

A painting depicting a woman in a green cap and vest looking at a vulture perched on a rock. The background is a vibrant, dotted landscape in shades of red, orange, and blue. The text "Percy the Victorious Vulture" is overlaid in yellow with a black outline.

# Percy

the

# Victorious Vulture

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The illustrations in this book are oil on canvas paintings created by Lauren Beauchner during her artist residency at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in 2015. Lauren spent many mornings at the roost site sketching the vultures in order to study their movements before beginning on the illustrations used in the book. She also referenced photographs of Percy provided to her by both Sanctuary staff and residents of the Kempton Valley. The art work in the story is inspired by actual scenery and roost sites of the Kempton Valley. The cover art is the North Lookout at Hawk Mountain, where visitors can observe the spring and fall migrations of 16 species of raptors. [www.laurenbeauchner.com](http://www.laurenbeauchner.com)



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A woman wearing a cap and a vest is looking at a vulture in an enclosure. The vulture is perched on a branch. The background is a textured wall with a pattern of small circles. The foreground is filled with large, light-colored rocks.

**Percy**  
the  
*Victorious Vulture*

# Introduction to Percy the Victorious Vulture

by

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Nobody seems to know where Percy came from. Maybe his parents raised him in a cave in the Central Appalachian Mountains of eastern Pennsylvania, or in an abandoned building in the farmlands that surround the mountains. Maybe his parents had even nested somewhere at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the world's first sanctuary for birds of prey. Founded in 1934 to stop the shooting of hawks, eagles, falcons and vultures along the ridge, the 2,600 acre sanctuary straddles the Kittatinny Ridge not far from where the Schuylkill River cuts through it near Hamburg.

Regardless of where Percy came from, we do know where and when he received a Hawk Mountain Sanctuary wing tag. A college student working with Hawk Mountain scientists caught him in a walk-in trap in the Kempton Valley with three other Black Vultures and four Turkey Vultures on the 20th of July 2010. All of the birds received wing tags: light blue tags with black numbers for the Turkey Vultures and yellow tags with black numbers for the Black Vultures. Percy, who was a juvenile at the time, received a yellow wing-tag with the number 43 in black. That summer Hawk Mountain scientists tagged several dozen Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures.

The tag, which was designed to last for at least five years, was similar to ones that had been tested earlier on Black and Turkey vultures by a team of university scientists who wanted to make certain that they were safe to use on vultures as well as on California Condors. The scientists found that the tags indeed were safe to use, and Hawk Mountain decided to use them on Turkey Vultures in 2007, and on Black Vultures in 2010. As of summer 2016, Sanctuary

scientists have placed more than 500 tags on Turkey Vultures in both North America and South America, and more than 80 tags on Black Vultures in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Arizona.

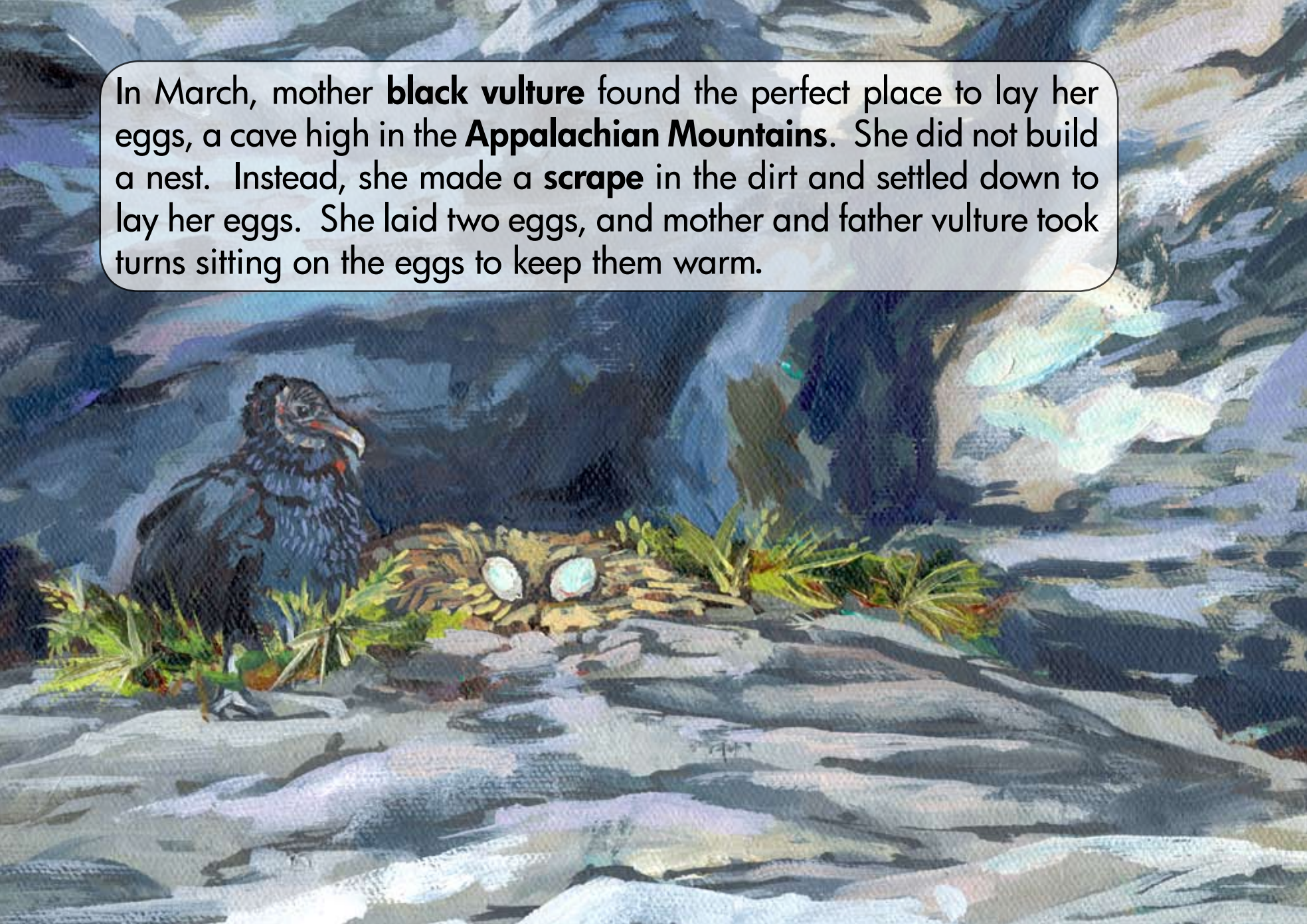
Placing wing tags on vultures helps scientists in several ways. First, it allows the scientists to collect important information about the weight and size of the tagged vultures and to assess their general health. Once they have been tagged, wing tagging (which is similar to having ones ears pierced) allows both scientists and the general public, to “follow” the birds, so that they can better understand their daily and seasonal movements as well as the habitats they use.

