

## Small Animal Folklore

**Cultural folklore traditionally features various small animals.**

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From superstitions to fairy tales to the fables of Aesop, small animals are often the featured creatures in folklore. With distinctive personalities, small statures and regular interaction with humans throughout history, critters like rabbits, rats, mice and hedgehogs are token characters in tales of yore.

Courtesy of Isabelle Francais/Bowtie Inc.

Rabbits and many other small animals are common throughout folklore.

Finnish folklorist Henni Ilomäki describes this phenomenon as sensible in times when people were primarily hunters, as "prey animals belonged to the forest." Interacting properly with the forest was key to success then. Thus, a frequent appearance of small critters in various cultural folklore is no surprise.

### Rabbit Folklore

Though the most historical bunny tale just might be Aesop's "The Tortoise And The Hare," rabbits are often found in many other fables. The Uncle Remus stories from the southern United States that feature the clever Br'er Rabbit originated among African slaves. They wove tales about the rabbit that faced up to bigger, stronger animals and outsmarted them every time. In one tale told throughout the South, a business-like Br'er Rabbit sells one quantity of corn over and over again to different creatures until he's made \$8 — and a lot of chaos.

The theme of a cunning rabbit outsmarting the rest is one that transcends different cultures. A tale told in India from the Panchatantra, "The Foolish Lion And The Clever Rabbit," describes an intelligent rabbit that tricks the King of Lions and saves all the prey of the land, including himself. Other tales popularized in America and Africa describe rabbits that play tricks on whales, elephants, monkeys and crocodiles, and they all end the same: with the rabbit laughing triumphantly at its own tricks.

But of course, the rabbit character isn't always portrayed as consistently brilliant. In Aesop's Fables, which originate from Greece, the hare is beat in a race by a slow-moving but steady tortoise that doesn't back down from the overconfident small critter. And in a fairy tale from Brazil called "How The Rabbit Lost His Tail," a vulnerable bunny loses his long, beautiful tail after a cat chops it off with a knife and sews it to her own tailless bottom.

Superstitions about rabbits are commonplace throughout the world. Rabbit forefeet are often considered lucky, and a hare that crosses your path may be either a sign of luck, or a sign of doom.

### Rat and Mouse Folklore

Growing up, most people become immediately familiar with stories that incorporate the humble rodent. Nursery rhymes like "Hickory, Dickory, Dock," "Pussycat, Pussycat," and "Three Blind Mice" thrust rats and mice into the spotlight from the get-go. Though they're the smallest of the small animal world, rats and mice play no small role in folklore.

Aesop's tale of "The Lion And The Mouse" shines a flattering light upon the meek mouse, which boldly saves the great lion from entrapment in a net by using his nimble teeth. The mouse teaches audiences that the smallest friends can be the greatest of all. In another Aesop fable, a house mouse shows off his luxurious home to a field mouse, only to result in the field mouse appreciating his humble, simple lifestyle. Such tales exemplify the general perception of mice throughout history: though small and humble, mice still maintain strong and sensible personalities.

A tale from Africa describes rats, however, with a touch more confidence. One rat named Ntori changes his name to mean the plural word "strangers," helping himself to everything that is intended for the people because of his clever new name.

While other animal fables may describe rodents are pleasant critters, Joseph D. Clark, author of *Beastly Folklore*, writes that, historically, humans did not think they're pleasant. Yet worldwide, superstitions associate rodents with the ease of ills: mouse flesh is said to cure rattlesnake bites, epilepsy and fevers, as well as baldness.

And for those who wonder why rats have hairless tails, there's a fable that explains it. Though the rat began life with a tail like a horse's, a "why" story popular in various cultures explains that after getting his tail stuck in a lizard's trap, the hairs were all stripped away.

#### Hedgehog Folklore

Though perhaps not the most prominent of folklore critters, hedgehogs are still fable regulars. Zug G. Standing Bear, owner of The Flash and Thelma Memorial Hedgehog Rescue in Divide, Colorado, said that it's no wonder.

Standing Bear believes folklore involving hedgehogs has been around for a long time because hedgehogs have been around for a long time. Some of the stories involving hedgehogs, Standing Bear said, include them carrying apples on their spines; stealing milk from cows; and being immune to snake venom.

Like the rabbit, the hedgehog is often perceived as clever. In one fable, a hare and a hedgehog race each other down a lane of cabbages, and the hedgehog manages to trick the hare into thinking he's faster by sending his similar-looking wife to the finish point each time. Another common theme in folklore is what Standing Bear said is "the hedgehog's dilemma," in which the metaphor of a hedgehog's quills signifies that the closer one gets to something; the more likely one is to be hurt by it. This belief was formed by Hugh Warwick, a journalist and ecologist expert on hedgehogs.

A cartoon popularized in the 1970s in New Zealand called Bogor featured a hedgehog as the primary friend of a woodsman. Why is the hedgehog a regular folklore feature? Standing Bear says that Warwick credits its quirky personality.

"Few wild animals will allow a human to get near it," Standing Bear said. "A hedgehog doesn't take off like a bird or run away or attack, so they let you pick them up."