

The Comb on the Cliff

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Vocabulary

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 18 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about five minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

High in the hills of central Nepal there are cliffs with what look like grey shields hanging from them, out in the open, hundreds of metres above the valley floor. They are not shields. They are the nests of the largest honeybee in the world.

The Himalayan giant honeybee can be close to three centimetres long — long enough to cover the date on a coin. It does not live in a hollow tree or a box, as other honeybees do. It builds a single comb, sometimes a metre and a half across, fixed straight onto bare rock with nothing over it at all.

Choosing the spot is the clever part. The bees pick an overhang, so that the rock leans out above the comb. That keeps the monsoon rain off, and it means that anything which wants to walk down to the nest — a bear, a marten, a curious goat — finds itself leaning backwards over a drop. One cliff may carry a dozen combs, sometimes many more, each hanging from its own patch of shade.

The comb is never bare. The bees cover it in a living curtain several bees deep, and when a hornet comes close the curtain moves. Hundreds of bees flip their abdomens upwards in sequence, so that a dark ripple runs across the face of the nest like wind crossing a field. Entomologists call it shimmering. A hornet reading that signal usually goes elsewhere, and if it does not, the bees can heat it to death in a ball of their own bodies.

These bees also move house twice a year. The high cliffs are too cold in winter, so entire colonies migrate down into the warmer valleys, and return to the heights when the flowers come back. Some colonies go back to a cliff their ancestors used, and old nest scars mark the rock where comb after comb has been fixed.

People climb to them. In villages across the middle hills, teams harvest the combs twice a year using rope ladders dropped over the lip of the cliff, smoke to quiet the bees, and poles several metres long to cut a comb free and steer it into a basket swinging below.

The spring honey is the reason the climb is worth so much trouble. In spring the bees work rhododendron flowers, and those flowers carry a natural chemical that passes

into the honey. A spoonful can leave a person light-headed and a little dizzy, which is why that honey has long been used as a medicine and sells for many times the price of ordinary honey.

Harvesting is hard on the colonies, and in some districts villages now limit how many combs may be taken, leaving the rest of the cliff alone. The bees settle again, the curtain closes over the comb, and the shields hang there as before — grey, enormous and out in the open air.

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about the Himalayan giant honeybee — its nests, its defences and the people who harvest it. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

1 How large can the bee be, and how large can its comb be?

2 What three things do the harvesting teams use to take a comb off a cliff?

3 Why is an overhanging cliff a better site than a flat rock face?

4 Why do whole colonies have to leave the cliffs every winter?

5 What is *shimmering*, and why does the writer compare it to wind crossing a field?

6 Why does the writer wait until near the end to explain what the spring honey does to people?

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 · The bee can be close to three centimetres long, and a single comb can be about a metre and a half across.
- ☐ 2 · Rope ladders dropped over the lip of the cliff, smoke to quiet the bees, and long poles to cut the comb free and guide it into a basket hanging below.
- ☐ 3 · The rock leaning out above the comb keeps the monsoon rain off it, and any animal trying to climb down to the nest is left leaning backwards over a drop, so bears and martens cannot reach it.
- ☐ 4 · The high cliffs get too cold, and the flowers they feed on are gone, so the colonies migrate down to the warmer valleys and come back up when the flowers return.
- ☐ 5 · It is the defence where hundreds of bees flip their abdomens up in sequence so a dark ripple runs across the nest. The comparison shows it is one wave moving over a surface rather than lots of separate bees moving at random.
- ☐ 6 · The climb has already been described as dangerous and awkward, so the reader is wondering why anyone bothers. Holding the answer back makes it land as the explanation: the honey is a valued medicine worth many times the normal price.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Space it out

Do not try to nail a passage down in one sitting. Recall it once now, once tomorrow, and once at the end of the week — a couple of minutes each time. The small forgetting that happens in the gap is useful: pulling the facts back after they have faded is what makes them stay, and three short goes beat one long one.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of something you learned in short bursts over weeks — a sport, an instrument, a language. How much of it can you still do compared with something you crammed the night before?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your child read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back, and no prompting, because the struggle to haul a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level, reward the reasoning in the inference and purpose answers rather than the exact wording.