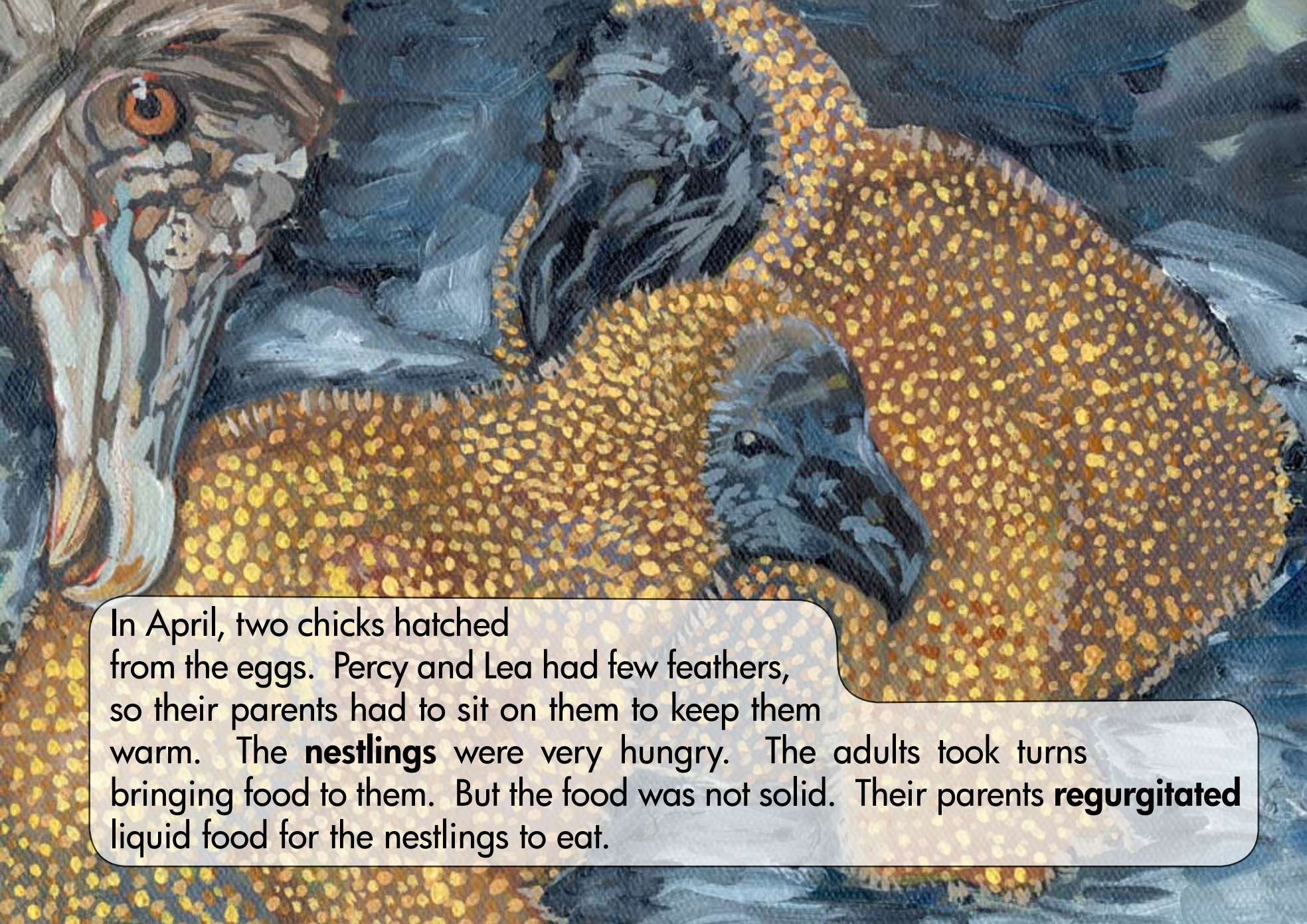
After being tagged, Percy was released at the capture site. Like most tagged birds, Percy flew to and perched on a nearby dead tree, carefully preened the feathers that surrounded the tag, rested for a few minutes and then flew off, perhaps to find some “friends.”

What follows is Percy’s (yellow-43’s) story: a down-to-earth story of a flightless Black Vulture, and an incredible odyssey that just happens to be true!

