

WILD IN THE BACKYARD

NIMESH VED

Written by Arefa Tehsin, this book takes us into a world inhabited by the different species that visit our backyard — species we often see, but know little about. Each species is brought to life through in-depth research into its habits, sketches, anecdotes and questions.

The beginning

A prolific writer, Arefa Tehsin has authored multiple books for children, including 'The Land of the Setting Sun and Other Nature Tales' with Raza H. Tehsin. She also writes columns and articles for newspapers and magazines. She begins this book, *Wild in the Backyard*, with a dedication that brings together bookstores and forests in an interesting way: "To my father, who took me to the bookstore and the jungle, who held my hand, yet left me alone. At both places". Few lines could have captured the spirit of the book more aptly.

The first line of the introduction too is both pertinent and striking: "We may think that wilderness and wildlife are confined to forests. But there is a whole lot of wild in our own backyards". Most of us do associate wildlife with large pristine forests far away from where

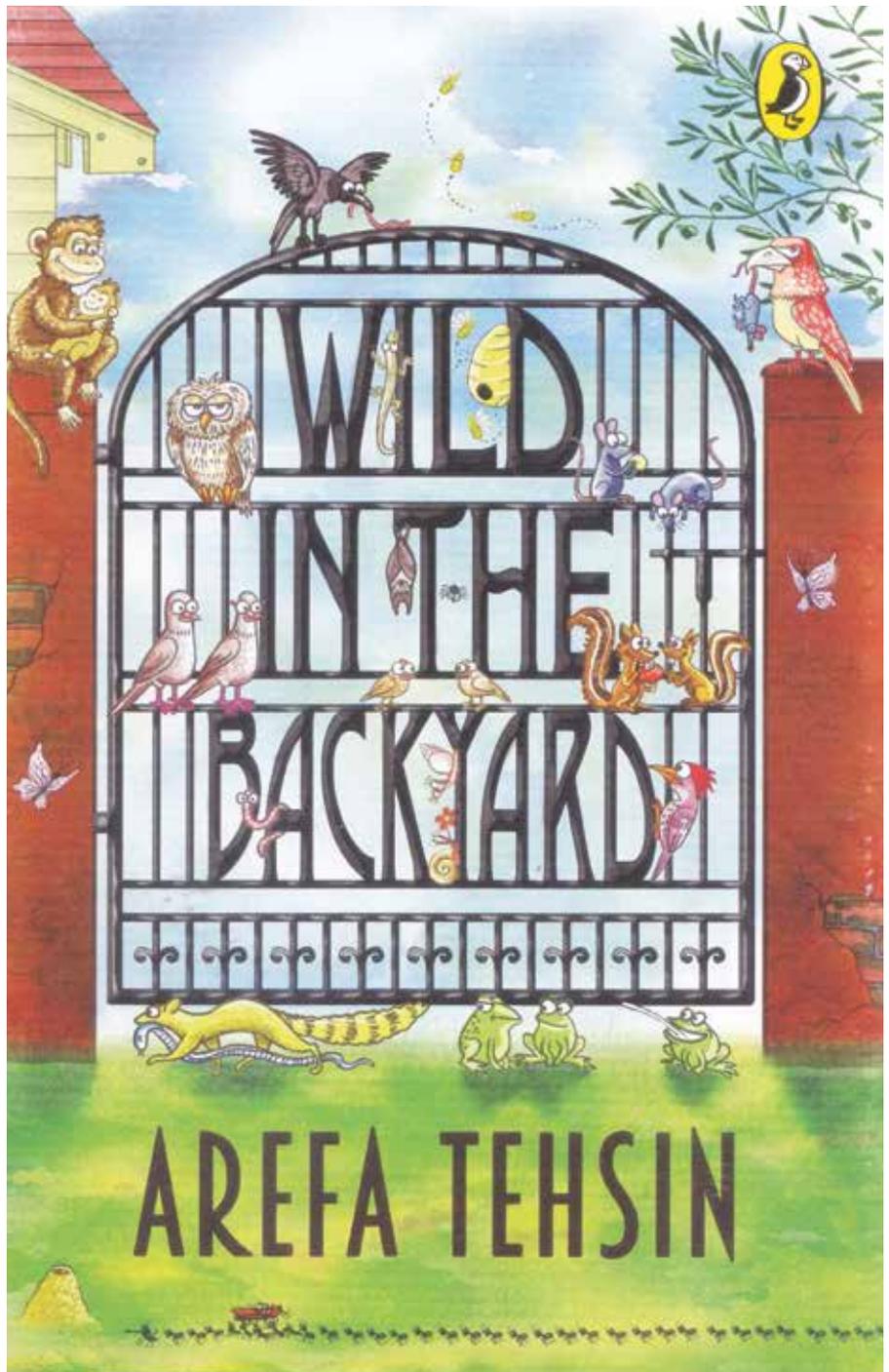
In a snapshot:

Author: Arefa Tehsin
 Publisher: Puffin Books — Published by Penguin Group
 Year: 2015
 Pages: 229
 Chapters: 25

we stay. While numerous studies have shown that forests have hardly ever been pristine spaces devoid of humans, this perception has remained largely unchanged. This has led people to believe that wildlife should be present only within forests; and any 'wild' species seen outside forests should be sent back to forests or culled. This perception has led us to neglect or ignore the many species that share our rural and urban homes. Arefa's book challenges both these notions.

Strengths

One of the biggest strengths of the book is that the author shares her experiences of natural history in a conversational manner and with great clarity. For example, the first chapter titled 'The Devil's Own', introduces young readers to the life of bats with lucid, yet informative, descriptions. One wishes that other educational material on these fascinating mammals could be designed along these lines, rather than being packed with the usual dry-as-dust statistics and names alone. In many cases, the author shares nuggets of natural history that are bound to awe a majority of her readers. The chapter on 'Centipedes: The Hundred Legger', for example, states that: "Centipedes can have 30 to more than 300 legs, but not 100. . . they have only an odd number of pairs of legs... each pair of legs is longer than the one in front". In another case, the author shares gems like, "Some super-smart Capuchin Monkeys and Lemurs upset these millipedes and then rub the awful-looking liquid (that the millipedes release) on their skins to repel mosquitoes!", without making any attempt to qualify this observation with a human-centric value-based explanation. Her writing often leads readers to mull over interesting questions, like: how does rain affect an organism's ability to use echolocation? In other chapters, she introduces readers to some of our more interesting discoveries on animal behaviour. For example, in the chapter on 'Crows: Crafty Crows', the author describes how:

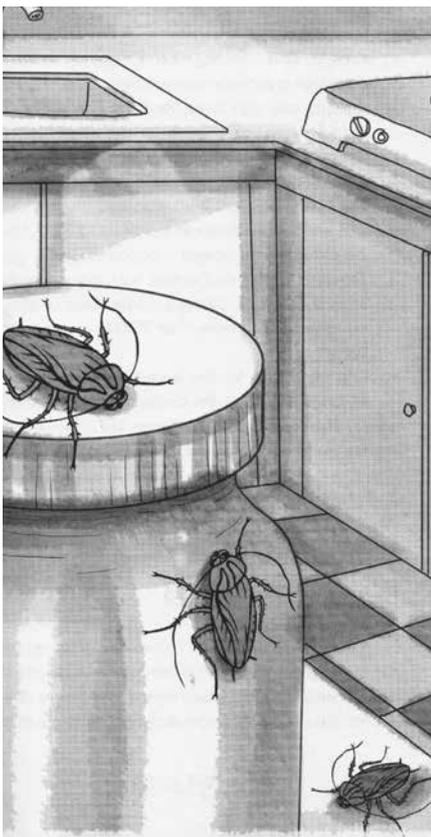
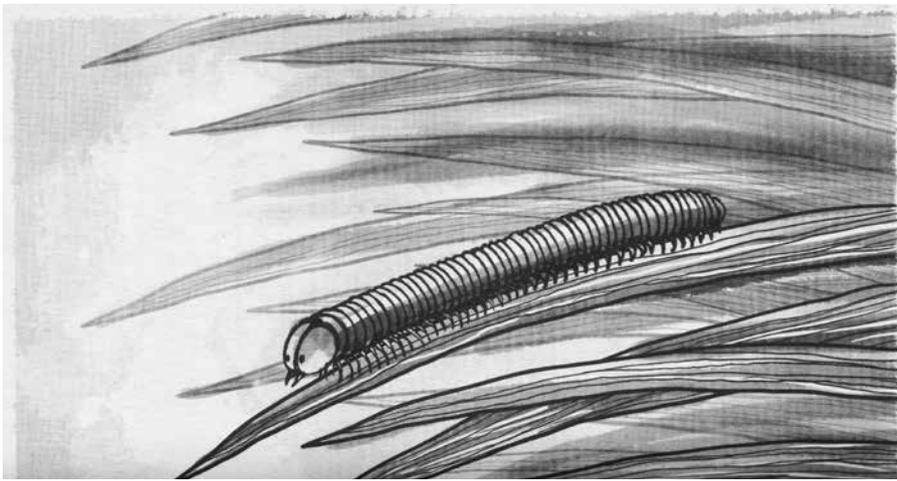


The front cover of the book.

Credits: Photographed by Nimesh Ved. License: CC-BY-NC.

"A few scientists in Auckland decided to try out the thirsty crow story in their lab. Remember the story of the crow dropping pebbles into a pitcher to raise the level of the water in it? The results of the experiment point out that crows are as clever with some tasks as human seven-year olds"! She adds to this by

mentioning how crows are known in some cases to "...drop the nuts they're carrying at traffic signals so that the cars passing by can break the nuts' hard shells". Showing how intelligent crows are, she points out that phrases like "He's a birdbrain", may hold little weight. In the chapter on 'Squirrels: The

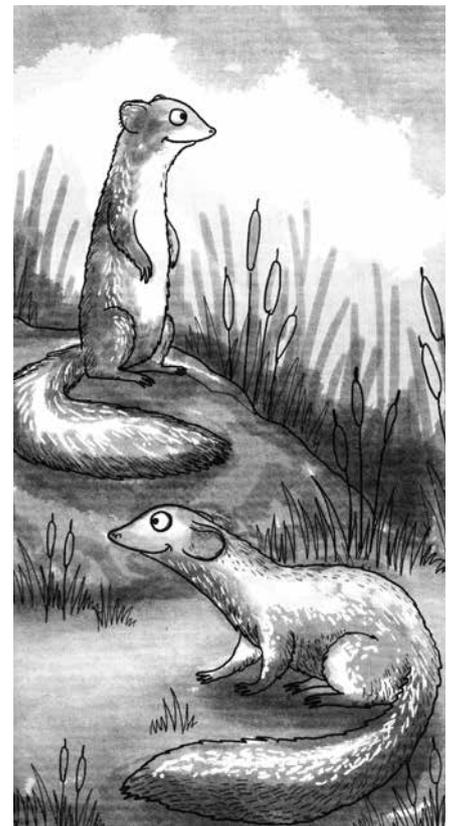
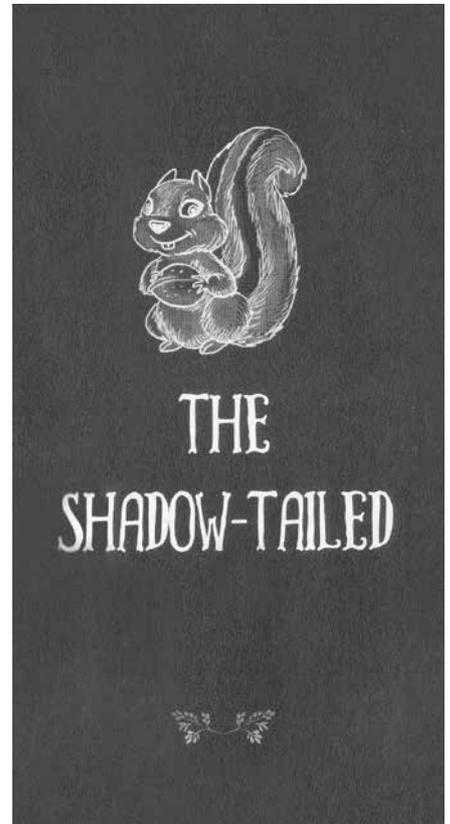


