

A Packrat's Holiday: Thistletoe's Gift

- Give children word clues to listen for onomatopoeia.
- Choose one child to swoop owl down.
- Choose two children to tip can back and forth.
- Choose one child to place food and shiny items on floor in front of audience.
- Choose one child to bring out a dead cactus branch.
- When puppet makes magic wand swoop down, that means to stop.

Thistletoe Q. Pack Rat lived in the Southwestern desert with his mama in their den made of twigs and cactus bits hidden under a rocky crevice.

This cold winter's holiday eve, he sat in the parlor, his chin in his paws. Mama's cupboards were bare. Times were tougher 'n horseshoes. There would be no holiday feast this year.

A sound like thunder rumbled in the distance. ***Rum-dilly, rum-dilly, rum.*** It grew louder . . . ***RUM-DILLY*** . . . and louder . . .
RUM-DILLY, RUM-DILLY, RUM.

Puppet raises magic wand: Have kids repeat the sound.

The sound thrummed in Thistletoe's head. It throbbed in his chest. He shook from head to tail. "M-mama, did you hear that?"

Mama Packrat held her ear to the burrow floor. "Law, if it ain't the sound of hoofbeats. The cowboys are on the move again, herdin' the rancher's cattle!" Quick as lightning, she scampered about tidying up. "We could have a right good supper now. But youngin', you've got to hustle. No telling what vittles those wranglers are carryin' in their saddlebags."

Thistletoe crawled up the den tunnel to see what he could see.

Cowboys on horses and two black and white dogs dodging back

and forth were driving a great herd of cows along the flat prairie.

The cows' hooves kicked up clouds of dust.

Two furry ears and two sharp eyes popped up from the next den.

“Jumpin' juniper, what's all the commotion?” Thistletoe’s cousin said.

“Another cattle drive is headin’ this way,” Thistletoe said.

“Must be nigh-high five hundred head. Come to stay the night, I reckon.” He daydreamed about the scraps of food left behind.

All the fixins’ Mama would need for a proper holiday feast.

Puppet sniffs.

“Well,” Cuz cried. “What're we waitin' for?”

“I'll be back in the shake of a rat’s tail,” Thistletoe said.

Puppet shakes cactus seeds.

Under Thistletoe's downy bed, he took out the last few cactus seeds he'd been saving, and stuffed them in his cheeks.

At the bottom of the den tunnel he called, "Bye, Mama! Don't wait up!" and shinnied back up.

Thistletoe and Cuz scuttled along the desert floor under cover of bushy creosote and desert willow bushes, their leaves wintery brown.

Dusk had wrapped the arid terrain in the last of the sun's warmth. Soon it would be dark, the moon would rise, and the night would turn chilly. Safe behind a mesquite bush, Thistle sniffed a piney scent. "Mmm, I smell wood smoke."

Puppet sniffs.

The two packrats peeked out to see what they could see.

Puppet tells kids to peek out from their hands.

Two cowboys sat stretching their legs by the campfire.

Puppet tells kids to hold up two fingers, and repeat.

Two belt buckles shone in the firelight.

Two large ten-gallon hats rested nearby.

But alongside one of the big ten-gallon hats sat a pint-size one.

“Have you ever seen a wrangler that small?” Thistletoe said.

Pint-Size’s head barely cleared the big cowboys’ belts.

Cuz shook his head. “Look, one of the big cowboys is cooking supper.”

Puppet tells kids to make this sound with him.

Ee-oo, ee-oo, ee.

The cowboy's knife sawed open three cans of beans.

Puppet tells kids to make this sound with him.

Plop!

The cans' contents poured into a pot.

Then Pint-Size wrapped three potatoes in tin foil.

Puppet tells kids to hold up three fingers.

The beans and potatoes hissed while cooking on hot coals.

Puppet tells kids to make this sound.

Ssst!

Soon, a delicious smell filled the air.

Puppet tells kids to sniff.

Thistletoe's nose twitched.

Puppet tells kids to twitch their noses.

His tummy grumbled.

Puppet tells kids to rub their tummies.

But he had to stay put for now.

After a time, one of the big cowboys unpacked a guitar while the horses and cows grazed nearby. In soft tones, he strummed an old prairie favorite.

Puppet sings song with kids.

Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

The moon winked through clouds.

Puppet tells kids to wink.

It was getting late. The cowboy put down his guitar and yawned.

Puppet tells kids to yawn.

“Time to turn in. Sunup’s going to come mighty quick.”

The cowboys’ three tin cups filled with water.

Puppet tells kids to hold up three fingers each time.

Three faces got splashed; three sets of teeth brushed. But only two wranglers crawled into their bedrolls.

Before settling down, Pint-Size collected the leftover lids, foil, and food scraps, and stored them in an empty can.

Puppet tells kids to say the sound.

Clink! Clunk!

Cuz scraped his paws in the dirt. "Let's go!"

Pint-Size spotted the packrats, glanced at the sleeping cowboys, and put his finger to his lips.

Puppet tells kids to put their fingers to their lips and say

Shh.

"Shh, little-uns, your time will come."

Then he crawled into his bedroll and fell fast asleep.

