

Genre Realistic Fiction

Essential Questions

How can we coexist with wild plants and animals?
When can living too closely to wildlife be dangerous?
When is it safe?

An illustration of a large, green, spiny cactus with several arms. A woodpecker with a red crest and black and white speckled body is perched on one of the arms, pecking at the cactus. A smaller, brown and white speckled bird is perched on the top of the cactus. The background is a light, textured beige color.

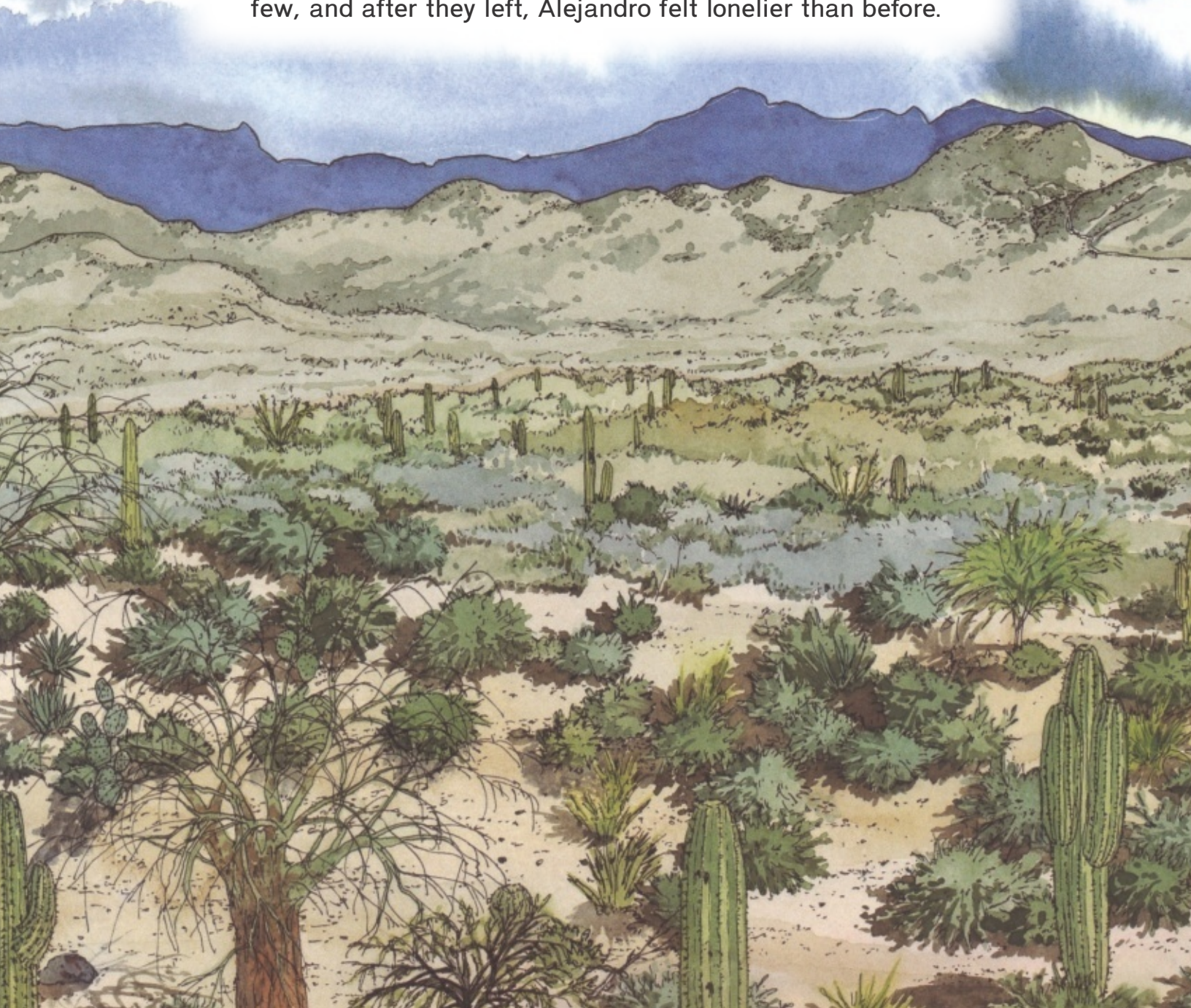
Alejandro's Gift

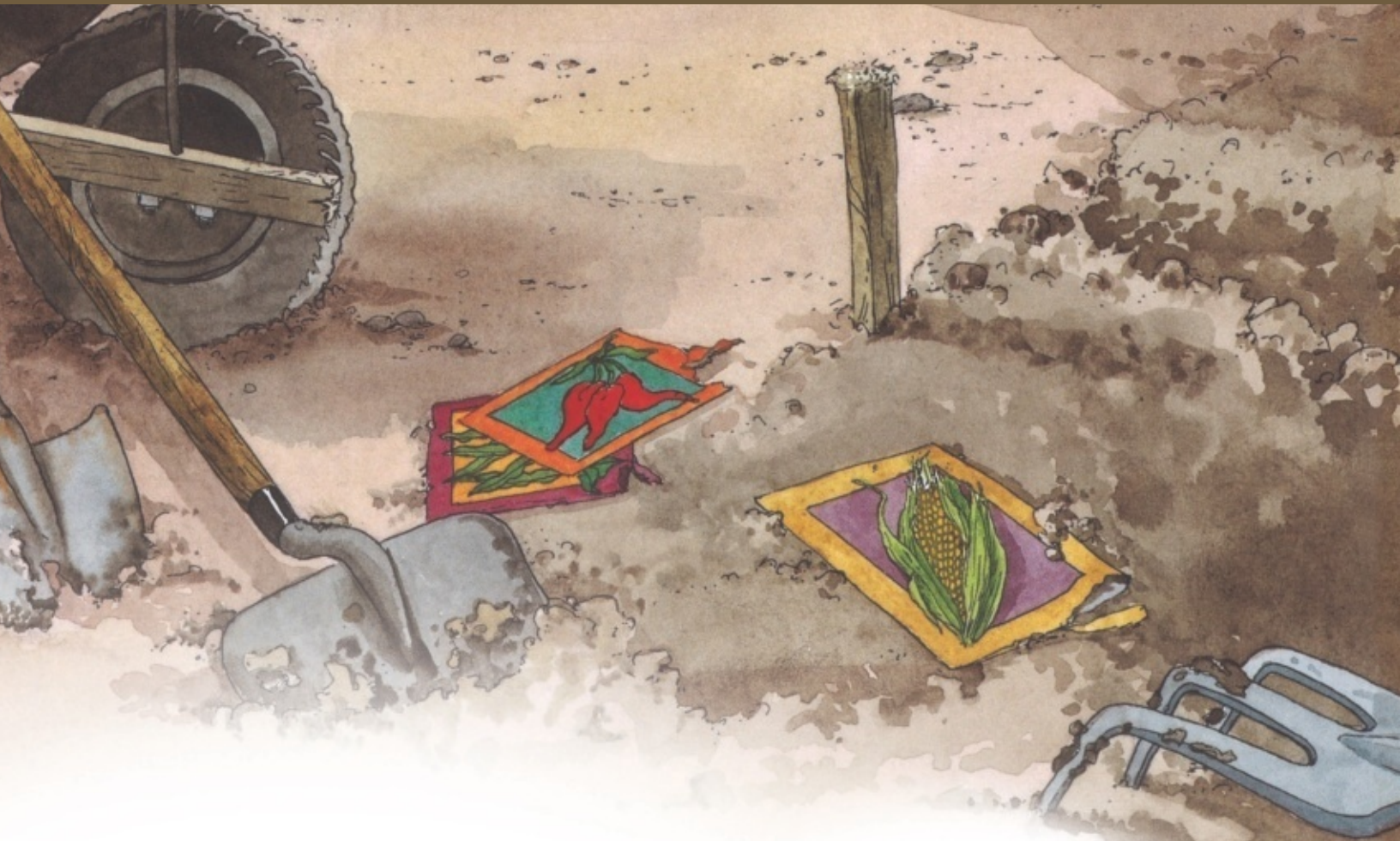
*by Richard E. Albert
illustrated by Sylvia Long*

ALEJANDRO'S small adobe house stood beside a lonely desert road.