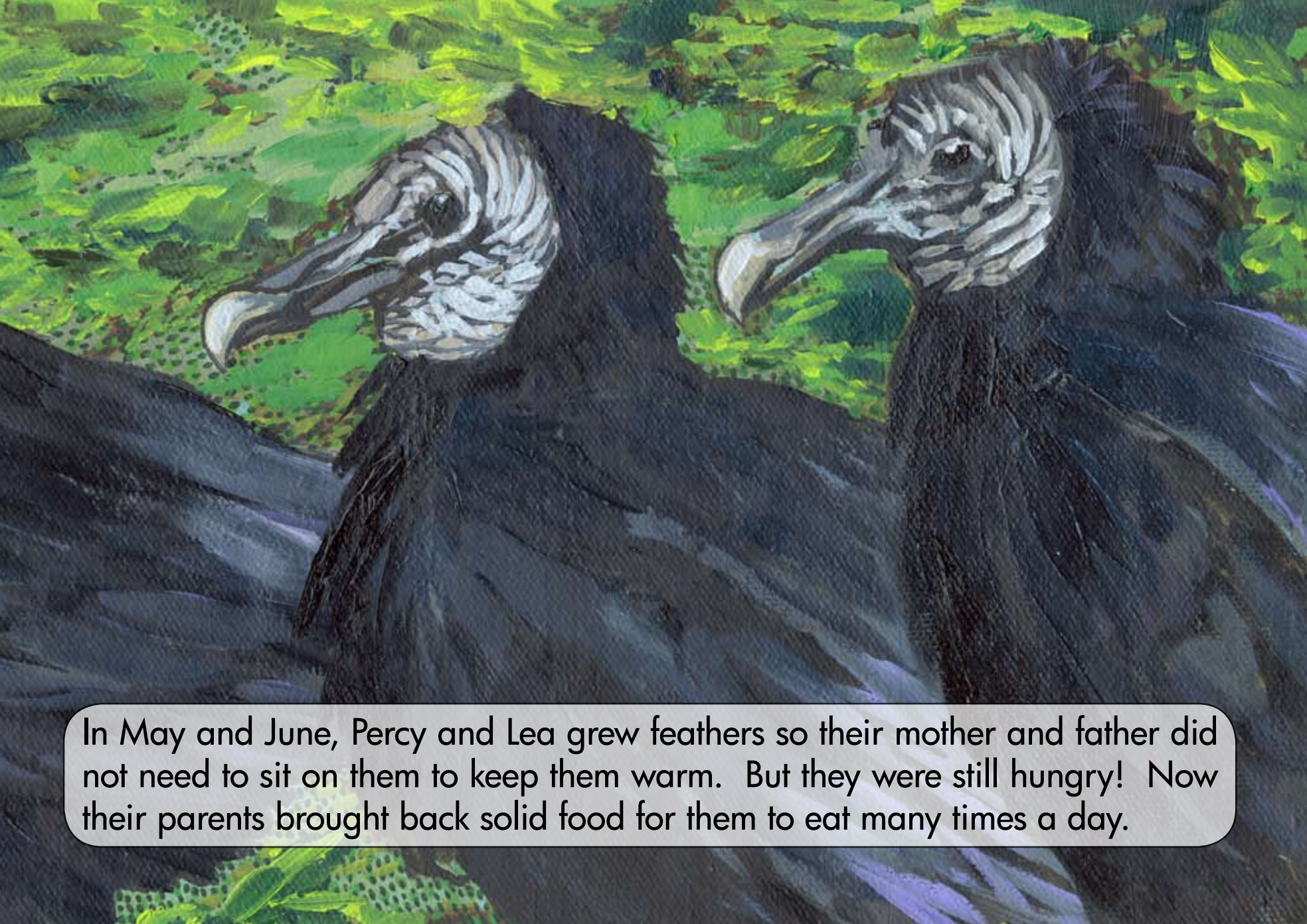
*Please note that the words in the following story that are printed in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of the book.*

In March, mother **black vulture** found the perfect place to lay her eggs, a cave high in the **Appalachian Mountains**. She did not build a nest. Instead, she made a **scrape** in the dirt and settled down to lay her eggs. She laid two eggs, and mother and father vulture took turns sitting on the eggs to keep them warm.



