

The background is a watercolor illustration of a swampy landscape. At the top, there are dark green, leafy branches hanging down. Below them, the background is a mix of light and dark green washes, suggesting dense vegetation. In the middle ground, there's a blue pond or stream. On the left side of the pond, there are several purple flowers on tall stems. On the right side, there are green lily pads and two white lotus flowers. The foreground is dominated by various green plants, including tall grasses and leafy stems, some of which are in sharp focus. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, naturalistic color palette.

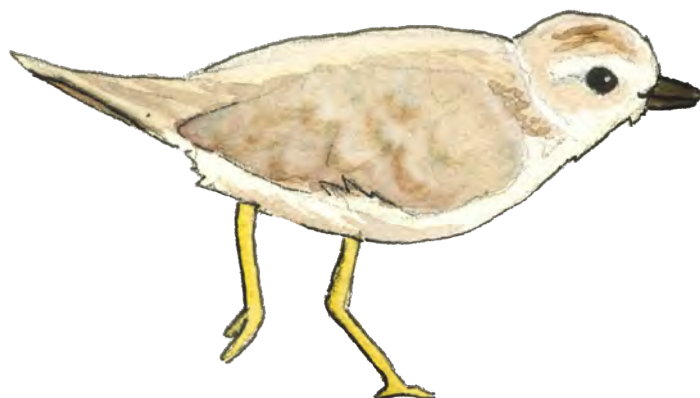
Secrets of Sandhill Swamp

By Owl Mayhall

Secrets of Sandhill Swamp

Text by Owl Mayhall
Illustrations by Owl Mayhall

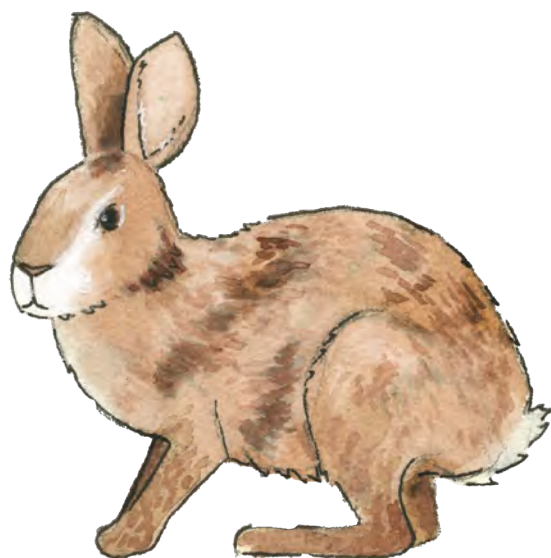




Dedication

To the creeks I grew up exploring.
To the wetlands kids will continue exploring.

I hope they bring you the same joy they brought me.





© 2026 Owl Mayhall
All rights reserved.

This book was created as a part of an Immersive Learning class at Ball State University. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted by any means in any form without prior written permission from the author.

For more information, owlmayhall@gmail.com

ISBN: 979-8-9957264-5-6

Sandhill Swamp was a scary place Simon did not want to visit. The trees towered like giants. Bugs hummed and hissed all night long. For as long as Simon could remember, a chain link fence had been holding the swamp back from overtaking his neighborhood. He could see its daunting shape from his bedroom window.



While Simon preferred to stay inside tinkering with his machines, his two best friends had convinced him to come play outside with their new baseball.

They tossed it around for a while, enjoying the warm sun. Piper threw it up as long and high as she could.



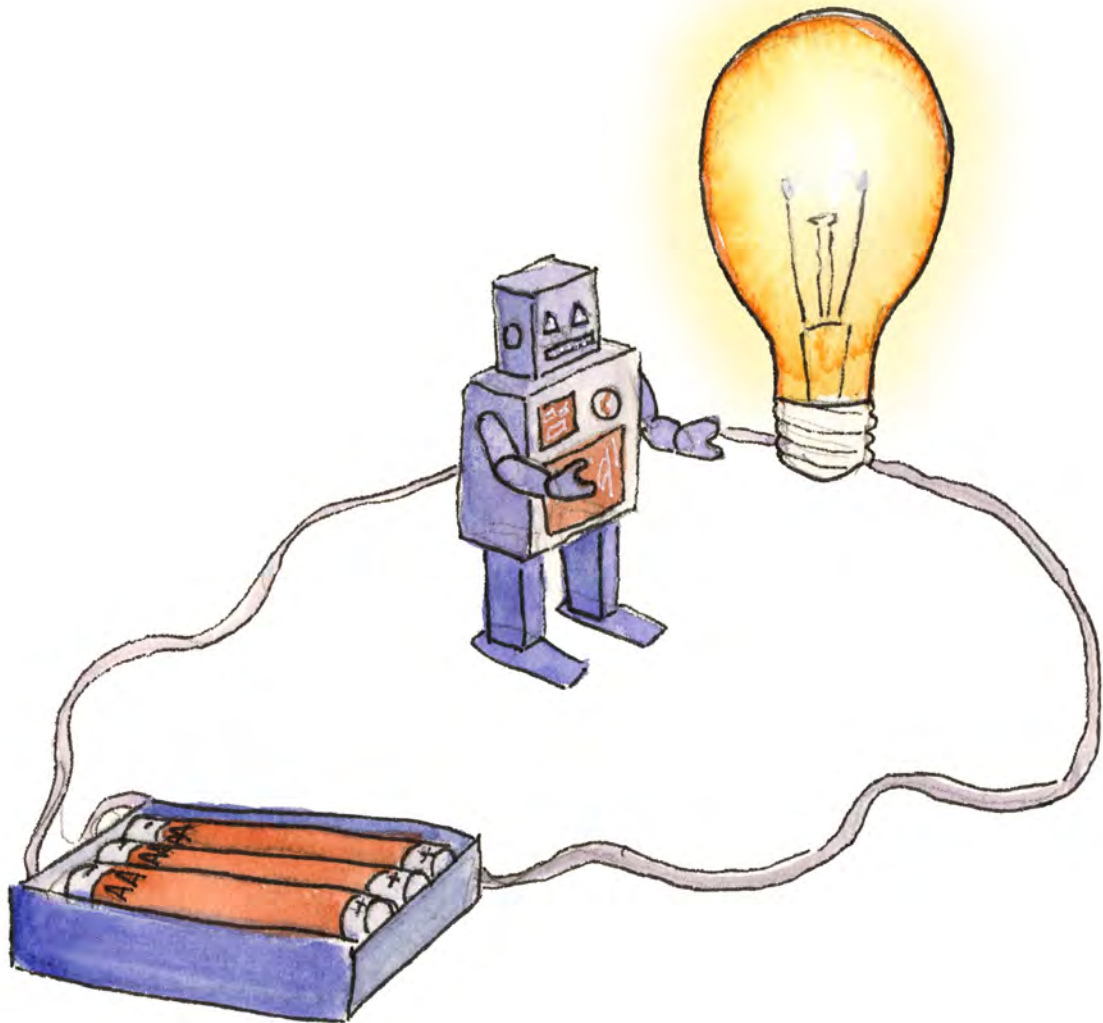
Zoom!

