

# The Bird That Was Not There

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

## HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 20 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about six 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.

The researcher arrived with four aluminium cases and no idea how to walk downhill. Her name was Dr Ani Teo and she had come to record birds. By the second week she had worked out that the person who knew where the birds were was not one of the men who had offered to guide her, but a fourteen-year-old named Rula who carried water past the guest house twice a day.

Rula was given a recorder: a grey box the size of a brick, a foam-covered microphone, and a notebook with waterproof pages. The rules were simple. Write the time. Write where you stood. Do not talk over the bird.

For the first few days she recorded everything, which Dr Teo said was exactly right and also useless. Forty minutes of tape held three seconds of bird and a great deal of wind, dogs and her own breathing. She learned to wait with the machine already running, to stand still until her legs ached, and to point the microphone at the sound rather than at the bird.

The valley gave her plenty. The dawn whistles above the gardens. A rattling call from the casuarina trees that always came in threes. And, nine days in, from a ridge of mossy forest an hour above the village, a long rising cry she had not heard before, repeated four times.

Dr Teo played it back that evening, then played it again with her eyes closed.

“Where exactly?”

“Above the old garden. In the big trees.”

“How high in the trees?”

Rula thought. “Low. Lower than I expected.”

The next morning they went up together and sat for three hours, and the cry came, and Dr Teo pointed the long microphone at it and then lowered it slowly, frowning. Because what was calling was not what should have been calling. The shape was right, the timing was right, but it was coming from a small dull bird hopping about in the undergrowth —

and three seconds later the same bird produced the rattling call from the casuarina trees, then a dog, then the squeak of the guest house gate.

“It copies,” Rula said.

“It copies,” Dr Teo agreed. She sat back on her heels. “Which means half my recordings of this valley may be one very talented liar.”

They spent the rest of the month sorting the collection, and it was Rula's notebook that saved it. Because she had written where she stood and what time it was, they could lay the recordings out and look for the impossible: the same voice in two places at once, or a dawn call at four in the afternoon. The mimic had left a trail without meaning to.

Dr Teo left in August with her cases, her tapes and photocopies of twenty-six notebook pages. She also left the recorder, which Rula did not entirely believe until the van had gone.

The notebook she kept afterwards was her own. It had the same three rules at the front, copied out in her own handwriting, and under them a fourth she had added herself: write down what else you heard, even if you think it does not matter.



- 6 The story ends with Rula adding a fourth rule of her own. Why does the writer finish there?

---

---

---

## 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 · Write the time, write where you stood, and do not talk over the bird.
- ☐ 2 · Any three of: the long rising cry, the rattling call from the casuarina trees, a dog, the squeak of the guest house gate.
- ☐ 3 · Right because Rula was learning to use the machine and not missing anything, useless because forty minutes of tape held only three seconds of bird and the rest was wind, dogs and breathing — nothing she could work with.
- ☐ 4 · Because every recording had a time and a place written beside it, they could spot impossibilities — the same voice in two places at once, or a dawn call turning up in the afternoon. Without those notes the copies would have been indistinguishable from the real birds.
- ☐ 5 · She means it imitates other birds so well that her recordings cannot be trusted. It is not really lying, because it has no intention of deceiving anyone — it simply copies what it hears, and the mistake was hers.
- ☐ 6 · The fourth rule is what the whole episode taught her: the sounds that seemed irrelevant — the dog, the gate — were exactly what exposed the mimic. Ending on a rule she wrote herself shows she has stopped following instructions and started thinking like a researcher.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

—

QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

\_\_\_\_\_

## THE STRATEGY Write the exam question

Instead of going back over the passage, write three questions on it that you think would be hard to answer — then put them away for a day and answer them. Writing a good question forces you to decide what actually matters in what you read, and answering your own question a day later is retrieval practice, which builds memory far better than looking at the page again.

## WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of a time you explained something to someone younger and they asked a question you had not thought of. What did that question show you about your own understanding?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**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 effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level, reward the quality of the reasoning in the inference and purpose answers rather than the exact wording.