The packrats eased out from under the mesquite bush. A shadow fell overhead and cast the packrats in sudden darkness. Cuz whispered, "Wait for the cloud to pass."

But silent as the disappearing moonbeam, the massive wings of a Great Horned Owl swooped down, talons bared.

Puppet tells child to swoop in front of me from one side to the other with the owl puppet.

"Run, Cuz, run!" Thistletoe cried.

Puppet tells kids to repeat, "Run, Cuz, run!"

Cuz scuttered out in the open. The owl gained within inches of him. Thistletoe tumbled out, too.

Before Owl's talons could latch on, Thistletoe shoved Cuz under a fold in Pint-Size's bedroll and scrambled next to him. Owl swept past. His wings stirred such a whirlwind of dust, Thistletoe had to blink several times. Seconds later, Owl rose to the sky and flew off.

Puppet tells kids to flap their wings.

The cowboys snored on.

Puppet tells kids to snore.

The packrats wasted no time and scurried about. But not one scrap glimmered in the moonlight. Not one bean lay on the ground.

Thistletoe got an idea. He pushed the can. It rocked one way.

Puppet tells two kids to push can.

Cuz pushed. The can rocked the other way.

The can was about to tip over when a big cowboy woke up. In a booming voice he shouted, "Scat, you varmits!"

Puppet tells kid to say "Scat, you varmits!"

The can tipped over.

Puppet tells kids to make sound.

Kersplat!

Morsels of food spilled everywhere.

“Rattlesnake!” Thistletoe cried.

Puppet tells kids to say “Rattlesnake!”

In a panic, he spat out the cactus seeds he'd been saving, and he and Cuz skedaddled away.

Back home, Thistletoe crawled down the tunnel, slow as molasses.

Puppet tells kids to crawl with their arms.

Mama took one look at him and his empty cheeks and said,
“Never you mind. You look all tuckered. Best run along to bed.”

Puppet tells kids to lay their heads on their hands to sleep.

The next morning, Mama sat on a cactus crook. She looked half starved.

This wouldn't do.

Thistletoe scurried back to the campsite, empty now. The rising sun caught a sparkle. His eyes bulged.

Puppet tells kids to say “Leaping lizards!”

“Leaping lizards!”

The can was gone. But scraps of cactus greens, fruit, and seeds; and shiny lids, bottle tops, and foil had been left in a heap next to the cold ashes from last night’s campfire.

Puppet has a child place these items on the floor in front of audience.

Treasures beyond Thistletoe’s wildest dreams.

Next to the mound, a dead cactus branch stuck straight up out of the dirt. It had to be. Pint-Size had found Thistletoe’s seeds and marked the place where he’d planted them. Thistletoe sighed.

Pint-Size’s gift would put food on Mama’s table, and next spring Thistletoe’s seeds would sprout next spring and bring

new hope to the desert. He hurried back and gave Mama the gleaming prizes.

Mama could barely squeak!

Puppet tells children to squeak.

She thanked Thistletoe with a big hug, then decorated the den pretty as you please with the shiny lids, bottle tops, and foil. The den walls glimmered and shone.

Puppet tells kids to hold up three fingers.

Three plates brimmed with food. Three packrats grinned. Three packrats dug in.

The End

A Note from the Author:

What are Packrats Really Like?

One summer my family went on a white-water rafting trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, in Arizona. At night, we slept under the stars in near perfect temperatures: 70s and

80s. The climate is so arid—dry—that we didn't need bug spray. In the mornings, though, we did see tiny footprints in the sand around our sleeping bags. I took out my trusty guidebook and found that our nocturnal visitors were packrats.

Packrats are from the rodent family, and can be found in North and Central America. They live in deserts, forests, and high rocky mountainsides. The Thistletoe Q. Packrat family is representative of packrats living nestled among the cactus plants of the desert Southwest, in Arizona and New Mexico. Desert dens are built to keep their inhabitants cool in the summer, and help these fascinating animals retain body heat in the winter.

The packrat's den, built largely of cactus parts and spikey spines, keeps them safe from predators: coyotes, foxes, snakes, and owls. Like Thistletoe and Cuz, packrats forage for food at night, and survive on fruit, seeds, and green plants. Succulent plants provide water.

Packrat nests look messy on the outside. But inside, nests are kept neat and tidy. Packrats love to collect anything that catches their fancy, left by picnickers, hikers, campers . . . and in Thistletoe's case, cowboys. They especially like shiny things, like the pop tops and foil in our story. But rather than leave a thank-you gift as Thistletoe did, packrats are more likely to drop an item and leave it for another more exciting find.

During bygone days in the late 1800s before the fencing of ranches and expansion of the railroads, cattle drives across the great plains were common. By day, a great herd of cows, often numbering in the thousands, were driven to a destination to be

sold. Cowboys on horses, and dogs, often referred to as “cow dogs,” helped keep the herd together as they moved along in the chosen direction. Today, different breeds of herding dogs guide livestock all over the world. Today, cowboys are skilled at jobs around the ranch, such as mending fences, baling hay, and driving a tractor.

You can learn more about packrats and even make your own packrat by visiting The Coati Club: Just for Kids! At Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum,

https://www.desertmuseum.org/kids/coati_news_201708.php.