It whizzed right over the fence and into Sandhill Swamp.



Ravi asked Simon to invent something to get the ball back.

“You’re always making crazy machines!”



Simon loved making machines. He had made lightbulbs and circuits and butter-my-toast-bots and spring shoes and all sorts of whats-its. But he had never made a machine to find a baseball.

Why did he have to figure it out? It was Piper’s fault it landed in the swamp. And Ravi was the first to suggest they play outside. They should be the ones to get it back.

A genius idea came to him.
If only animals could go inside Sandhill Swamp,
maybe the solution was to become animals!

Simon could invent a machine to turn Ravi and Piper into
animals so they could go to Sandhill Swamp and find his
baseball.



Brrzt!

The machine was complete! Simon showed it off to his friends and pointed it towards the Animal Transformation lever.



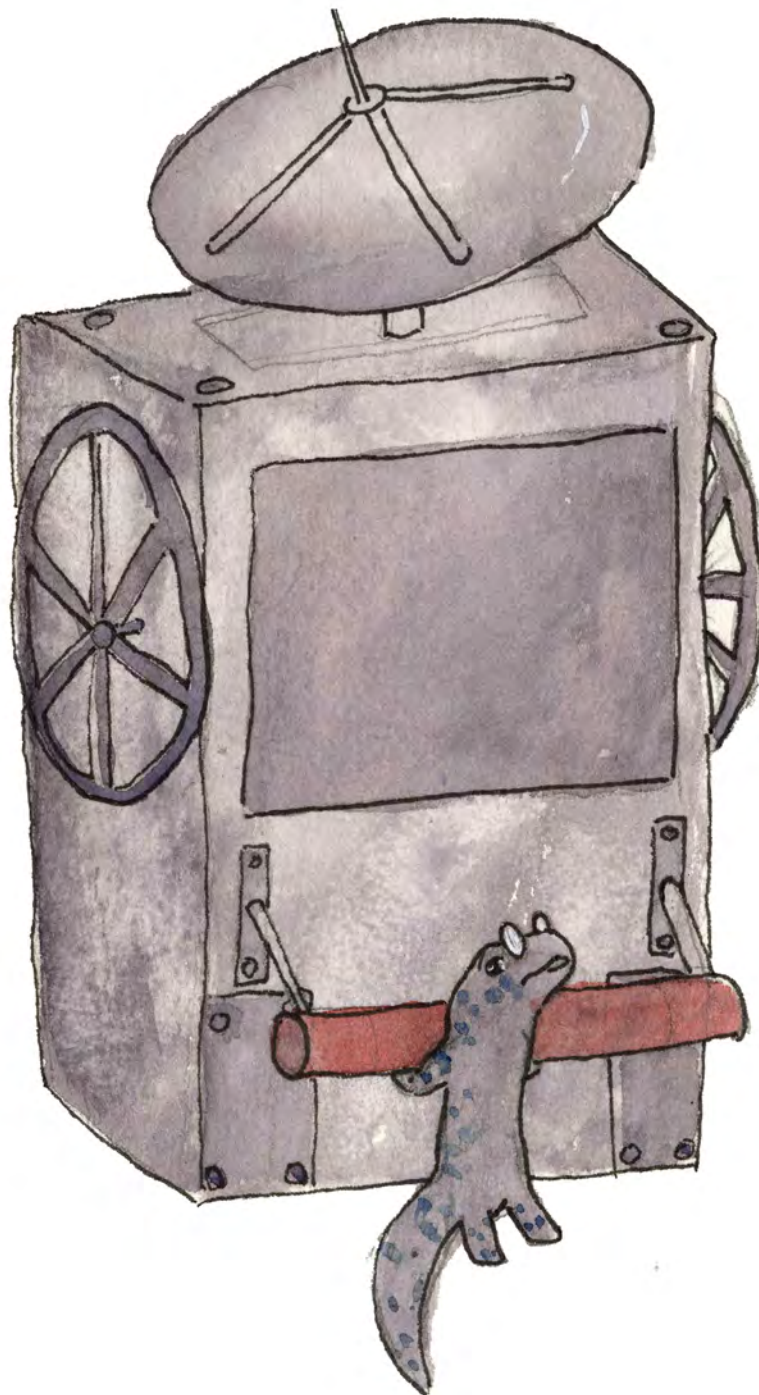
A cloud of smoke enveloped the garage.
Simon looked down and discovered he was now a salamander!
Ravi was a rabbit! And Piper was a bird! His machine had
worked-but too well! He was an animal now!



Simon crawled up to the machine and tried to switch the lever back, but he was far too small to move it.

“Come on,” Ravi said, “It worked! Let’s go get your ball.”