Some illustrations from the book.
Credits: Photographed by Nimesh Ved.
License: CC-BY-NC.

Shadow-tailed', the author illustrates how superstitions do not have rational basis and can be disproved. In other cases, she speaks directly to her young readers with passages like this one. *"Monkeys sure know how to have fun! You should send your Ma and Pa to go and learn from the monkey elders, who let their kids have fun all the time."*

Pitfalls

Although a wonderful read, this book had some errors that could have been avoided. For instance, in the chapter on 'Rats: Rats! Who is that', the author wrongly attributes the gregarious bamboo flowering or *Mautam* to Nagaland instead of Mizoram. In other cases, the author seems to offer an overly simplistic perspective to otherwise complex issues. This is evident in the same chapter, where she connects the flowering of bamboo in the 1960's with the Mizo armed movement without adequately addressing the complex socio-political and economic dimensions of this connection. It may have been better if the author had stuck to describing how this flowering attracted rats that ate more than 90% of the crops in the fields, and led to a famine not only in 1960, but again in 2007-08. The chapter on 'Butterflies: Fluttering Fairies' mentions the Bombay Natural History Society without providing any context. In another case, the author suggests that readers invest in keeping an owl-box in their homes. Is this really safe for the owl, and for those who keep them? Apart from practical problems such as how and where to procure these boxes and how to feed the owls, is it ethical or legal to keep a bird in captivity? This book would have been more interesting if it had included more Indian words and descriptions of the beliefs and practices that local communities have towards the 'wildlife