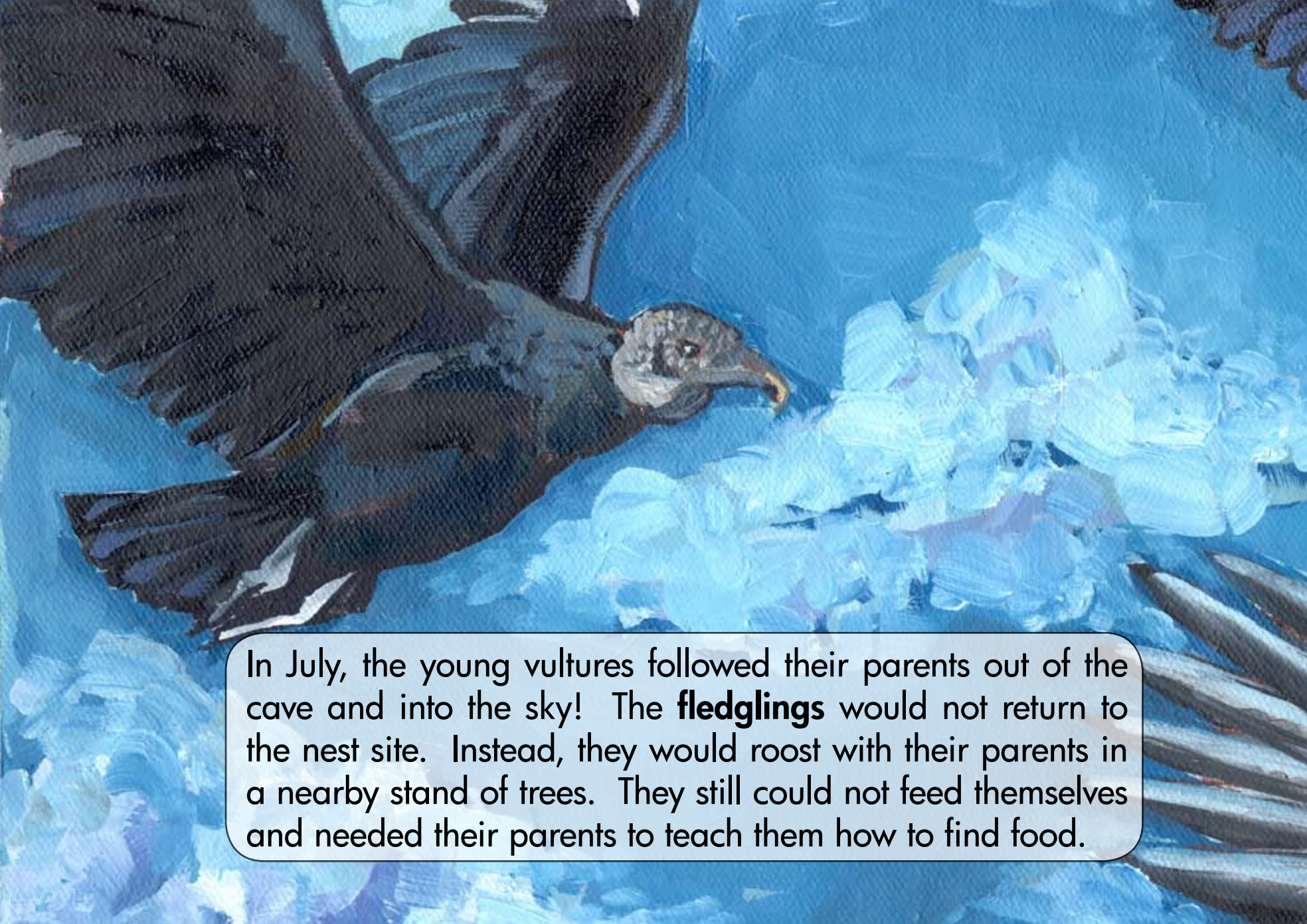


In April, two chicks hatched from the eggs. Percy and Lea had few feathers, so their parents had to sit on them to keep them warm. The **nestlings** were very hungry. The adults took turns bringing food to them. But the food was not solid. Their parents **regurgitated** liquid food for the nestlings to eat.



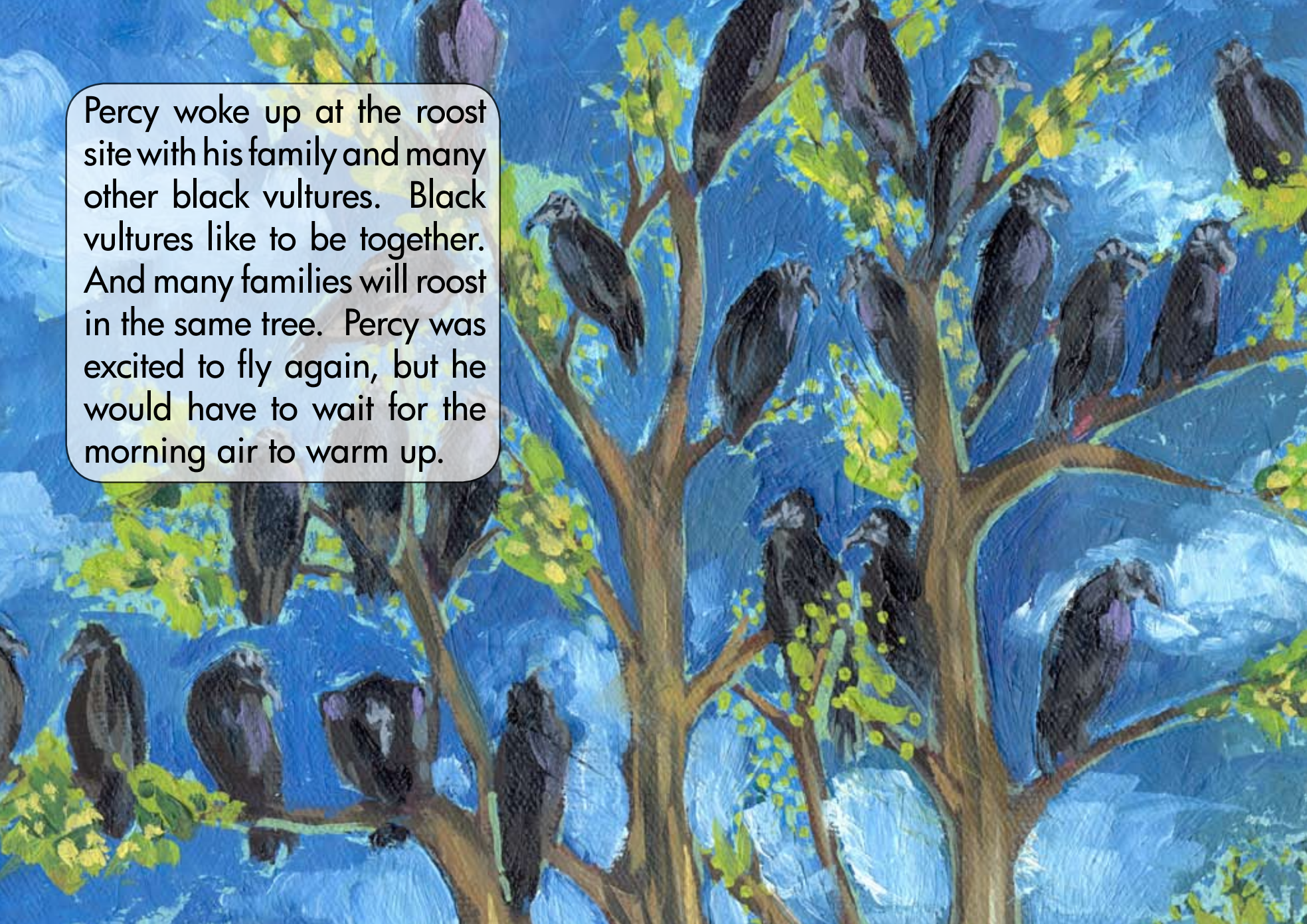
In May and June, Percy and Lea grew feathers so their mother and father did not need to sit on them to keep them warm. But they were still hungry! Now their parents brought back solid food for them to eat many times a day.






In July, the young vultures followed their parents out of the cave and into the sky! The **fledglings** would not return to the nest site. Instead, they would roost with their parents in a nearby stand of trees. They still could not feed themselves and needed their parents to teach them how to find food.

Percy woke up at the roost site with his family and many other black vultures. Black vultures like to be together. And many families will roost in the same tree. Percy was excited to fly again, but he would have to wait for the morning air to warm up.