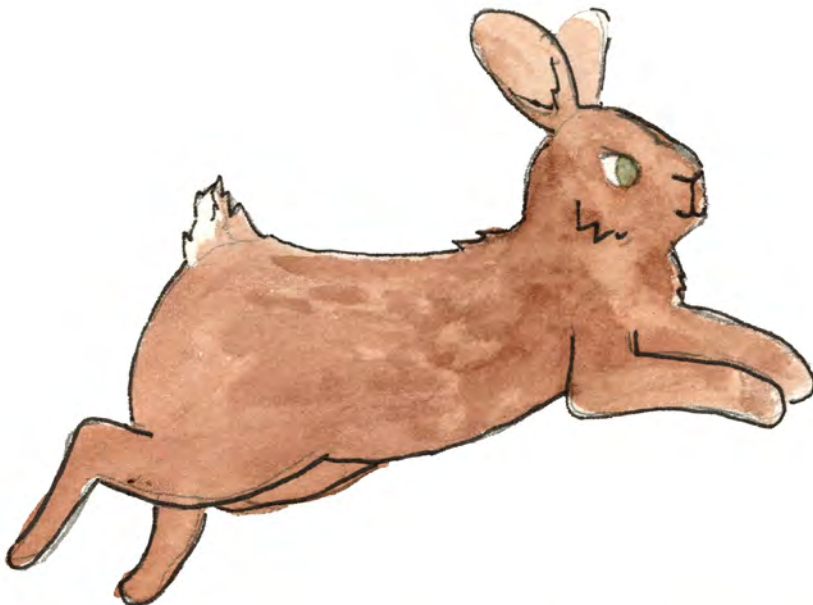
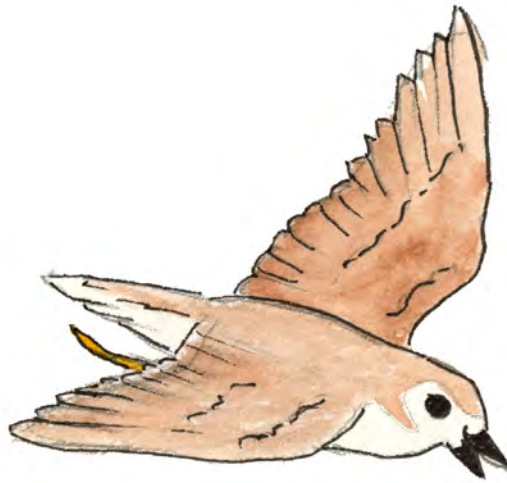
Grumpily, Simon followed the two out of the garage and towards Sandhill Swamp.



“I love being a bird,” Piper said, “I can fly fast and see so many sights!”

“Being a bunny is the best!” Ravi said as he leapt in the air.

Simon looked at his body. He was so small and his skin was dry and itchy. “I don’t like this at all. I wish I was at home.”



When they reached the fence, they wondered how to get past it.

Piper flew high above and landed on the other side.

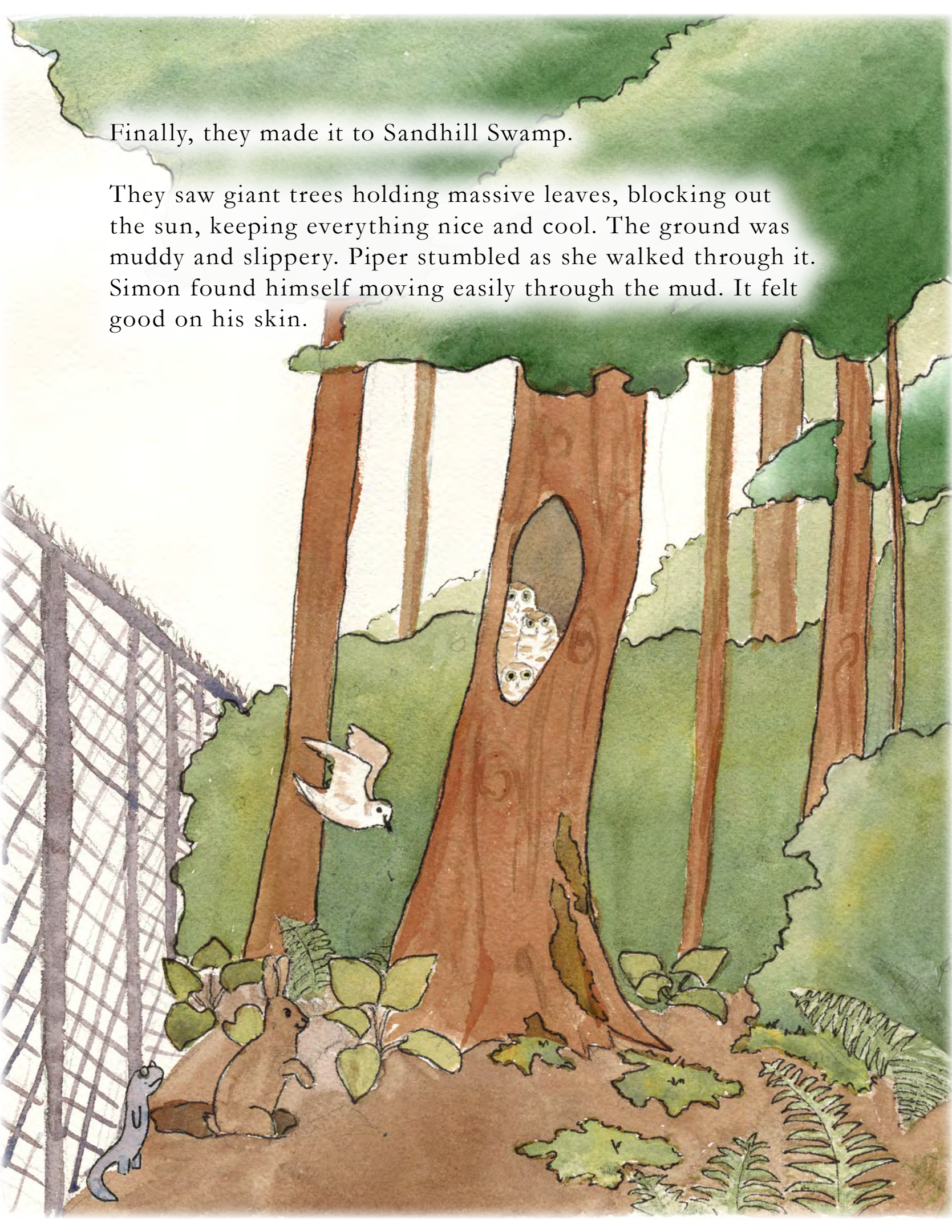
Ravi used his strong legs to dig underneath.

Simon was small enough as a salamander - he crawled right through the fence without any hassle. "At least being a salamander makes some things easier."



Finally, they made it to Sandhill Swamp.

