be carried or eaten to give a shy person courage
- Carrying a fox tooth will cure an inflamed leg
- The dried and sugared liver and lungs of a fox cures coughs
- Fox fat rubbed into the scalp will cure baldness
- Finishing a bowl of milk started by a fox will cure whooping cough

Legends

In Oriental folk tales, foxes change shape at will, turning themselves into beautiful women to entrap gullible human beings. One variation is that a man sees a fox shedding its skin and becoming a beautiful maiden. He hides the skin and marries the girl. Years later she finds her skin and changes back into a fox.

Stories

Reynard the Fox

The Gingerbread Man

Aesop's Fables - *The Fox and the Grapes*

The Tale of White Deer Park



Squirrels



Folklore

It is thought to be unlucky to kill a squirrel in many European countries and anyone who does so is believed to lose their hunting skills. This belief is thought to have originated in the legend that the squirrel hid its eyes with its tail when it saw Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and so acquired the bushy tail it has today to save it from further embarrassment. The squirrel is famous in Norse legend as a mischief-maker and in Celtic mythology as the symbol of Medb, a fierce goddess-queen in Irish folklore, or Queen Mab, the queen of the fairies in British stories. She had a bird and a squirrel on her shoulders and was believed to be fond of mischief. She was sometimes accused of swapping human babies for fairy children (changelings), to be brought up by mortal parents.

Superstitions

- Burning a squirrel on the bonfire rids the fields of vermin

Legend

1. The Vikings believed that the world was supported by a cosmic ash tree at the centre of the universe, Yggdrasill, whose mighty branches supported the nine different worlds of the Norsemen. The highest realms of the gods and light elves lay under the rainbow bridge at the very top of the tree; next, the worlds of mortals, dwarves and dark elves rose from the oceans and the frost giants' land lay at the icy edges. An eagle perched at the top of the tree and a dragon, Nidhogg, gnawed at its roots whenever it tired of chewing corpses. Each day the eagle was harassed by a squirrel, Ratatosk, which scurried between the heavens at the top of the tree and the dark realms below, carrying insults from Nidhogg to the heavenly eagle. Ratatosk's comings and goings also brought rain and snow.

2. In the North American Indian Blackfoot tribe's story of the Old man and the Roasted Squirrels, an old man begs to join a group of squirrels playing in hot ashes, leaping into the ashes to be buried. The one that lasted longest before being pulled out was the bravest. The man asked to be buried first to prove how brave he was. The squirrels said he might be burned as he did not understand the game and offered to demonstrate it first. So the old man buried them all at once in the burning ashes. The squirrels began to squeak and cry, but he heaped on more ashes and roasted them alive. To the Indians, the squirrels had proved they were more honourable than the man, because they would not risk his safety, and the story showed how cunning and deceitful human beings can be.



Wolves

Folklore

Folk stories portray wolves in two quite different lights: on the one hand they were regarded as symbols of evil and the wolf was believed to be the lord of the dead (even though it was thought to be frightened of shrimps and crabs!); on the other hand, the Celts believed the wolf would help travellers who had lost their way, guiding them back to safety. Many North American Indian tribes revered the wolf's courage and intelligence and claimed they were descended from wolves. The Shoshone tribe believed that the wolf guarded the path walked by the dead.

Superstitions

- Wolves' eyes glow in the dark
- Sorcerers can change at will into wolves by putting on a wolf pelt
- Some Scottish and Irish families were descended wolves and could still change back when it suited them (called shape shifting)
- Chinese families still bang cooking utensils during a lunar eclipse to frighten the wolf of heaven they fear is trying to swallow the sun
- If a wolf sees a man before he sees the wolf, the man will be struck dumb (England)

Folk medicine

- Wolf skins wrapped round epileptics helped when they had fits and cured those suffering from rabies
- Wolf teeth were rubbed against the gums to stop toothache
- Wolf teeth were worn round the necks of young children to protect them from harm (France)

Legends

1. Fenris was the largest and fiercest of the Norse wolves and son of the mischief-making god Loki and the first giantess, Angurboda. It was his destiny to bring about the death of Odin, the chief of the gods, and so end the rule of the gods on their day of doom, called Ragnarok. Their end would in turn bring about the age of Man. When they learned of Fenris's role in their destiny, the gods kidnapped the wolf and brought him to their home in Asgard to keep an eye on him. He was so fierce that only the war god Tyr would feed him and he grew bigger and more dangerous by the day. Odin decided that Fenris should be bound to the earth to keep him from causing trouble. The first chain the gods made, called Laeding, Fenris shook off easily and the second, Dromi,

flew off in pieces. So Odin called on the Black Elves of Svartalheim to make a magical silken ribbon, Gleipnir, out of strange materials like the roots of a rock, the sound of a cat's footfall, the breath of a fish and a bird's spittle. Fenris was suspicious of it and would not be bound unless one of the gods put his hand between his jaws as a sign of trust that the cord was harmless. Tyr did so and Fenris bit off his hand when he found he could not escape. Afterwards Fenris's mouth was wedged open with a sword to stop him from biting anyone else. At Ragnarok, Fenris escaped from the magical cord and went in search of Odin. His mouth was so wide that his lower jaw touched the ground and his upper jaw touched the sky and he swallowed Odin whole, so ending the rule of the gods.