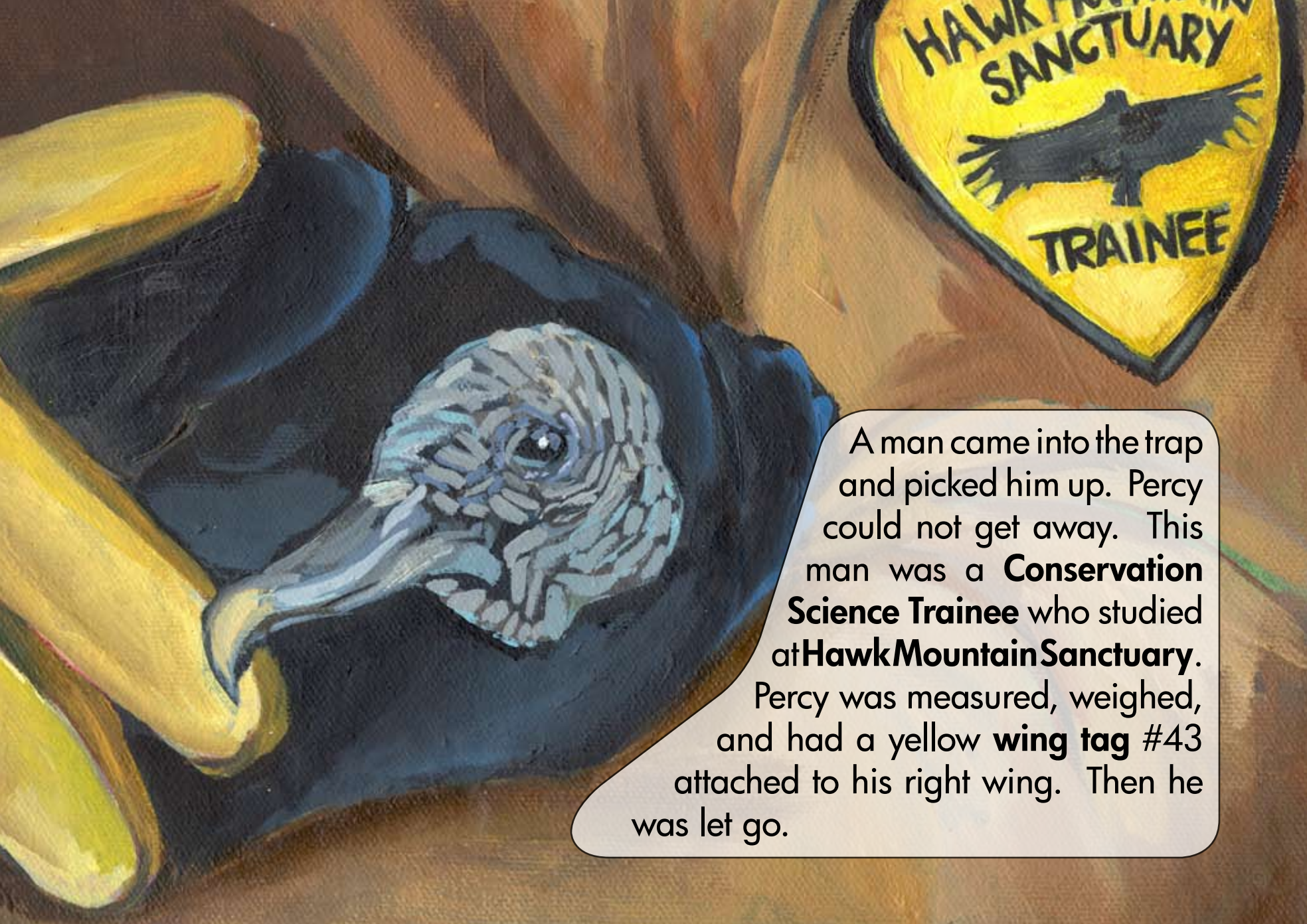
As the morning air grew warmer, Percy and the others stretched their wings to warm up in the summer sunshine. Their black feathers soaked up the sun's heat so that they could fly. Percy's long black wings have white wingtips.

A painting of three vultures in flight against a bright blue sky. The vultures are dark with lighter feathers on their wings. The ground below is a mix of pink and blue. A text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

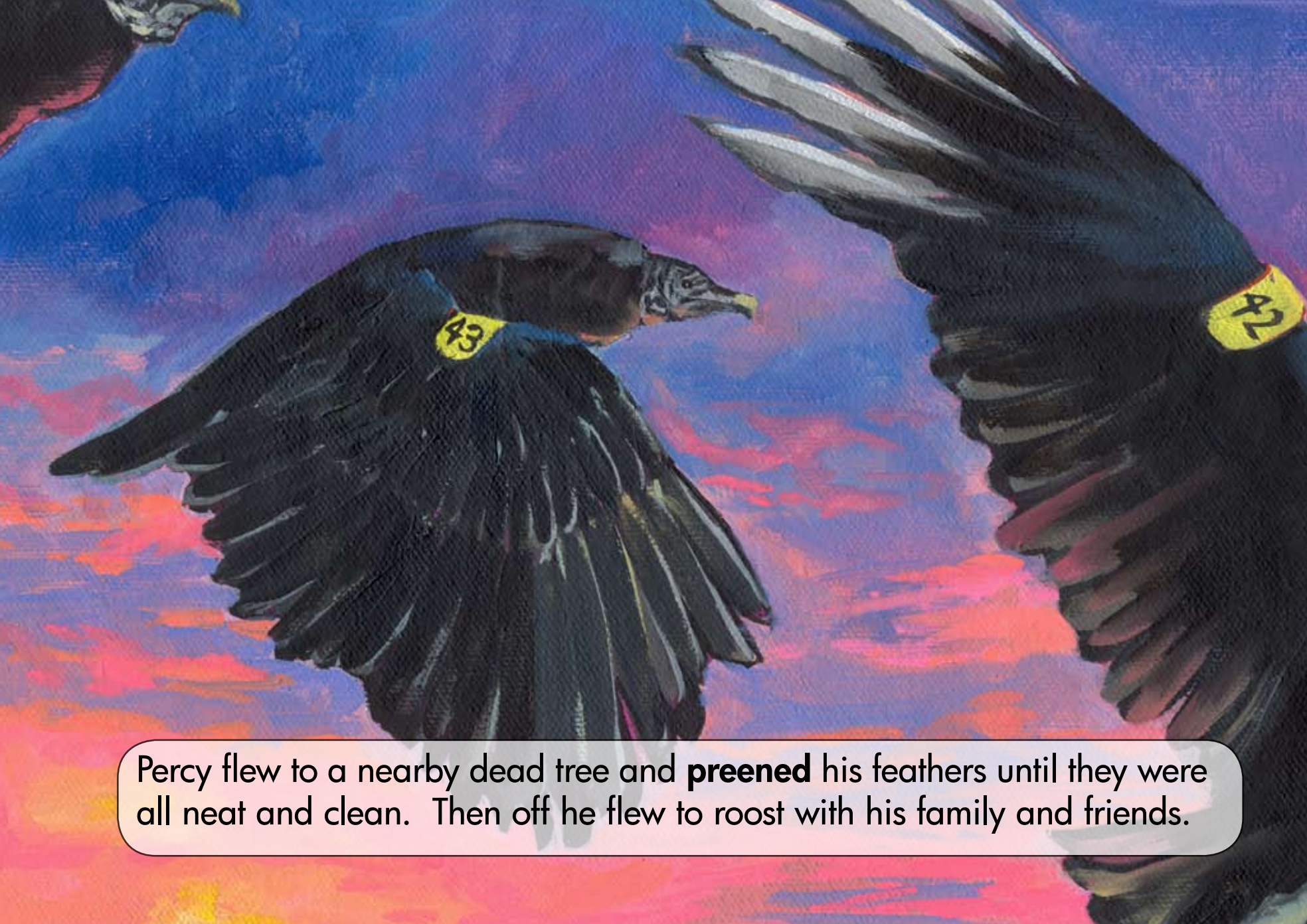
Once the sun warmed up the ground, invisible **thermals** rose up from the landscape. Percy and his family leaped into the rising air and were lifted up, up, up by the thermals. Percy followed his parents as they searched for **carcasses** on the ground. He had to learn how to find food on his own.