They saw giant trees holding massive leaves, blocking out the sun, keeping everything nice and cool. The ground was muddy and slippery. Piper stumbled as she walked through it. Simon found himself moving easily through the mud. It felt good on his skin.



They looked around and noticed a frog sitting by the edge of the pond.

“Hello, Mister Frog,” Piper said. “We’re looking for Simon’s baseball, can you help us?”

The frog looked up and sighed, “I’m far too relaxed. Come join me in the water, it’s very nice here.”





Ravi jumped right in.

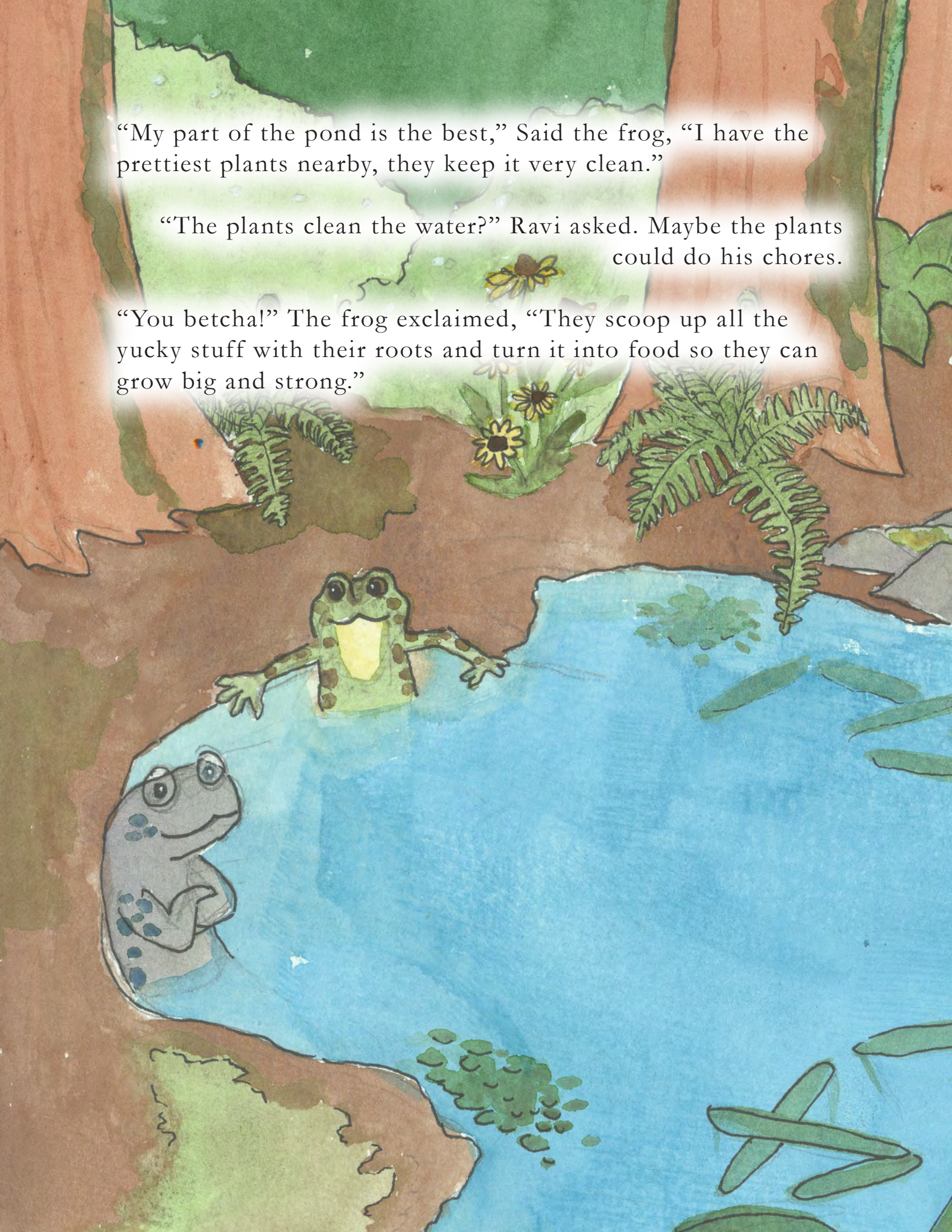
Splash!

Piper stepped closer in the water, splashing Ravi with her feathers. The two laughed as they played. Simon dipped his toes in. It felt so refreshing. *Maybe* the swamp wasn't so bad.

“My part of the pond is the best,” Said the frog, “I have the prettiest plants nearby, they keep it very clean.”

“The plants clean the water?” Ravi asked. Maybe the plants could do his chores.

“You betcha!” The frog exclaimed, “They scoop up all the yucky stuff with their roots and turn it into food so they can grow big and strong.”





“If you want to find a baseball, you should ask the dragonflies. They see everything.”

The three critters hopped out of the water and thanked Mr. Frog for his help. It was time to look for a dragonfly.

“Did someone need a dragonfly?”

“Yes! We’re looking for my baseball,” Simon said.

The dragonfly nodded. “I saw a baseball yesterday. It flew in while I was sunbathing by the lily pads. I think it landed nearby.” He pointed the critters in a direction before zooming off.

