



Can I Borrow Your Burrow?

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I found it, thought the gopher tortoise.
A place to call home!

It was a sunny, sandy, grassy spot. Mr. Tortoise dug himself a deep, dark burrow there, as wide as he was long.

A gopher cricket and a dung beetle stopped by his new home to say hello.

“Nice house you have!” chirped Cricket.

“Could use some housekeeping, though,” observed Beetle.

“Could indeed,” agreed Cricket. “Would you like some company, Mr. Tortoise? We’d be happy to tidy up for you.”



Quiet Mr. Tortoise didn't say no, so Beetle and Cricket moved right in.

A noisy gopher frog had noticed the insects and followed them into the burrow. Breakfast treats, he was thinking. But once he was inside the burrow, he had an even better thought: this is a good place to live!

"You have a beautiful house, Mr. Tortoise," said Frog. "Can I stay here, too? I won't be any trouble at all, and I only snore when I'm awake."

Mr. Tortoise didn't mind snoring. He nodded his head up and down, which meant, "Yes, you can stay."

Beetle and Cricket quickly piped up. "Wait a minute! We have rules. The number one rule is: you can't eat anybody who lives here."

"All right," agreed Frog. "I'll catch flies."

While Frog was fly-catching one rainy morning, he saw a fat blue-black gopher snake sliding through the grass.

“Help!” cried Frog, backing into the burrow. Snake followed, all eight feet of her. But once she was inside, she forgot about lunch.

“What a comfortable house!” said Snake. “Very spacious and good for sharing, right, Mr. Tortoise? I won’t take up much room. I’ll just curl up in the back.”

Mr. Tortoise never took up much room himself when he was sleeping, tucked neatly inside his shell.



He nodded his head up and down, which meant, “Yes, there’s plenty of space.”

Frog puffed and peeped. “Wait a minute! We have rules. The number one rule is: you can’t eat anybody who lives here.”

“Sounds fair,” agreed Snake. “I’ll eat out.”

The next time Frog sat at his fly-catching post, he saw a burrowing owl. Owl saw . . . a snack!