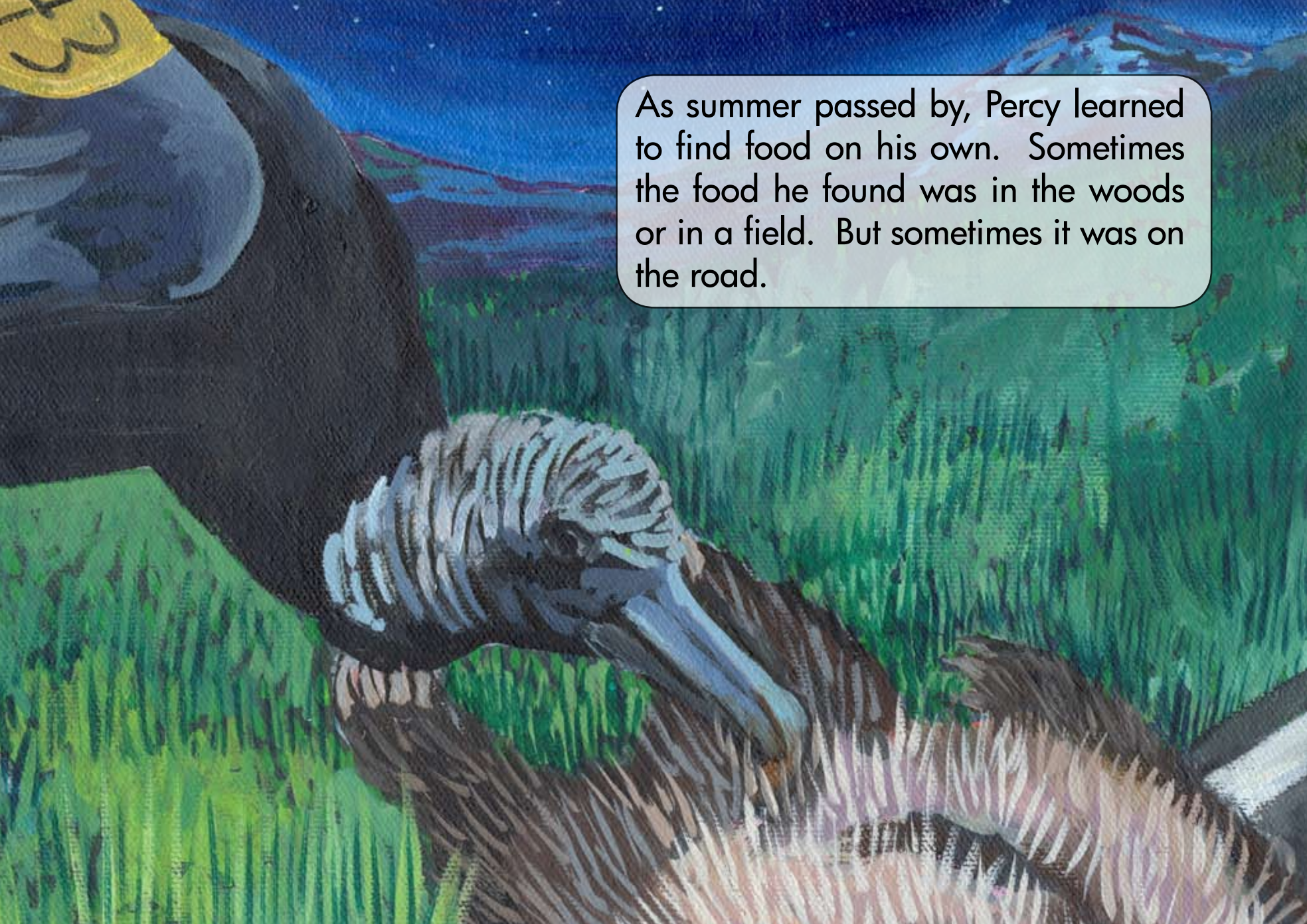
Percy and his family were soaring above the **Kempton Valley** when they saw a pig carcass at the Brown family farm. Down, down, down they flew for lunch. This time the carcass was inside a big square cage, but the door was open so in Percy went for a tasty meal. Then the door shut behind him and he could not get out!



A man came into the trap and picked him up. Percy could not get away. This man was a **Conservation Science Trainee** who studied at **Hawk Mountain Sanctuary**. Percy was measured, weighed, and had a yellow **wing tag #43** attached to his right wing. Then he was let go.