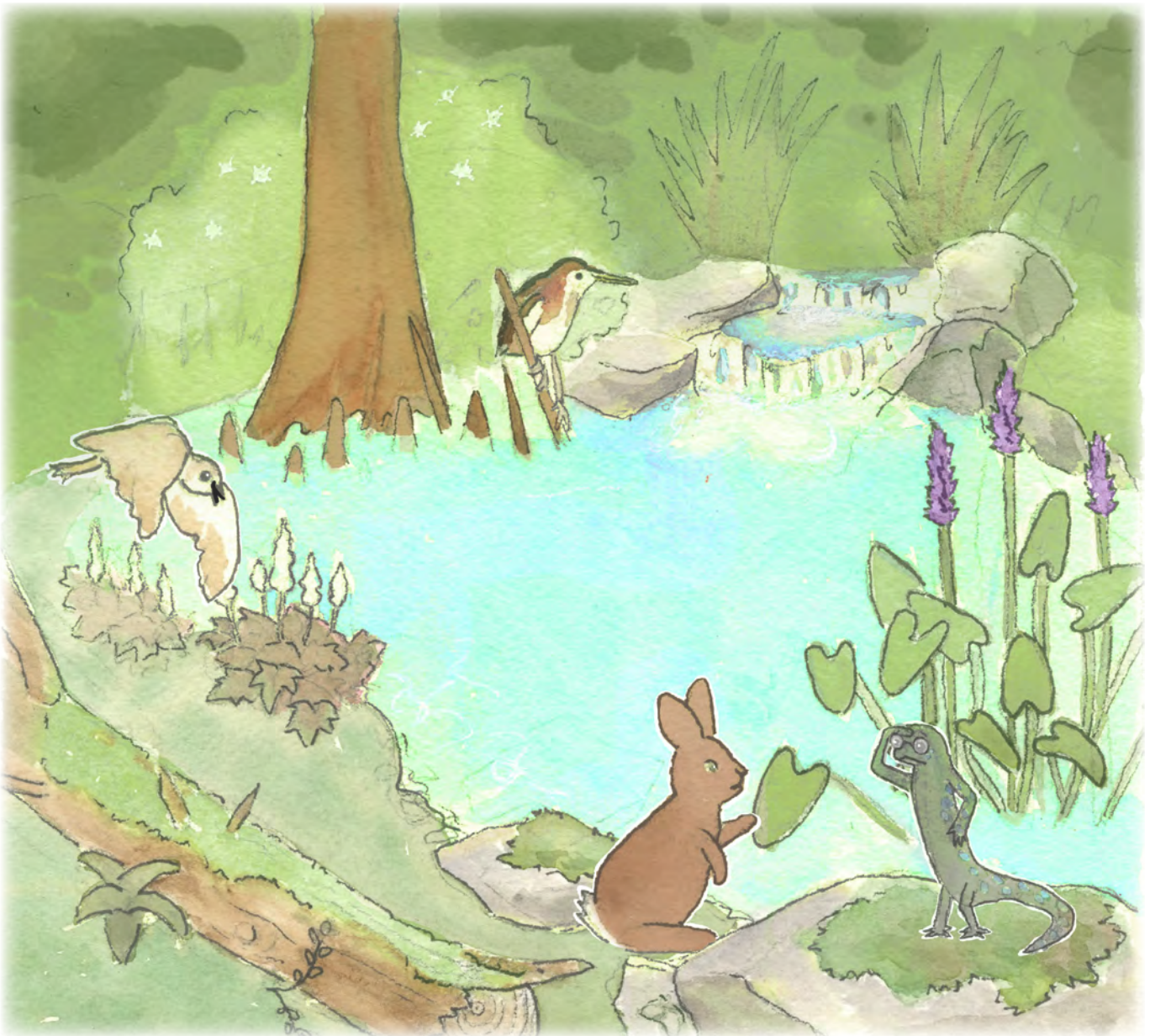


The kids walked to the edge of another pond and looked out into it. They saw all types of plants, but they didn't notice any lily pads.

“This one is so soft and fuzzy,” Piper said.

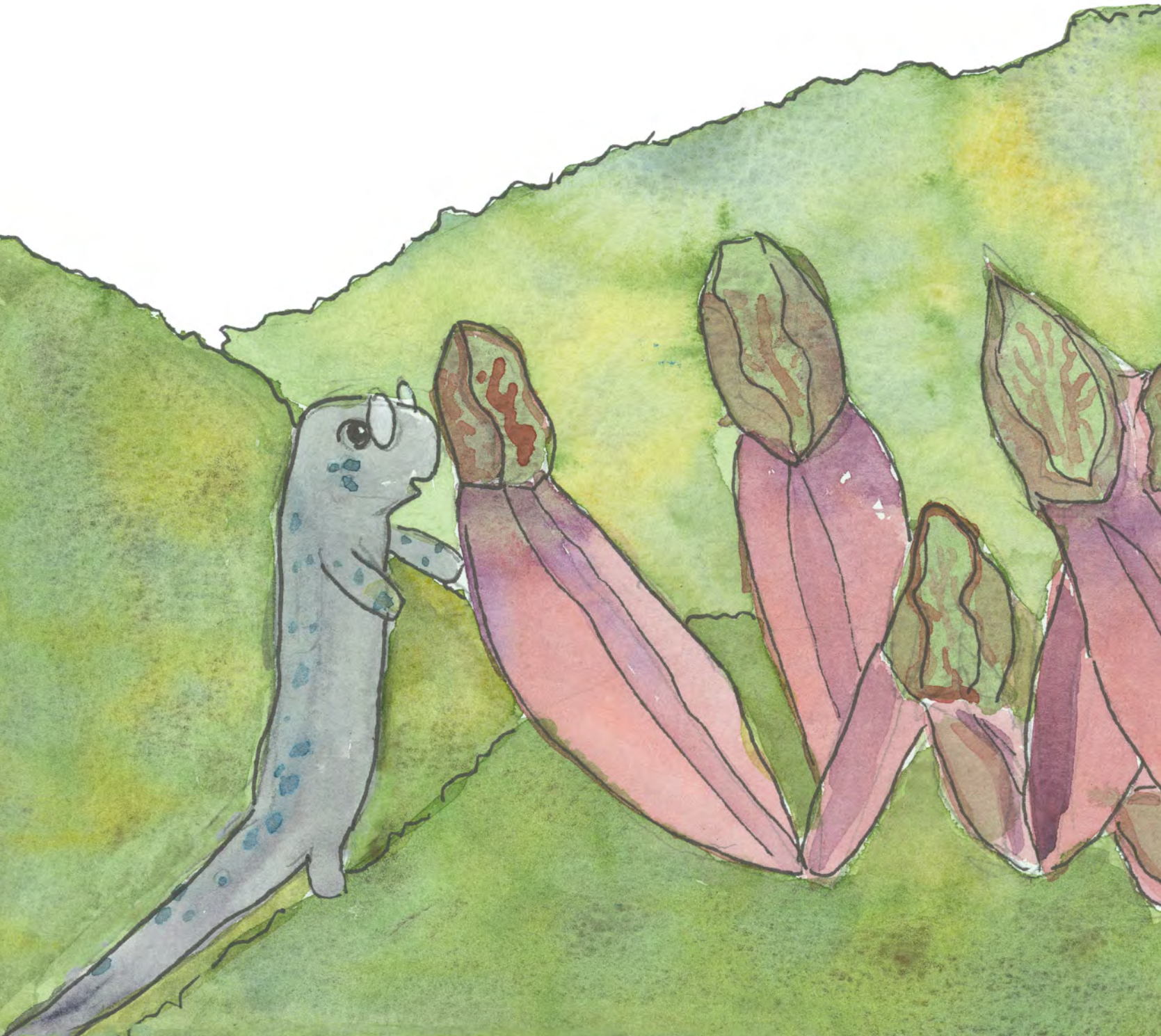
“Look at these purple flowers!”

