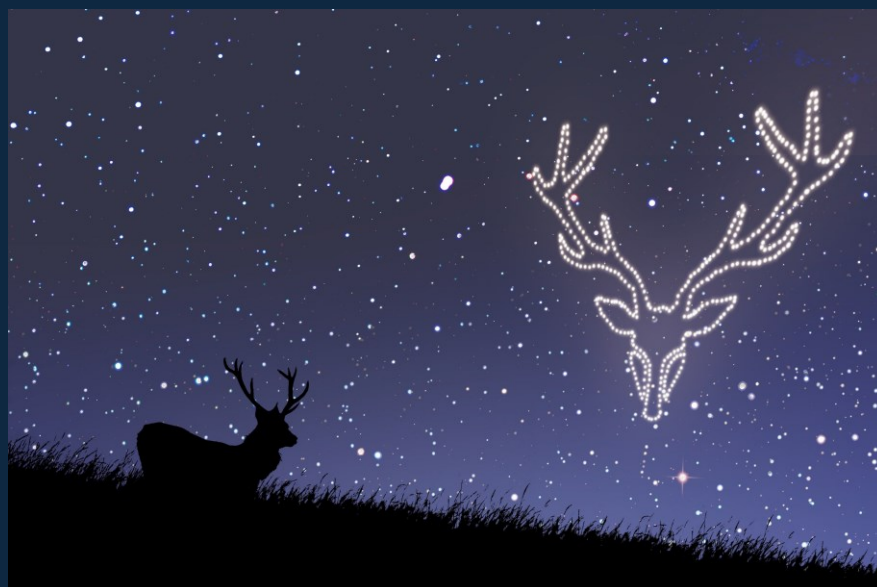




Exmoor Dark Skies Festival 2024

EXMOOR DARK SKIES
STORY-WRITING
COMPETITION 2024
Winning Entries



**Stories inspired by Exmoor's dark night skies by
Vivienne Rambe ★ Rebecca Needs ★ Finley Richardson**



Published by Exmoor National Park Authority, December 2024

Image: Jon Rowley / ENPA

As part of the Exmoor Dark Skies Festival 2024 children were invited to channel their inner Exmoor and write an exciting story inspired by Exmoor's dark night skies.

With thanks to our three acclaimed judges:

Davina Jelley, owner of Seven Fables book shop in Dulverton

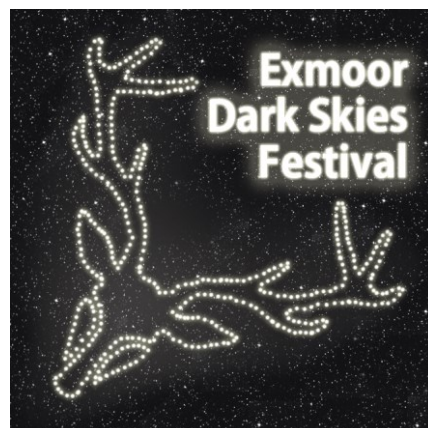
Erin Allgrove, author of Bosun Bob The Salty Old Sea Dog

Marion Lindsay-Noble, author of The Ant Murders series which are based on Exmoor.

The judges were looking for imagination, good use of language and all things Exmoor.

The winners were:

- ★ **Rebecca Needs** *Category: Children aged 12-16*
- ★ **Vivienne Rambe** *Category: Children aged 11 and under*
- ★ **Finley Richardson** *Schools Prize (best entry aged 11 and under from school submissions within Somerset and Devon)*



An Unbreakable Bond Made On An Exmoor Night

By Rebecca Needs

Winner – Children aged under 12-16

He fell. Fell straight into the darkness of Wimbleball lake. Noah scrambled back onto the bank and looked at the scenic land around him. He couldn't see much but one of the things he could see was the beautiful, clear sky filled with stars. He knew the lake would be cold but he couldn't resist a walk around the outside at night. Living in central London was such a different scene than his grandparent's little cottage in Exmoor.

They went there every summer in his school holidays and they would always go to Wimbleball lake. His grandparents had access to use the lake after hours so he told his parents he was going for a walk around the lake. After all, Noah was 13 and his parents were always allowing him to go out if it meant he would get some exercise. However, he had not been expecting a swim and a walk.