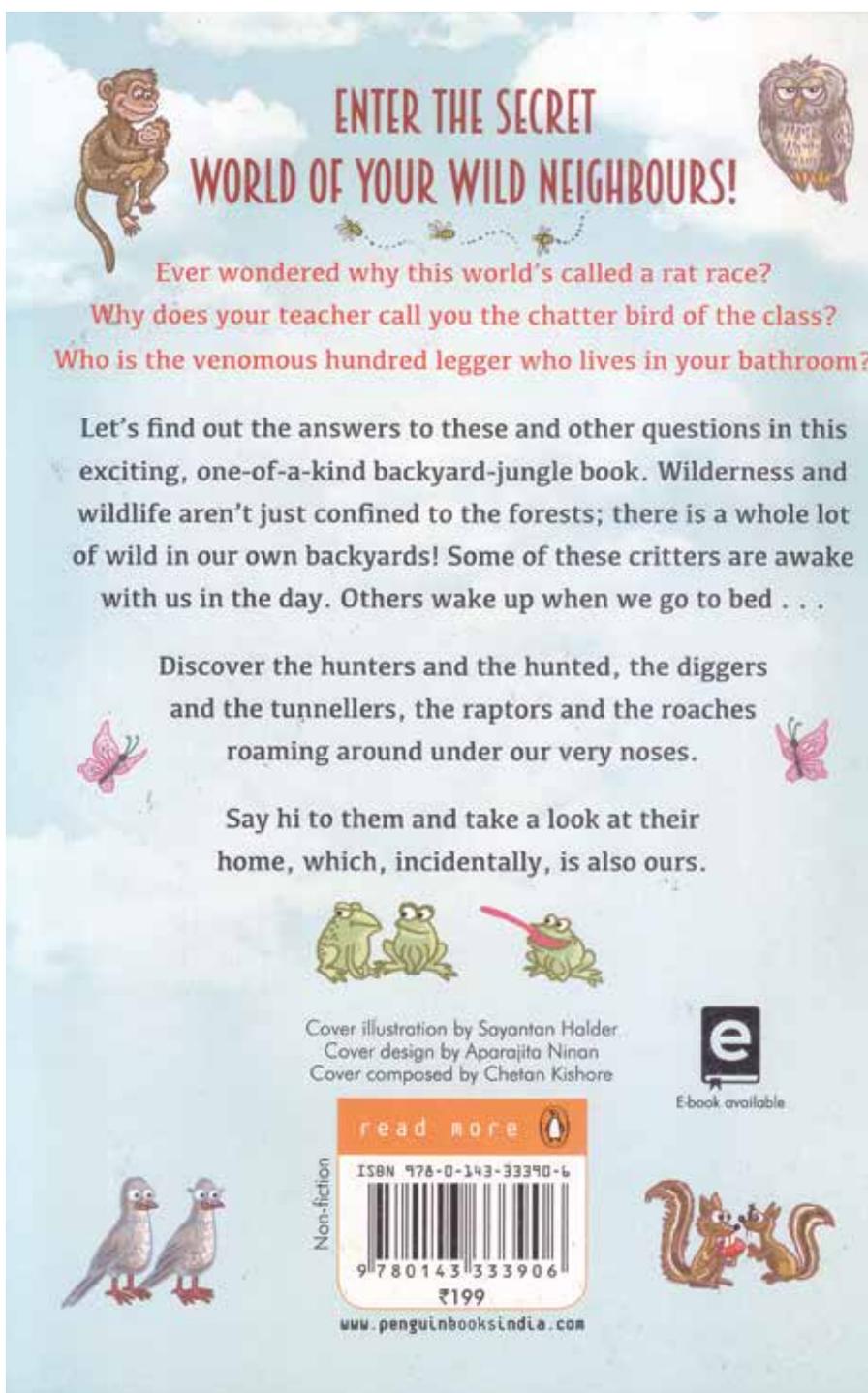


...And some more illustrations from the book.
Credits: Photographed by Nimesh Ved.
License: CC-BY-NC.

in their backyards! The reference section could also have been a lot richer!

To conclude

There are many reasons to enjoy this book. The most important one, though, is for the author's writing and her insights. For example, the author brings humans down from the pedestal that we usually place ourselves on *vis-à-vis* wildlife subtly, yet successfully: "There are many creatures that have got used to our noisy and clumsy habits". This is followed some pages later by: "Sadly, humans do more monkey business than monkeys themselves". In another instance, the author makes the observation: "Who knows, we may be putting dried cockroaches on our dry lips every day"! By hinting at how we may be consuming animal products without our knowledge in this way, the author succeeds in teaching without preaching. Also delightful are the many succinct one-liners, like 'the mongoose is bold but shy' and 'butterflies are beauties with brains'. Not only does the author pose questions in a non-monotonous manner, she also frequently uses words that the younger generation is likely to relate to. But, for me, the highlight of the book was the simple explanations of many terms that we come across frequently, yet choose to skip over even though we may not understand their meaning or import. This book talks of some of these terms with rare simplicity. For eg. the difference between locusts and grasshoppers is presented in a single line: "When thousands and millions of them form a gang, we call them locusts; and when they live alone in our gardens and meadows, we call them grass hoppers".



The back cover of the book.

Credits: Photographed by Nimesh Ved. License: CC-BY-NC.

Nimesh Ved enjoys meandering on cycles. He blogs at nimesh-ved.blogspot.com and can be contacted at nimesh.explore@gmail.com.