Beside the house stood a well, and a windmill to pump water from the well. Water for Alejandro and for his only companion, a burro.

It was a lonely place, and Alejandro welcomed any who stopped by to refresh themselves at the well. But visitors were few, and after they left, Alejandro felt lonelier than before.





To more easily endure the lonely hours, Alejandro planted a garden. A garden filled with carrots, beans, and large brown onions. Tomatoes and corn.

Melons, squash, and small red peppers.

Most mornings found Alejandro tending the garden, watching it grow. These were times he cherished, and he often stayed for hours, working until driven indoors by the desert heat.

The days went by, one after another with little change, until one morning when there was an unexpected visitor. This visitor came not from the desert road, but from the desert itself.

A ground squirrel crept from the underbrush. Moving warily over the sand, it hesitated and looked around. Alejandro paused, keeping very quiet as the squirrel approached the garden. It ran up to one of the furrows, drank its fill of water, and scampered away. After it left, Alejandro realized that for those few moments his loneliness had been all but forgotten.

And because he felt less lonely, Alejandro found himself hoping the squirrel would come again.



The squirrel did come again, from time to time bringing along small friends.

Wood rats and pocket gophers.

Jackrabbits, kangaroo rats, pocket mice.

Birds, too, became aware of Alejandro's garden.

Roadrunners, gila woodpeckers, thrashers.

Cactus wrens, sage sparrows, mourning doves, and others came in the evening to perch on the branches of a mesquite bush, or to rest on the arms of a lone saguaro, before dropping down for a quick drink before nightfall.

Occasionally, even an old desert tortoise could be seen plodding toward the garden.

Suddenly, Alejandro found that time was passing more quickly. He was rarely lonely. He had only to look up from his hoe, or from wherever he might be at any moment, to find a small friend nearby.

For a while this was all that mattered to Alejandro, but after a time he wasn't so sure. He began asking himself if there was something more important than just making himself less lonely. It took Alejandro little time to see there was.

He began to realize that his tiny desert friends came to his garden not for company, but for water. And he found himself thinking of the other animals in the desert.





Animals like the coyote and the desert gray fox.

The bobcats, the skunks, the badgers, the long-nosed coatis.

The peccaries, sometimes called *javelinas*, the short-tempered wild pigs of the desert.

The antlered mule deer, the does, and the fawns.