Noah walked over Bessam bridge towards the cottage but decided to take a different route to the five-minute walk he would normally take. He travelled through some tightly compacted trees until he reached an opening. He gazed up once again to see the saucer constellation above his head.

'Wow' Noah thought, 'If only I could stay here forever.' Sadly, he couldn't, his life was constantly changing because of his father's job. He had lived in many different countries, New Zealand, Argentina, Dubai. Out of all of those amazing places he much preferred the countryside of Exmoor.

He passed a small house called Mole-End cottage where the lights were on shining through the small windows. Noah walked on for about ten minutes when he saw a stable where the most beautiful Exmoor pony slept, its glossy mane shining in the moonlight. It was a cream colour with a chocolate brown mane.

Noah was so mesmerised by it he just gazed at it when the pony stood up and looked him straight in the eyes. Noah felt frightened this was the first time he had ever seen anything like what he was looking at right now but the pony started walking and Noah followed. He was tempted to ride on its back but he didn't think a pony – which he had just met a minute ago – was very safe to ride on. He must have followed the horse for twenty minutes when they eventually stopped.

'Why here, what's here?' asked Noah knowing the pony wouldn't reply because obviously, ponies can't speak. Out of the night sky, hundreds of butterflies were circling around him. His jaw dropped, it was worth the walk even if it were fifty miles long.

Once the butterflies had flew back up towards the twinkling stars Noah realised something. He had no clue where on Earth he was. He sat down and curled up into a little ball. The pony realised what was happening (it was a strange thing that humans did when there upset) and started to nudge Noah's head with his nose. Confused, he looked up and the pony bent down as if gesturing for Noah to get on his back so he did. The pony started walking, and walking, and walking. It was starting to get late and Noah knew but he wanted to know where the pony was going to take him.

At least half an hour had passed, but Noah didn't mind he was enjoying looking at the stars and the moors. He started to realise where he was being taken. Back to warmth of his grandparent's cottage. He dismounted the pony thanking it and then it turned and wondered into the mysterious of the Exmoor night.

'Where have you been?' his mother was running out embracing him when she was close enough, 'It's half past ten I was dead worried about you!' His father came out behind her. 'Come on let's get you back inside,' he said.

Several years later, Noah returned. Wondering if the pony was still at the stable. He had to find out, so when he got to his grandparents house the first thing he was going to do was find the stables but there was no need. The pony, with its cream coat and chocolate brown mane was already waiting for him. He hadn't been to Exmoor for at least two years and was eager to come back.

'He's been coming back to us every night to the point, where we decided to adopt him.' Noah's grandmother said.

'Yes your grandmother has even got me to build him a stable.' His grandfather explained. Noah wasn't even listening properly though. The pony had come back for him and that was a bond he was not going to break. The pony was waiting two years for this moment Noah felt incredibly bad for making the wait that long he promised himself he would come back every year just to see this one pony who he had met on one Exmoor night.



Image: Milky Way over Wimbleball, Rob Davey

Huggalumps of the Hills

By Vivienne Rambe

Winner – Children aged 11 and under

Hundreds of starry nights ago, on the wide green hills of Exmoor, emerged mounds of lumpy grass like a miniature mountain range. The Exmoor wildlife like the ponies and the creatures of the night stayed as far back as they could from these lumps. Even curious, sniffing dogs didn't go near. Most people thought the strange lumps were covering pieces of rubbish left behind by walkers long ago. Nobody paid them a lot of attention and they were mostly ignored.

Days, weeks and months passed, and the lumps remained the same. The grass never seemed to grow any longer and the wildlife still stayed away. One magical night on the third day of November, a girl named Poppy went up Exmoor to see the dark skies and the millions of stars. She was enchanted by the cool air and rustling sounds of the trees. She had never seen stars shine so brightly. As she roamed over the hills, she suddenly spotted the lumps and was immediately intrigued. Something drew her closer. As she got nearer, she saw the fluffy grass tops glow different colours in the star light and start to move around. She felt her arms reach down to pick up one of the lumps, Slowly and carefully she cradled it into her arms and looked down at the glowing creature.



