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Dragon in the Rocks, , , . .

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Like many children, my daughter went through an intense dinosaur phase. At age 3 she told people she was going to be a paleontologist and wash ducks (a nod to an environmental program she watched on TV). Therefore, I was happy to find a story about Mary Anning of Lyme, England, one of the world's earliest fossil hunters. Remarkably, she excavated an entire skeleton on her own -- later sold to a museum -- when still a child. Since so many books about professions are concerned with what kids can do "when they grow up," my daughter enjoyed hearing about a dinosaur hunter who was not much older than she was herself.

She could easily be an i...more This is the third picture book about Mary Anning that I've read. This one's facts seem to deviate a bit from the other accounts that I've read. But the gist of the story is there: the 12 year old girl who discovers an important fossil and who contributes to early paleontology.

So, Once Upon A Time, and imagine if you can, a steep sided valley cluttered with giant, spiky green pine trees and thick, green grass that reaches to the top of your socks so that when you run, you have to bring your knees up high, like running through water. Wildflowers spread their sweet heady perfume along the gentle breezes and bees hum musically to themselves as they cheerily collect flower pollen.

This particular summer had been very hot and dry, making the lean farm dogs sleepy and still. Farmers whistled lazily to themselves and would stand and stare into the distance, trying to remember what it was that they were supposed to be doing. By two o'clock in the afternoon, the town would be in a haze of slumber, with grandmas nodding off over their knitting and farmers snoozing in the haystacks. It was very, very hot.

The boys and girls would clamber all over it, poking sticks at it and hanging wet gumboots on its ears but it didn't mind in the least. The men folk would sometimes chop firewood on its zigzagged tail because it was just the right height and the Ladies Weaving Group often spun sheep fleece on its spikes.

Often on a cool night, when the stars were twinkling brightly in a velvet sky and the children peacefully asleep, the grown ups would settle for the evening with a mug of steaming cocoa in a soft cushioned armchair. Then the stories about How The Dragon Got There began. Nobody knew for sure, there were many different versions depending on which family told the tale, but one thing that everybody agreed on, was this:

The days went by slowly, quietly and most importantly, without any rain. There had been no rain in the valley for as long as the children could remember. The wells were starting to bring up muddy brown water and clothes had to be washed in yesterday's dishwater. The lawns had faded to a crisp biscuit colour and the flowers drooped their beautiful heads. Even the trees seemed to hang their branches like weary arms. The valley turned browner and drier and thirstier, every hot, baking day.

The river carried away the schoolteacher's bike shed but she cared not a jot. It even demolished the Ladies Bowling Club changing rooms but they howled with laughter and slapped their thighs. When the flood sent pools of water out towards the golf course, filling up sixteen of the nineteen holes, the men just hooted and whistled and threw their caps up in the air.

After the families had restored and rebuilt the village, and set up sailing clubs for the children, and scuba diving for the grandparents, they erected a bandstand and monument in the spot where the Dragon used to lay. Every year to mark the occasion, they would bring garlands of flowers and herbs and arrange them in a big circle. The children would have the day off school, for it was known as 'Water Dragon Day' and wearing the dragon masks that they had been working on all week, would skip and clap and sing.

There reserve contains 28 different vegetation associations, including heaths, woodlands, low forests, mallee and kwongan. The large number of plant communities form a complex mosaic characteristic of wheatbelt vegetation, including vegetation communities occurring on laterite. Sixteen 16 plants, including 13 eucalypts, are endemic either to the wheatbelt region or to Western Australia. The rare Lake Varley Grevillea is found in the reserve.[1]

Mary's father also told her of a dragon skeleton he had once seen in a cave near their home in Lyme Regis on the southern coast of England. One day the opportunity arose to visit the cave herself, and subsequently she spent many months chipping, numbering and packing up the fossil pieces of the 26-foot-long ichthyosaur skeleton, which has now been on display at the Natural History Museum in London for nearly 200 years.

Looking for more inspiration on the significant finds of other young paleontologists... look to Tumbler Ridge and the discovery by Daniel Helm of a significant dinosaur trackway that inspired a community or to Vancouver Island and the tale of paleontology in beautiful Courtenay where the Trask family found one of BC's most famous marine reptiles.

Ammonites were a group of hugely successful aquatic molluscs that looked like the still extant Nautilus, a coiled shellfish that lives off the southern coast of Asia. While the Nautilus lived on, ammonites graced our waters from around 400 million years ago until the end of the Cretaceous, 65 million years.

One of the most beautiful drives in the Pacific Northwest is the coastline along the Olympic Peninsula from Port Angeles to Neah Bay. This stretch of road meanders alongside the Clallam Formation, a thick, mainly marine sequence of sandstones and siltstones that line the northwestern margin of the Olympic Peninsula, western Washington.

The Farallon Plate took a turn north some 57 million years ago, sweeping much of western coastal Oregon along with it. By the middle Oligocene, the Cascadia Subduction Zone was in full force with growing pressure erupting volcanoes along the Western Cascades, a pattern that was to continue well into the Miocene. The soft ocean sediments of Oregon contain beautifully preserved gastropods, bivalves and cephalopods.

Rain long foretold takes a long time to pass; if it arrives on short notice, it soon will pass. For the folks I go out collecting with all hikes, digs and kayak trips are rain or shine. Safety is always top of mind and prepping for the weather is paramount. Keep yourself safe whatever part of the world you choose to explore. For forecasts of marine weather in Vancouver call 604.666.3655 or visit <http://www.weatheroffice.com/>

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