Those plants were pretty, but they weren't lily pads.

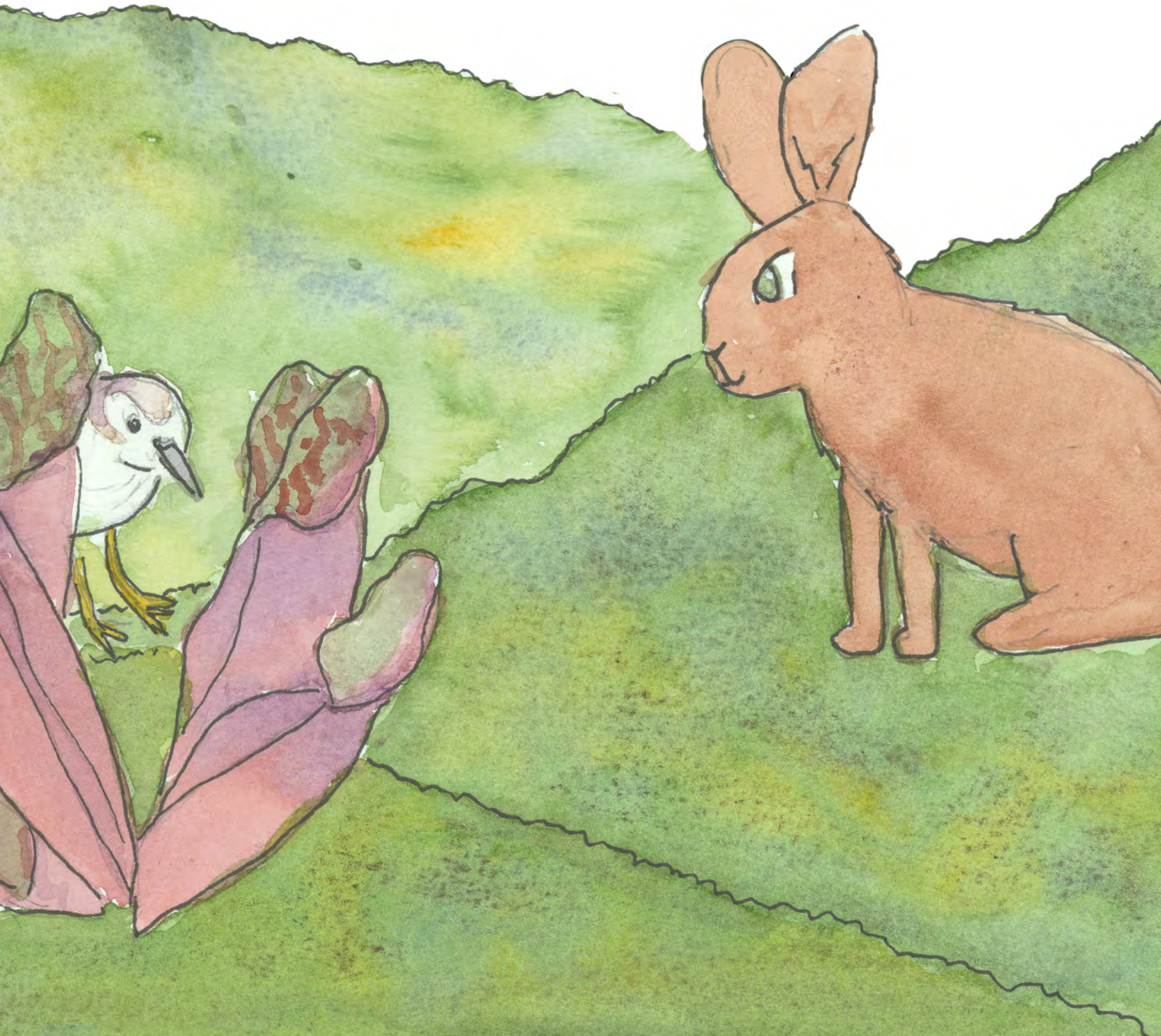


“Come check this one out,” Ravi yelled.

The critters approached the plant Ravi had found. A cluster of green and red tubes sticking up from the ground, each covered loosely with their own tiny lid. They had never seen anything like it before.



As they watched, a fly flew by and landed on the plant. After a moment, it crawled down into the pipe and disappeared. Simon crawled forward, curious about it. He looked into the tubes and noticed other flies. Why was this plant collecting so many flies?



“If you’re looking for fly soup, that’s a good place to find it,”
Said a turtle as he passed by.

Simon remembered what it was called. “It’s a carnivorous
plant! My dad told me about these once. They trap bugs
inside and eat them.”

The turtle said, still passing by. “A pitcher plant, to be
exact.”

Simon watched as an ant crawled into the pitcher. It was the
coolest plant he had ever seen.



Piper flew up and landed on a distant plant. “Look! This one has such a pretty flower.”

“It’s one of the lily pads!”

Simon and Ravi quickly swam to Piper. The three critters looked down in the water until they noticed something white sticking out of the mud.



“There’s my baseball!” said Simon. It was at the bottom of the lake! “I’ll swim down and get it!”

“No way!” Said Ravi. “Let me help you. I can kick it free from the mud.”

“I’ll fly up and find the way home,” Piper offered.