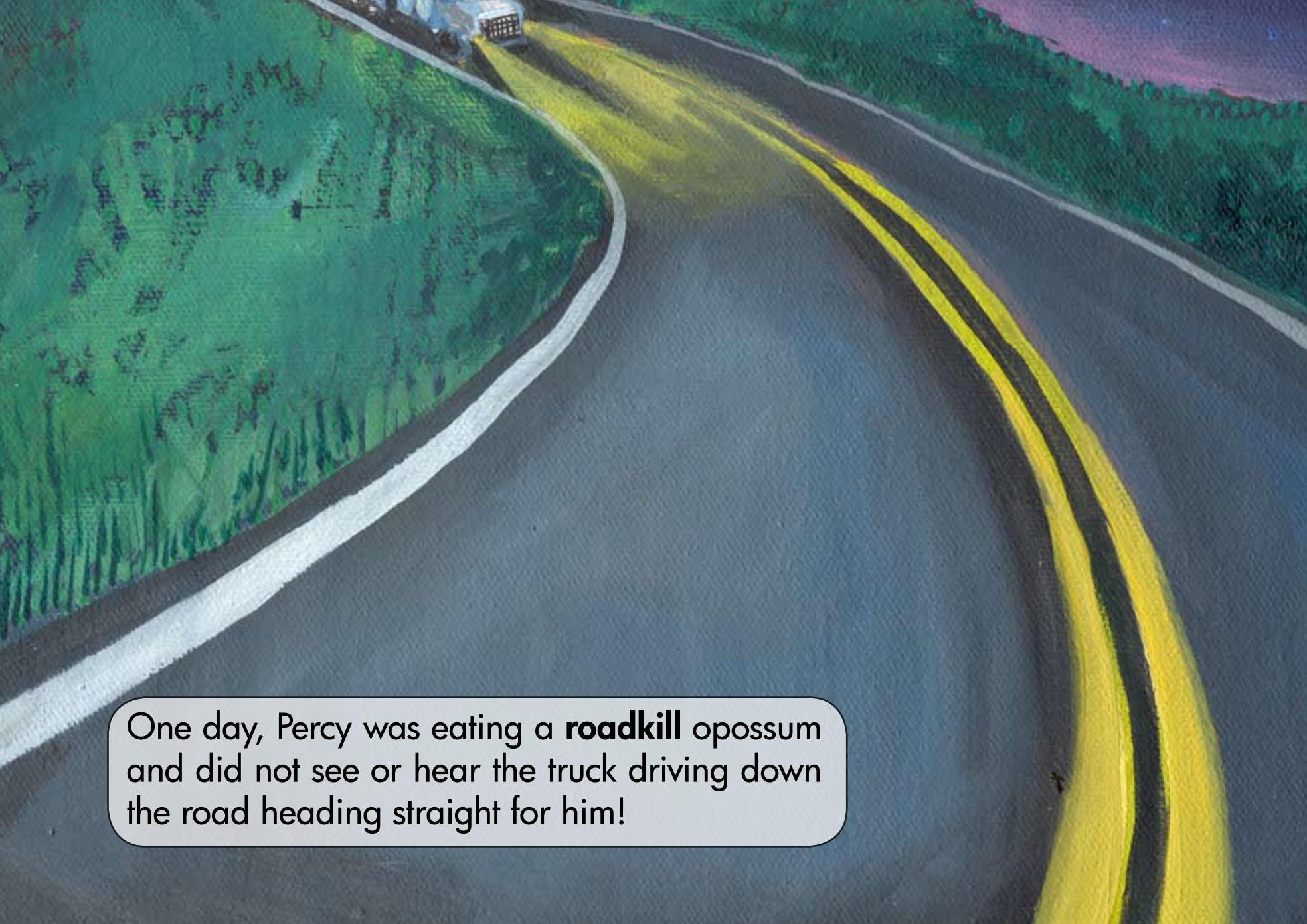


Percy flew to a nearby dead tree and **preened** his feathers until they were all neat and clean. Then off he flew to roost with his family and friends.

A painting of a brown bear with a yellow collar with the number 3, looking at a large, textured rock formation in a green field under a blue sky.

As summer passed by, Percy learned to find food on his own. Sometimes the food he found was in the woods or in a field. But sometimes it was on the road.