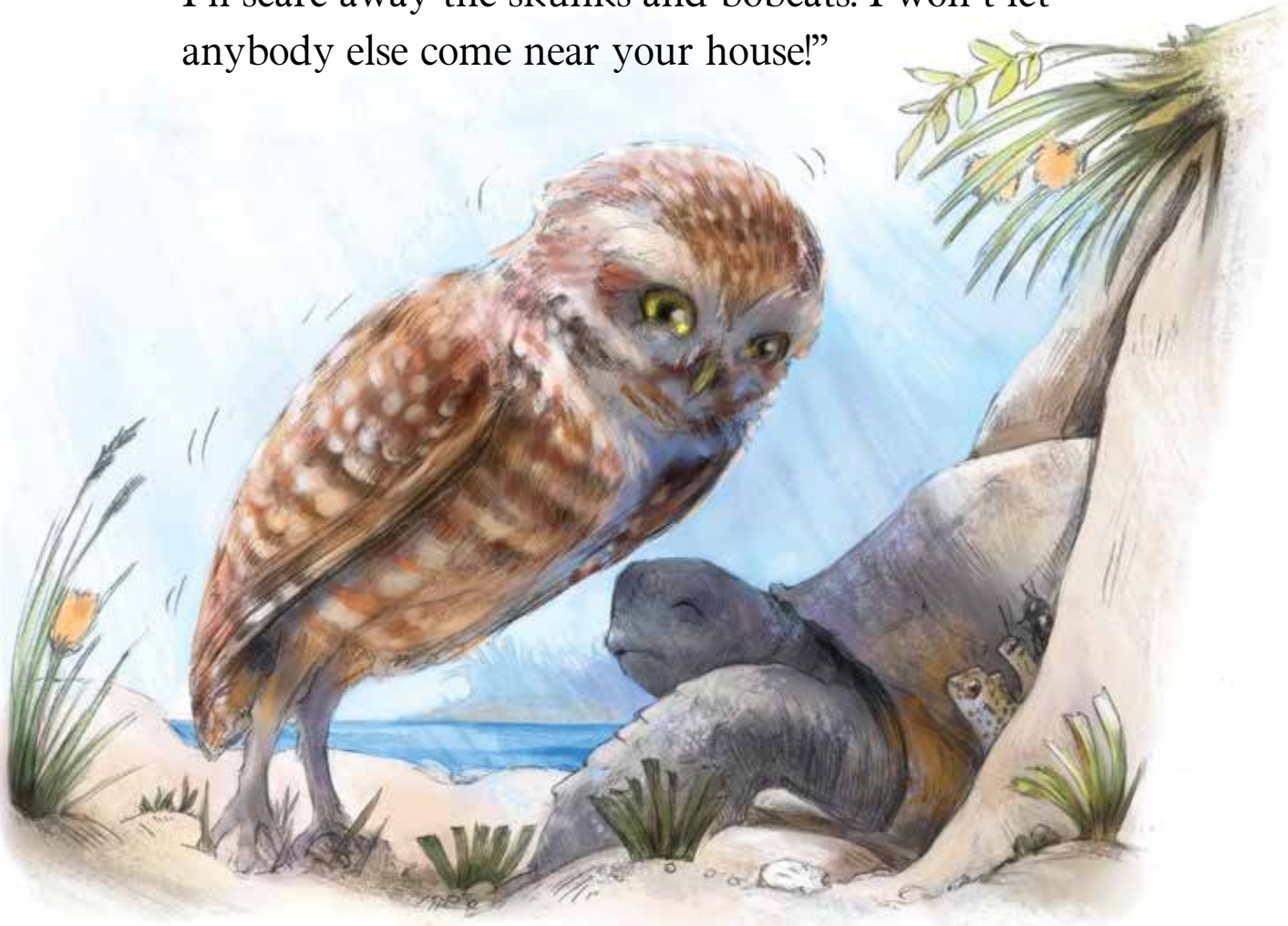
The frightened frog fled back to the burrow. Owl hopped behind him and peered inside.



“Oooh!” exclaimed Owl, bobbing up and down. “How perfect! I love this house! Don’t worry about a thing, Mr. Tortoise. I don’t want to move in. Not yet. I’ve just come to stand guard for you.”

Mr. Tortoise peeked out of his shell. Since he hardly ever said a word, his houseguests answered for him. “OK, but we have rules, you know. The number one rule is: you can’t eat anybody who lives here.”

“Quite reasonable,” agreed Owl. “In the meantime, I’ll scare away the skunks and bobcats. I won’t let anybody else come near your house!”





So Beetle, Cricket, Frog, and Snake all lived together in Mr. Tortoise's burrow. They followed the number one rule, live and let live, and they all kept their promises.

Cricket and Beetle cleaned house.

Frog only snored when he was awake.

Snake curled up in the back.

And Owl stood guard at the entrance, but she shrieked and rattled and made so much noise—louder than a hissing snake, louder than a snoring frog, much louder than a chirping cricket—she scared everybody away. Even Mr. Tortoise!

Mr. Tortoise knew what he had to do. He went out for a walk and kept on walking, till he found a nice sunny, sandy, grassy, quiet spot. Then he dug a brand-new, cozy burrow and settled in . . . all by himself. 🐌





Room to Share

The gopher tortoise lives in the North American Southeast. It is called a “keystone” species because it helps so many other creatures to survive. Its long, deep burrow can also be a home to over 360 different kinds of animals. Opossums, skunks, armadillos, bobcats, raccoons, rabbits, spiders, frogs, insects, birds, and snakes have all moved into tortoise burrows.

Some of these animals may live with the tortoise. Others, like burrowing owls, will move into an unused tortoise burrow. One animal the tortoise usually doesn't allow into its burrow is . . . another tortoise!