Image: Valley of Rocks by Keith Trueman

It had large round loving eyes and ears like long fluffy socks on each side of its head. Its little head and body was covered in fur which was as soft as a cloud . Poppy felt like nothing else mattered, but holding this strange lump. It hugged her so firmly it felt like the creature was going to hug all the air out of her. It gripped tightly like it needed all her love and warmth. Slowly, the other lumps moved closer to her and before she knew it she was covered in these hugging lumps.

One of the lumps started to make a little squeak and surprisingly she could understand. It told her that they needed her and begged her to stay with them. It told her she could become a 'Huggalump' too. Poppy was desperate to stay and was about to give in to the pleas. All of a sudden Poppy saw a bright star through the fur of the Huggalumps and suddenly she could hear people calling her name.

She spoke softly to the Huggalumps. I'm sorry, but I can't stay this time. They gently released their grip and their eyes looked sorrowful.

Poppy walked towards the calling voices and as she looked back she noticed the lumps disappear into the ground. She wondered if she would ever see them again.

From this day on she has never forgot the Huggalumps and on the third day of November each year she has returned to the same spot. So far the stars have never shone quite as bright and the lumps have never reappeared.

Maybe this year it will be different!!



Image: Tawny Owls by Harvey Grenville

Cassiopeia

By Finley Richardson

Winner Schools Prize

Part I

Cassiopeia shines upon vast heaths and sheer cliffs, their tops never ending, almost touching the sky. Ponies gallop in silver moonlight, scattering deer and making gulls cry out. Windswept trees dotting the landscape. So tranquil. So breathtaking. So unlike the scene that happened here 2 billion years ago.

2 billion years ago ...

It was the battle for Exmoor, and things were looking up for the resistance.

Exmoor's soldiers, who were rocks from Valley of the Rocks, had overcome the opposing force: Dartmoor's Tors.

The day of victory was a memory that a bloody battle had been going on for centuries. Dartmoor's army of Tors was finally overcome at the battle of Dunkery Beacon.

It was a great day, Exmoor's rocks still celebrate it, but it is not the victory that we remember, it is the act of defiance.

It was cold. Rain poured down Nafiya's ripple-marked sandstone back, making her threadbare tunic cling to her. She watched intently, scanning the surrounding area for any signs of enemy life.

Suddenly a figure stepped out of the bushes. Nafiya trained her bow on him, but he noticed her and showed that he was on her side.

It was then that Nafiya realised it was her all time hero Mycienio the fearless, who had once single handedly toppled the Mendip Hills and Blackdown armies in the space of two days. Softly, in a voice of relief, he stated "It's a miracle".

"What's a miracle?" asked Nafiya cautiously chewing her hair.

Again, softly, "it's a miracle, we won the battle".

"How? B-b-but we can't of. There are too many of them."

Mycienio grinned and said "tactics my girl, tactics".

Nafiya, now looking awestruck, said "How?" "How?" "How did we win it?"

Mycienio the fearless, conqueror of the Blackdown Hills and the all-knower, actually laughed out loud.

His broad shoulders heaving with laughter, “Win it?” “Win it?” “Why, you can go see for yourself”, he bellowed.

So off she set and started climbing through austere woods, panting, and arrived on the scene by lunchtime.

A’eser Beacon was soaked in blood which would later lead to the place being called ‘Dunkery Beacon’ as that means ‘red hill’ in the rockish dialect.

The Tors were still fighting vigorously, but every single one of them knew in their small, cold hearts, that they were well and truly beaten.

As a final desperate act of defiance, Birch Tor (leader of the Tors) snapped off a branch of a rowan tree and threw it high into the great, vast reaches of endless space.

It is not known why, or how, but the rowan’s branch froze in space and turned into the constellation that we now call Cassiopeia.

So, whenever you take a peaceful stroll across Robbers Bridge, or jog in Simonsbath, just remember the battle for Exmoor that happened here billions of years ago.



Image: Horsehead by Martin Goff-Jones



www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/dark-skies