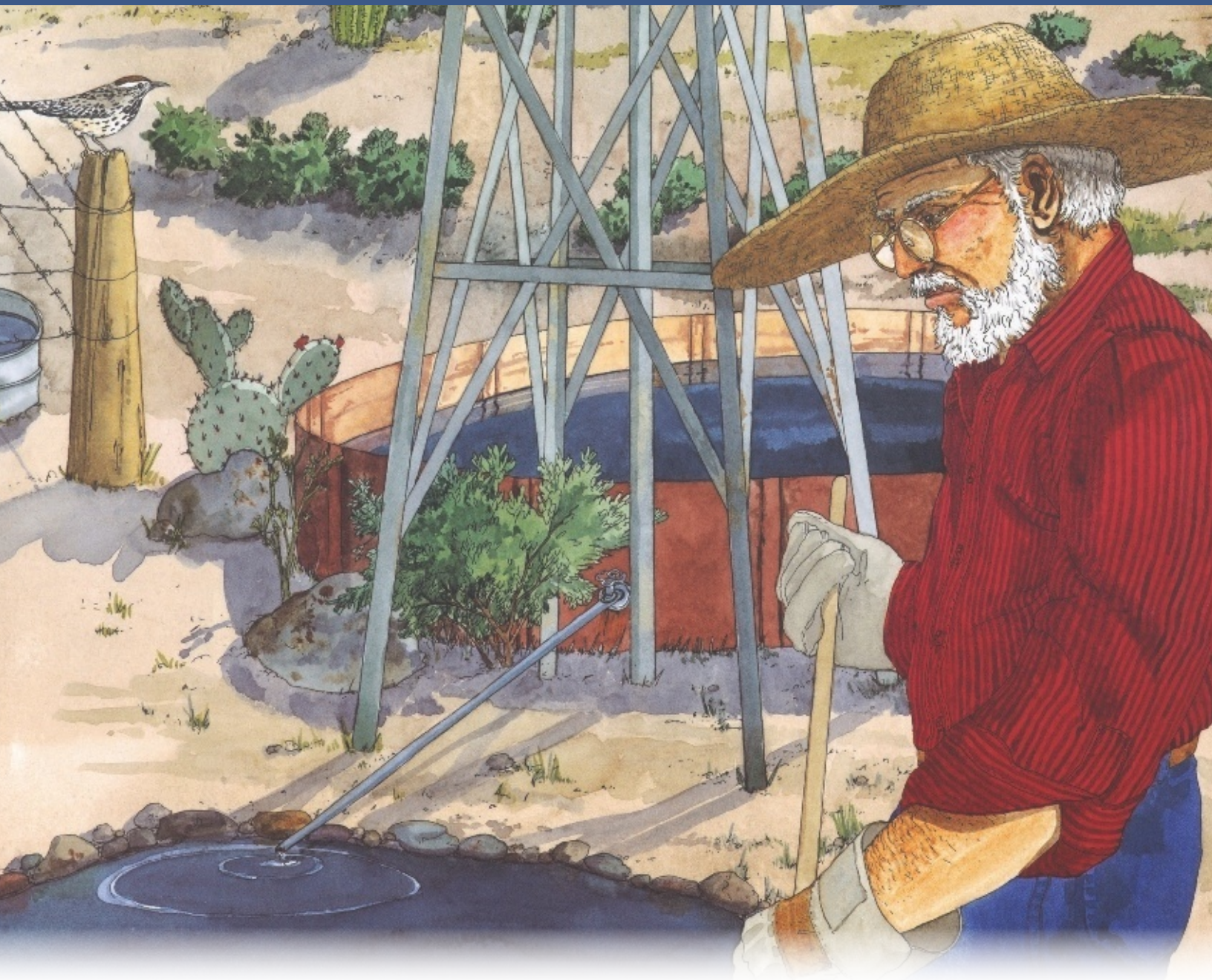
Finding enough water was not a problem. With his windmill and well. Alejandro could supply ample water for any and all. Getting it to those who needed it was something else.

The something else, Alejandro decided, was a desert water hole.

Without delay, Alejandro started digging. It was tiring work, taking many days in the hot desert sun. But the thought of giving water to so many thirsty desert dwellers more than made up for the drudgery. And when it was filled, Alejandro was pleased with the gift he had made for his desert friends.

There was good reason to suppose it would take time for the larger animals to discover their new source of water, so Alejandro was patient. He went about as usual, feeding his burro, tending the garden, and doing countless other chores.

Days passed and nothing happened. Still, Alejandro was confident. But the days turned to weeks, and it was still quiet at the water hole. Why, Alejandro wondered, weren't they coming? What could he have done wrong?



The absence of the desert folk might have remained a mystery had Alejandro not come out of the house one morning when a skunk was in the clearing beyond the water hole. Seeing Alejandro, the skunk darted to safety in the underbrush.

It suddenly became very clear why Alejandro's gift was being shunned.

Alejandro couldn't believe he had been so thoughtless, but what was important now was to put things right as quickly as possible.

Water hole number two was built far from the house and screened by heavy desert growth. When it was filled and ready, Alejandro waited with mixed emotions. He was hopeful, yet he couldn't forget what had happened the first time.

As it turned out, he was not disappointed.

The animals of the desert did come, each as it made its own discovery. Because the water hole was now sheltered from the small adobe house and the desert road, the animals were no longer fearful. And although Alejandro could not see through the desert growth surrounding the water hole, he had ways of knowing it was no longer being shunned.

By the twitter of birds gathering in the dusk.

By the rustling of mesquite in the quiet desert evening telling of the approach of a coyote, a badger, or maybe a desert fox.

By the soft hoofbeats of a mule deer or the unmistakable sound of a herd of peccaries charging toward the water hole.

And in these moments when Alejandro sat quietly listening to the sounds of his desert neighbors, he knew that the gift was not so much a gift that he had given, but a gift he had received.