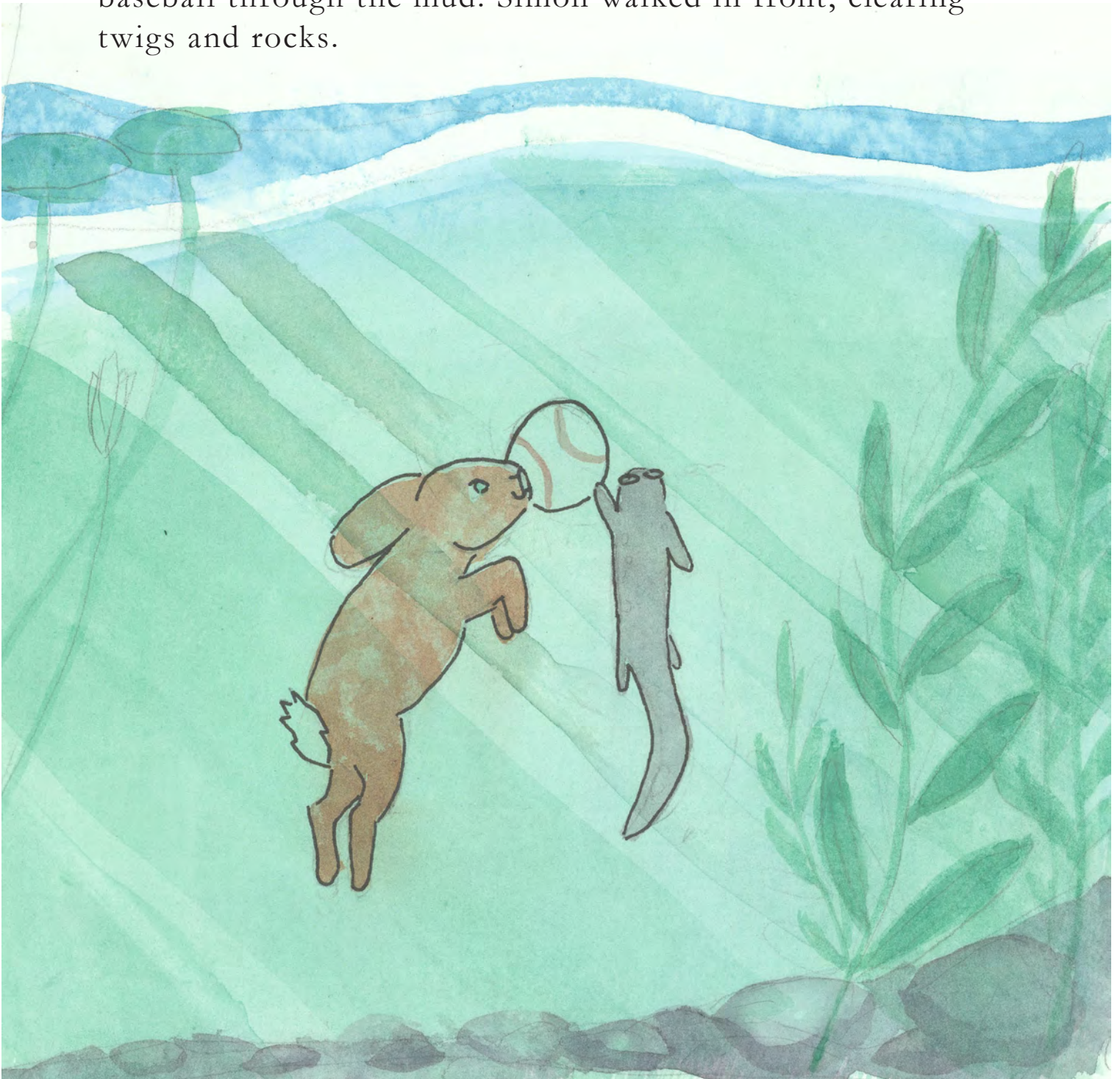
Simon and Ravi swam down to the bottom of the pond,
admiring the sights.





Ravi pushed the ball out of the mud. He and Simon grabbed the baseball. They pulled it up and out of the water. Simon was so happy to have his baseball again. Now the group could go home.

Ravi balanced the ball on his head as the two swam back to the shore, guided by Piper from above. Ravi rolled the baseball through the mud. Simon walked in front, clearing twigs and rocks.





The three friends worked and worked until they finally brought the ball back to the fence.

Simon looked back at Sandhill Swamp. It wasn't scary anymore. He could see the tall trees were offering shade. The plants were cleaning the water, not trying to escape a cage. The critters inside who chirped and whistled and hollered so loudly were letting their friends know where they were.

When they reached the garage, Ravi pushed the baseball under the lever. It popped back up!

Pooof!





“Let’s go back to Sandhill Swamp later,” Simon said.
Ravi and Piper nodded, smiling.



Sandhill Swamp is not a real place, but it's based on many different Midwestern-American wetlands. A swamp is one type of wetland, but what are wetlands anyway?

A wetland is any area of land where water covers the ground or is present nearby at all times or at varying periods in the year. To make it simple: land that is wet, either all the time or for a bit each year. Includes rivers, swamps, marshes, bogs, fens, and more.

Simon and his friends meet a lot of interesting critters on their journey. Wetlands are a hot spot for cool critters! Let's learn some more about each of them.

Frogs: America is home to over 300 species of frogs. The frog featured in this book is a leopard frog. Frogs rely on wetlands. Frogs start off as tadpoles and swim in bodies of water until they grow legs and explore their surroundings. Adults often ribbit, chirp, bark, or make other sounds. Listen closely when you're near water and you might hear them!

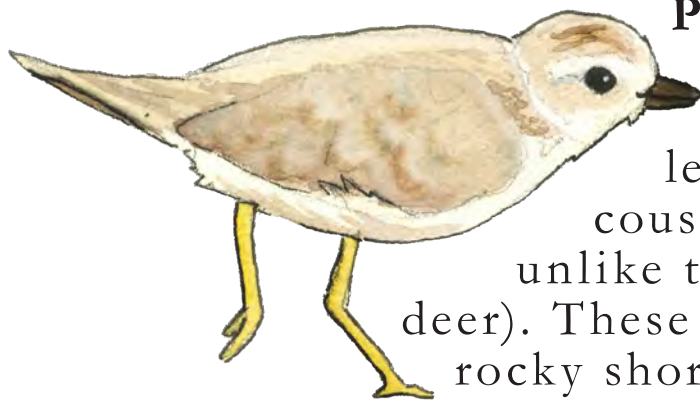
Dragonflies: Dragonflies are the kings and queens of wetlands - and one of the best signs a wetland is healthy. Dragonflies are one of the best hunters in the animal kingdom. They catch around 95% of prey they set after. To put that into perspective, Wolves tend to catch about 20% of their prey and lions catch around 30%. Not only amazing hunters, they are amazing fliers-capable of flying up, down, left, right, and backwards! They can get up to 35 MPH, faster than the fastest humans!