2. Skoll was another wolf from Norse mythology, also destined to bring about the end of the rule of the gods. Skoll was a terrible beast that chased the sun across the sky daily from dawn to dusk with the sole aim of swallowing the light and plunging the world into darkness. His brother Hati spent his nights chasing the moon across the sky. At Ragnarok, Skoll was destined finally to catch the sun in his massive jaws and swallow her, but at the last moment the sun gave birth to a daughter more beautiful than herself. This new sun brought warmth and light to the new fresh, green world that rose from the sea and heralded the new age of men.



Stories

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Big bad wolves - | <i>Little Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs</i> |
| Caring wolves - | <i>Romulus and Remus, The Jungle Book</i> |



Otters

Folklore

The Celts could not decide if the otter was a mammal or a fish as it was equally at home on land and in water. This led to long arguments over whether it could be eaten during Lent (when meat was forbidden) and whether the animal changed its form as it moved between land and water. Otters feature in many folk tales, usually offering to help mortals by bringing them food. Otters also symbolised joy, play and happiness!

Superstitions

- Otters carried a secret stone in their heads
- Otter skins were magical
- Wearing an otter skin would save a person from drowning
- Otter skin bags kept harps dry

Folk Medicine

- Otter skin helped fever, smallpox and childbirth
- Licking a still warm otter liver would enable the person to heal burns by licking them.

Legend

Loki, the mischief-making god, Odin, his king, and another god, Honir, used to wander through Midgard, the world of men, in disguise. One day they came on an otter eating a salmon and Loki killed it with a stone. They took the dead otter and salmon with them to a farmhouse, the home of Hreidmarr, the magician. When he saw the dead animal, he called his sons to bind the visitors because they had killed his son, Otter. As the sons of magicians, they could all change their shapes at will and Otter, being a great fisherman, would take the shape of an otter to catch fish for the family.

Hreidmarr demanded a life for a life but finally agreed to the gods' offer of wergild, a payment made to a family when a life was taken by accident. Hreidmarr and Otter's brothers agreed to the wergild, if enough good red gold could be found to cover Otter's animal skin so that not even a whisker remained on view. Loki was released to obtain the gold while Odin and Honir stayed behind as prisoners and the brothers skinned the otter to stretch out its skin.

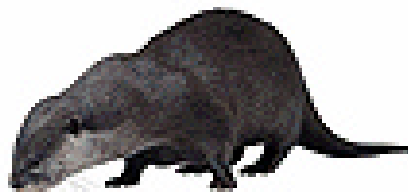
Loki decided to trick the dwarf Andvari out of his treasure to provide the wergild. Andvari used to hide beneath a waterfall in the shape of a fish but Loki borrowed a magical net and caught him. Loki forced Andvari to give up his gold if he wanted to save his own life. Sulkily, Andvari collected all his treasure and piled it on the banks of the waterfall, but snatched back one small golden ring. Loki demanded the ring and Andvari cursed the ring and promised that it would bring sorrow to any that wore it.

When Loki returned with the gold, the gods stretched out the otter skin and piled it high with the gold. Odin, however, noticed the tiny ring and took it from the heap. He told Hreidmarr that the wergild had been paid, but Hreidmarr found one whisker of Otter's snout was still uncovered. So Odin sighed, took off the ring and used it to cover the last whisker. Then they were freed.

But the curse came true. Hreidmarr was killed by one of his two remaining sons for the treasure and then the other son stole the treasure and turned himself into the dragon Fafnir to guard it. He was eventually slain by a young warrior trained for the purpose by his own brother.

Stories

Gavin Maxwell *Tarka the Otter*.



Wild Cat

Folklore

A giant wild cat was believed to have terrorized mythical Britain until it was eventually overcome by King Arthur with the help of Sir Kay. The cat was revered by many Gaelic tribes and Caithness in Scotland was apparently named after the Catti, or cat people, clan, who lived on the ness, or promontory, of the cats. Warriors wore wild cat skins, still with the heads, draped over their helmets. In Scottish legend cats were used to foretell the future during *taghgairm*, a cruel practice which involved roasting a live cat over a fire until other cats arrived to rescue it by answering any questions put to them. Witches were believed to be closely associated with cats and people would not discuss family matters if cats were present, in case it was a witch's familiar or even a witch in disguise.