The Southwestern region of the United States is made up of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. A variety of wildlife can be found in its varied habitats. The following glossary lists some of the animals and plants shown in this book.



The **ARIZONA POCKET MOUSE** eats many kinds of seeds and can hibernate when food cannot be found.

BADGERS have distinctive black-and-white “masks” on their faces. They live in family groups in underground burrows. Few animals will attack the badger because of its fierce temperament.



The **BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT** has very large ears, which help keep it cool in hot weather. It also has very large feet, which help it run quickly.



BOBCATS get their name from their stubby “bobbed” tail. They are found only in North America, where they are the most common wildcat. They eat small mammals, such as rabbits, mice, and squirrels. The bobcat barks hoarsely when threatened.

BOTTA’S POCKET GOPHER spends most of its time in underground burrows, some of which can be as long as 150 feet. Botta’s Pocket Gophers live by themselves, often fighting other gophers they meet.



The **CACTUS WREN** is the largest North American wren—growing up to 9 inches long. It lives in nests in clumps of mesquite on desert hillsides.



COATIS (kwa-tees) are short legged animals that can grow up to two feet long. They eat lizards and insects, but are known for eating fruit, often stripping fruit trees bare. Coatis travel in large groups.

The **COLLARED PECCARY** (peck-a-ree) resembles a wild pig but has a snout that points upwards. It eats cacti—especially prickly pear, which it devours spines and all. During the midday heat, peccaries often sleep in hollows in the ground.



COSTA'S HUMMINGBIRD is a purple-throated hummingbird no more than 3 1/2 inches long. As it hovers over flowers, its wings beat so fast they make a humming sound. Hummingbirds are the only birds that can hover.

COYOTES can run as fast as 40 miles per hour and leap as far as 14 feet. They run with their tails down, unlike wolves, which run with their tails straight behind them.

The **CURVE-BILLED THRASHER** is about the size of a robin. It has a long, curved bill and red eyes. It lives in cactus deserts and eats insects.



The **DESERT TORTOISE** stores water in a pouch beneath its shell. It hibernates underground from October to March. Desert Tortoises can grow up to 15 inches long.



The **ELF OWL** is the smallest American owl and is no bigger than a sparrow. It lives in saguaro deserts and feeds on large insects.

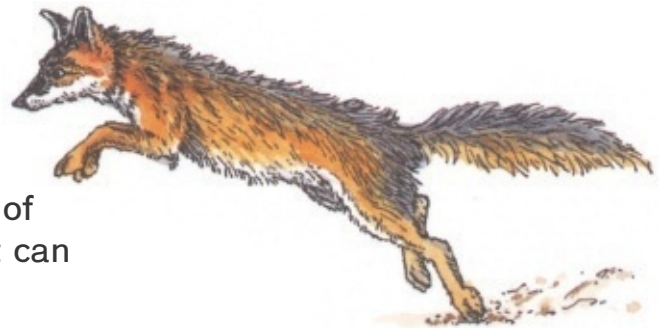


GAMBEL'S QUAIL lives in desert thickets. This bird has a loud, cackling call, and a large teardrop-shaped feather on its head.



The **GILA WOODPECKER** nests in holes in giant saguaro cacti. Its feathers are patterned in black and white stripes. Males have a small red cap, while females and young birds have plain brown heads.

The **GRAY FOX** is mostly active at night, but can sometimes be seen during the day looking for food. They are the only canids (the family of wolves, foxes, coyote, and dogs) that can climb, and they often rest in trees.



The **GREATER ROADRUNNER** is a tall bird (20 to 24 inches) that rarely flies, running instead on strong feet. It eats a wide variety of small animals, including snakes, lizards, and scorpions.



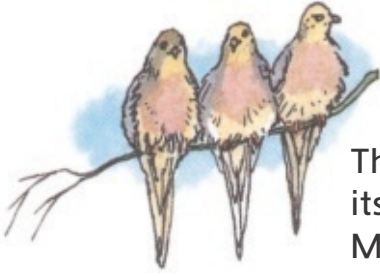
HARRIS'S ANTELOPE SQUIRREL lives in low deserts. Its pale coloring helps it blend with the environment. Antelope Squirrels get most of the water they need from the food they eat.