Turtles: The turtle you saw in this book is a painted turtle! They're born with protective shells that protect them from predators. As they grow up, the shell's grow with them, shedding pieces called scutes to make room for new growth. Turtles have really good memory. If they enjoy a certain location, they'll continue traveling there year after year. If your backyard is really comfy for box turtles, you'll see the same ones year after year!

If you enjoyed this book, there's plenty more to learn about wetlands. Try finding more book from your local library or try visiting a nearby state park and asking park rangers/naturalists for more information. See if you can spot any of the creatures from this book out in the wild! Remember to be always respectful and stay curious.

Let's learn about the species Simon, Piper, and Ravi turned into!

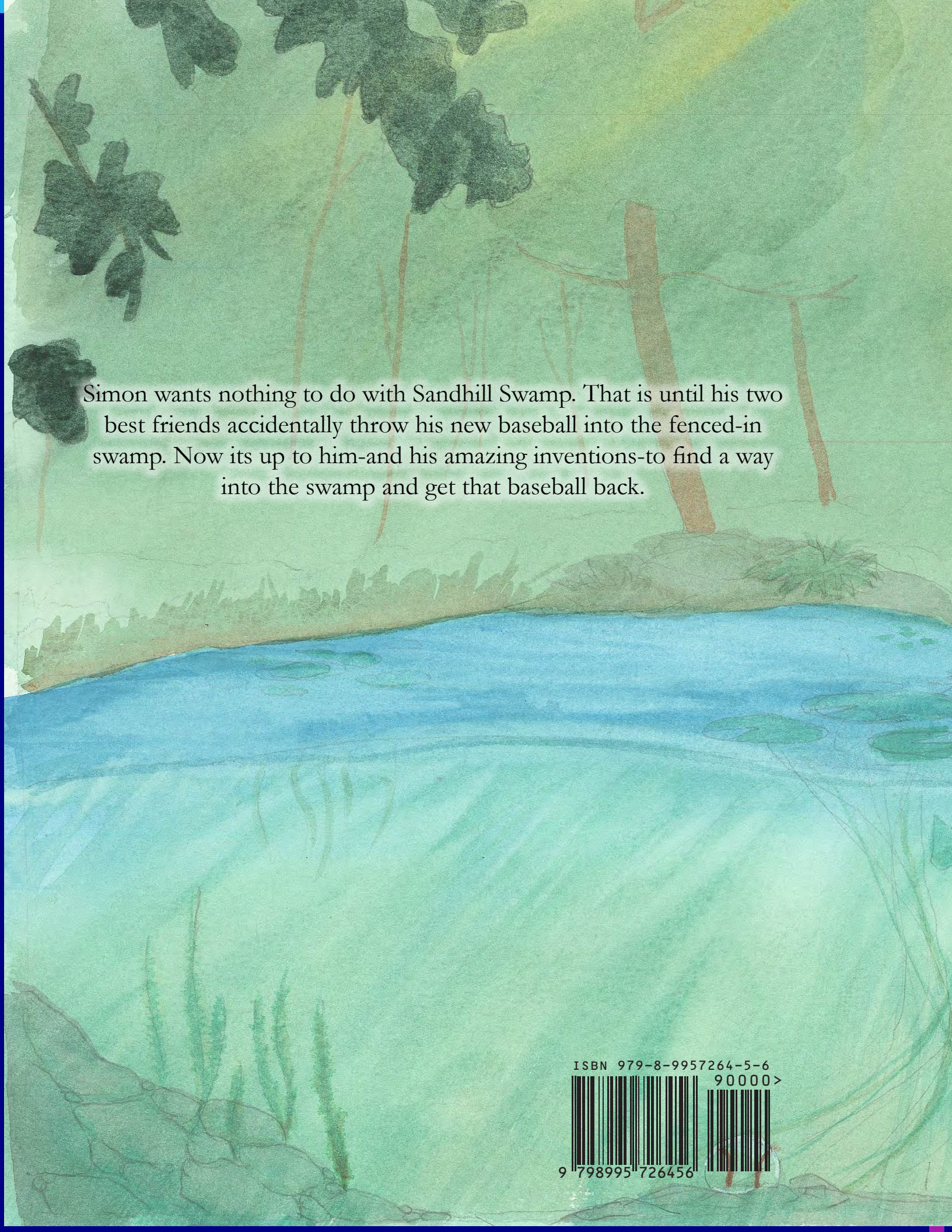
Blue spotted salamander: Salamanders are amphibians-same as frogs. They can breathe through their skin, so having clean water and soil is very important to them. Blue spotted salamanders like to spend most of their lives underground or hiding beneath rocks, fallen trees. Blue-spotted salamanders lay their eggs underwater.



Piping plover: Piping plovers are one species in the large plover family of birds. They're much less common than some of their cousins, such as the Killdeer (who, unlike the name suggests, do not kill deer). These birds enjoy staying by sandy or rocky shores, usually in groups. Plovers are excellent parents. When a predator gets close to a piping plover nest, the parent will fake an injured wing to lure predators away. This is called a "broken wing display."

Swamp rabbit: Not your typical bunny. Swamp rabbits are built for the wetlands. They have thick fur that helps keep them warm and dry while swimming-which they absolutely love to do. Like their name suggests, they typically live in swamps. Swamp rabbits are herbivores, meaning they mostly eat plants.



A watercolor illustration of a swampy landscape. The background is a mix of light and dark green washes, suggesting dense foliage. Several trees with brown trunks and dark green leaves are scattered across the scene. In the foreground, a body of water is depicted in shades of blue and teal, with several lily pads floating on its surface. The overall style is soft and painterly.

Simon wants nothing to do with Sandhill Swamp. That is until his two best friends accidentally throw his new baseball into the fenced-in swamp. Now its up to him-and his amazing inventions-to find a way into the swamp and get that baseball back.

ISBN 979-8-9957264-5-6

90000>



9 798995 726456