Superstitions

- Cats should never be bought with money or they will never be good mousers
- If a cat sneezes it will rain, especially if it washes behind its ears
- If a cat sits with its back to the fire a storm or cold weather is on the way
- If a cat scratches a table leg, expect a change in the weather
- If a cat washes itself out in the open, rain is on the way
- If a cat washes itself in a doorway, a priest is on his way (USA)
- If a cat appears next to a bride it will bring the newlyweds good luck
- Miners avoid saying the word 'cat' underground to avoid a disaster
- Sailors encourage ship's cats with kindness to avoid storms

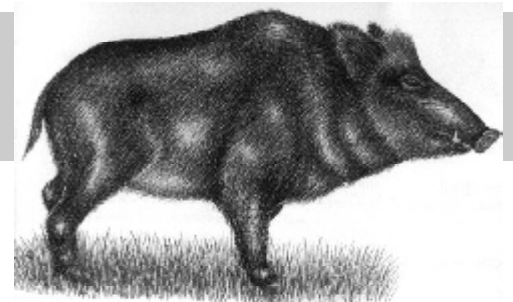
Wild Boar

Folklore

Celtic and Norse people greatly revered the boar and told many stories about it. Sometimes they buried boar whole in stone-lined graves to bring luck to nearby buildings (Chelmsford). Renowned for its ferocity, the boar usually featured as the formidable quarry of legendary heroes or as a magical creature sent to entice warriors to the Otherworld. It was also a symbol of war and warriors often wore the figures of boar on their helmets.

Superstitions

- The boar's tusks glowed red hot when it was being hunted
- Dreaming of a boar foretold war
- The stiff bristles on the boar's back contained magic.



Folk medicine

- A boar skin placed on an injury made the wound disappear.

Legends

1. The Norse gods had a great magic boar, Saehrimnir, in their castle of Valhalla. Every day their cook, Andhrimnir, killed the boar and cooked him in a gigantic kettle to make a delicious boar stew. And every morning, Saehrimnir was alive again, ready to be killed and eaten that night.
2. Ottar was a human warrior who fell in love with the goddess Freyja. She disguised him as a wild boar so that she could keep him with her in the realm of the gods in Asgard. She even rode mounted on his back.
3. Freyr, a gentle summer god, melted the icy heart of Gerda the frost giantess. He went everywhere carrying ears of wheat and accompanied by a boar, both symbols of a fruitful harvest.
4. The Irish saint, St Ciarán of Saighir, tamed a wild boar and then build his monastic cell out of its teeth.
5. In Welsh mythology, a Celtic hero, Pryderi, disturbs an enormous, white shining boar while out hunting. His hounds chase it into a deserted fort where Pryderi follows and sees a magical golden bowl. When he touches it, his hand sticks to it, and when his wife Rhiannon searches for him, she touches it too and is stuck fast. The boar escapes, having proved to mere mortals its supernatural powers.



Beavers

Folklore

Ancient people had the same problem with the beaver as they had with the otter: was it a mammal or a fish, as it lived both on land and in water and had a scaly tail like a fish? In fact, monks ate beaver during Lent, believing that it was a fish because of the tail. Beaver teeth have even been found in Iron Age burials - at the Rouliers cemetery. To the Celts, the beaver represented industry, strong family bonds and peacefulness.

Legends

1. Native American Indians believed the beaver had strong healing powers. When the white man arrived in their territories, bringing new diseases like 'flu and the common cold, which they had not encountered before and had no immunity against, they thought the Beaver God had deserted them. So they sought revenge by joining the white man in hunting the beaver almost to the point of extinction.

2. Two American naturalists got more than they bargained for when they took a pair of beaver home to study their behaviour. When they went out to dinner one evening, the beavers gnawed the wooden legs off all the tables and built a dam in one corner of the room with the wood.



Stories

C.S. Lewis *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Rats

Folklore

Rats have almost always been thought of as unlucky and as carriers of disease.

Superstitions

- Rats have a sixth sense when it comes to predicting disaster
- Rats will desert a ship at sea when nothing appears wrong because they know it is going to sink
- If rats board a ship in harbour, the ship will be lucky
- Sailors do not mention the word *rat* on board in case it brings bad luck
- On land, if rats leave a house, it will soon collapse or someone in it will die
- If rats gnaw a person's clothes or furniture, that person will die
- If the rat population explodes, war will break out
- If a white rat is seen, the witness will be lucky
- If rats invade a house, someone will soon come into some money (Scotland)
- To get rid of rats -
 - 1) write a curse on a piece of paper and leave it for the rats to find
 - 2) sit beside the rats' hole and ask them politely to leave
 - 3) lure them away with music

Folk Medicine

- A dried rat's tail cures colds
- Rats will exchange a child's lost baby tooth for a strong new tooth if the milk tooth is placed beside a rat hole

Stories

Pied Piper of Hamelyn