MERRIAM'S KANGAROO RAT is the smallest kangaroo rat in the United States. It lives in scrublands, feeding mostly on the seeds of mesquite and other desert plants.

MESQUITE (mess-keet) is a spiny tree that grows in large thickets in the Southwest and Mexico.





The **MOURNING DOVE**'s name comes from its melancholy cooing, which is its mating call. Mourning doves can be found all over North America.

MULE DEER have large ears and are one of the most common animals of the desert. Their diet consists of grasses, twigs, and cactus fruits. Mule Deer can run up to 35 miles an hour, and can jump as far as 25 feet.



The **PHAINOPEPLA** (fay-no-**pep**-la) is a tropical bird with an elegant crest on its head. It eats mistletoe berries and insects, which it snatches right out of the air.

SAGE SPARROWS are small brown birds with white eye rings. They are found in dry foothills and sagebrush.



The **SAGUARO** (sah-**gwar**-oh) is a cactus that can grow up to 60 feet tall. It provides fruit for many desert creatures, and bears white flowers.



The **WHITE-THROATED WOOD RAT** usually lives in the base of a cactus, and it uses the cactus needles to hide the entrance to its home.



You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Text Connections

1. What brings the desert creatures to Alejandro's house? What was the first creature to visit?
2. In the poem "A Winter Scene," Henry David Thoreau names many forest creatures. What desert creatures visit Alejandro's garden? If Alejandro wrote a similar poem, how would it be different from "A Winter Scene"?
3. What did Alejandro make for the animals? What was the problem with it?
4. What impact did Alejandro have on the environment? Based on "John Muir," do you think John Muir would agree or disagree with Alejandro's actions?
5. Alejandro gave creatures a gift, but also received a gift in return. Think of a time when you did something kind for others. How did you receive a gift from your own kind act?

Did You Know?

Most animals in the desert are herbivores, or plant eaters. Even when water is scarce, these animals get water from the desert plants they eat.



Write

Write about how you can help provide food or water for animals near your home. For example, do you have a garden, birdbath, or bird feeder?

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. When Alejandro digs the second water hole, how does he feel? Why does he have mixed emotions? Use details from the text to support your answer.
2. At the end of the story, what does Alejandro realize about his gift to the desert animals? Identify specific details in the text that support your answer.

Writer's Craft

3. The author of "Alejandro's Gift" frequently lists the various animals and plants that appear in the desert. What effect do these lists have on a reader's understanding of desert life?

Concept Development

4. Look at the glossary in "Alejandro's Gift." How do the images and text in the glossary help you understand the story?





Read this Science Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Diagrams are drawings that show the arrangement or parts of something. They clarify information in the text.

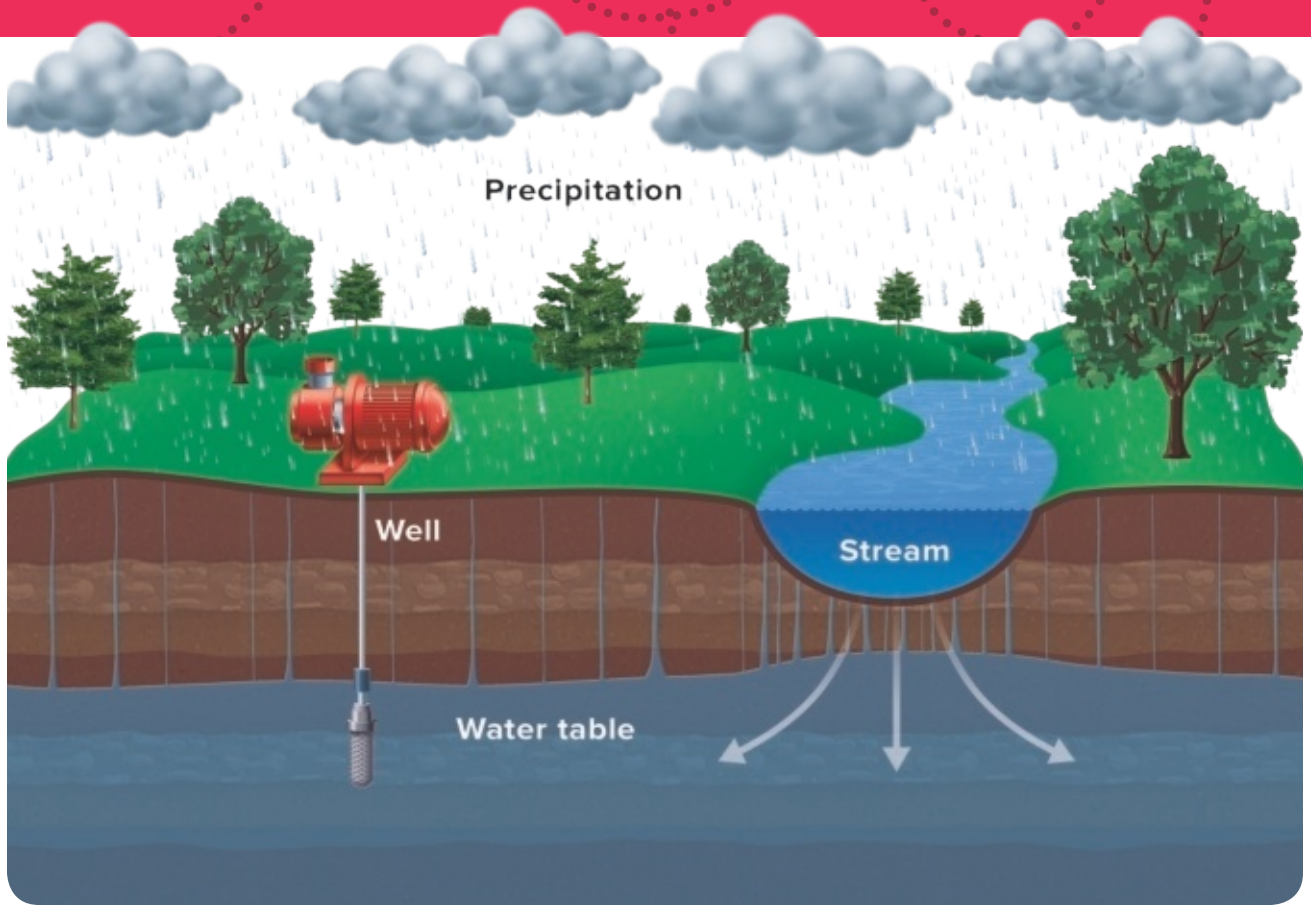
The Water Table

You just read about Alejandro, who digs a water hole for the desert animals that live near his home. In the story, Alejandro has a well beside his house, and he uses a windmill to pump water from the well. But where does the water in the well and the water hole come from?

In the desert, water is scarce. But by digging deep into the ground, people can access groundwater below the water table. An area's water table is the line below which the earth is saturated with water. Although it is called a line, a water table does not have to be straight. Typically, it follows the shape of the land above it. For example, streams replenish the water table, and so the line slopes upward under a stream. They are also influenced by weather. They are usually higher in rainy seasons and lower in dry seasons.

When necessary, humans can access water tables for drinking water and crop irrigation. To access the groundwater beneath a water table, you must first excavate earth until you have tapped into an aquifer. An aquifer is an area of soil, sand, and rock beneath the water table that can hold water. When a well is situated above an aquifer, groundwater will flow into the excavated area. As long as the aquifer remains saturated with groundwater, the well will be replenished whenever you draw water from it. To protect the well's groundwater from pollution, people will often screen the excavated area with bricks or thickets.

In the United States, there is an enormous underground aquifer called the Ogallala Aquifer. The Ogallala Aquifer is so large that it stretches beneath eight states. This aquifer alone provides 30 percent of the groundwater used for irrigation in the United States.



1. According to the text, what is a water table? Is the water table a flat, horizontal line? Explain.
2. How are water tables influenced by weather? When do you think it would be easier to dig a well or water hole: in a cool, wet season or in a hot, dry season? Explain your answer.
3. Think about how you would design and build a well near your school. Where would you put it? What tools and supplies would you need? During what time of year would you dig it?



Go Digital

Search for more information about different kinds of wells. Research how different types of wells solve different problems.