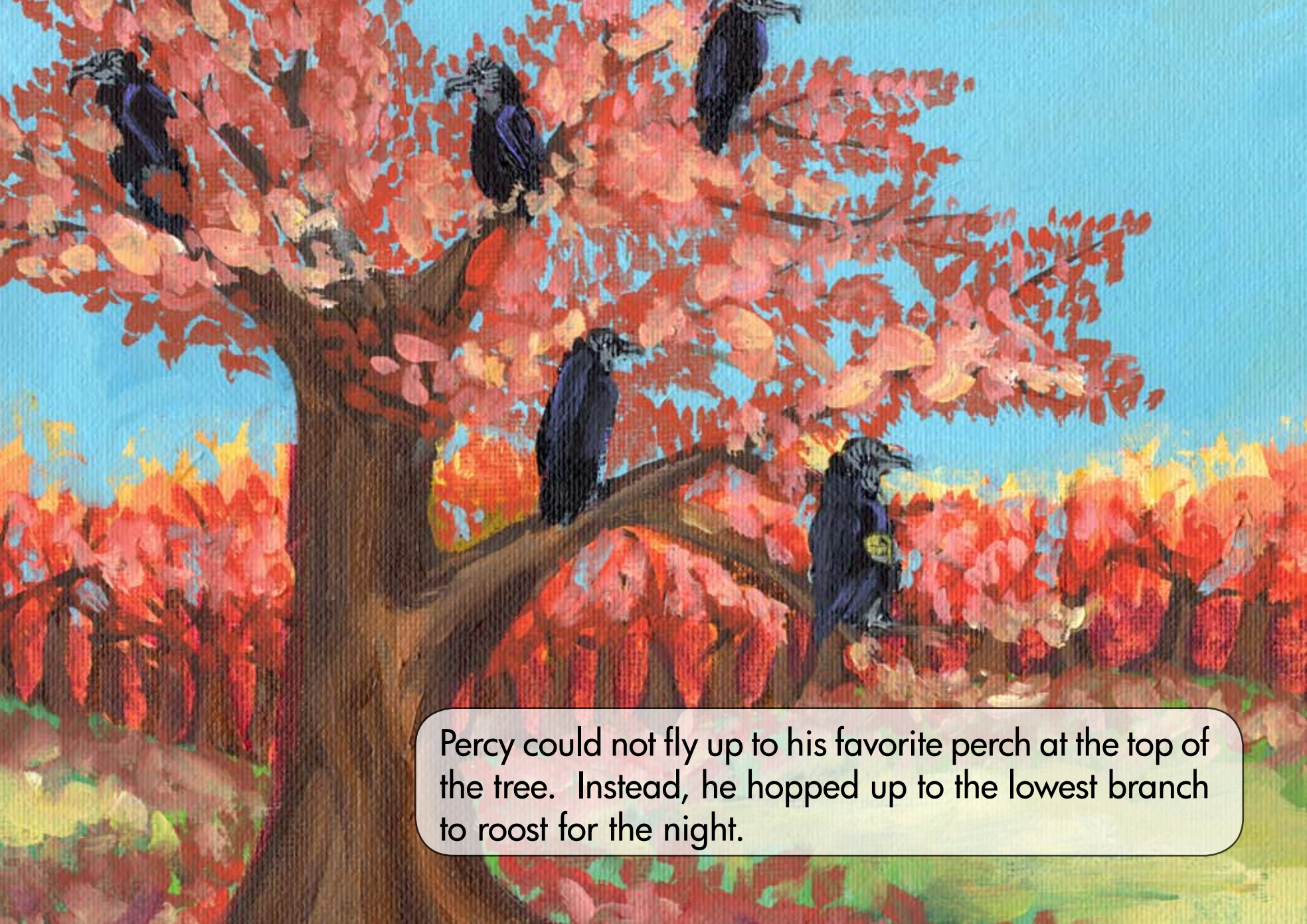




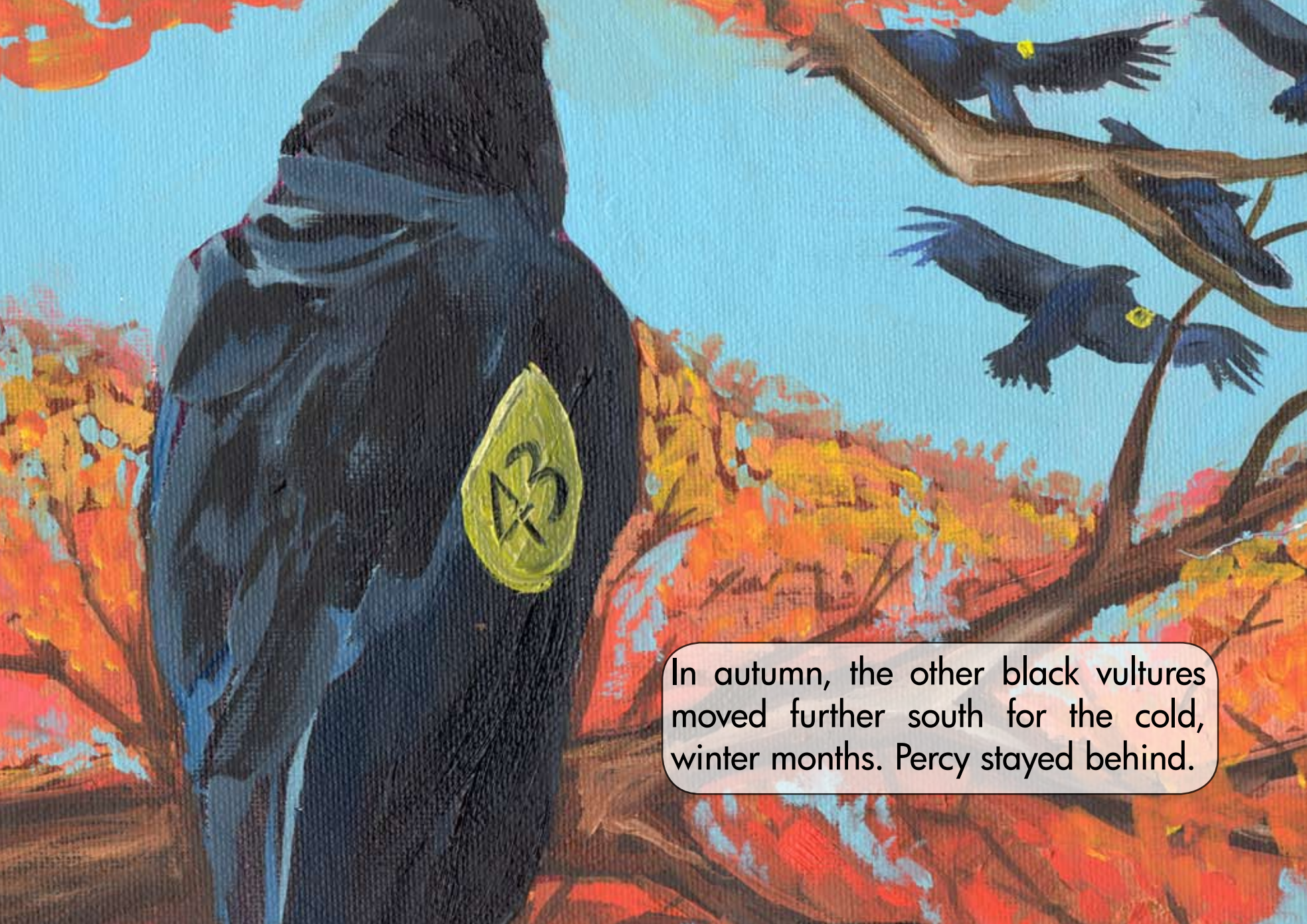
One day, Percy was eating a **roadkill** opossum and did not see or hear the truck driving down the road heading straight for him!



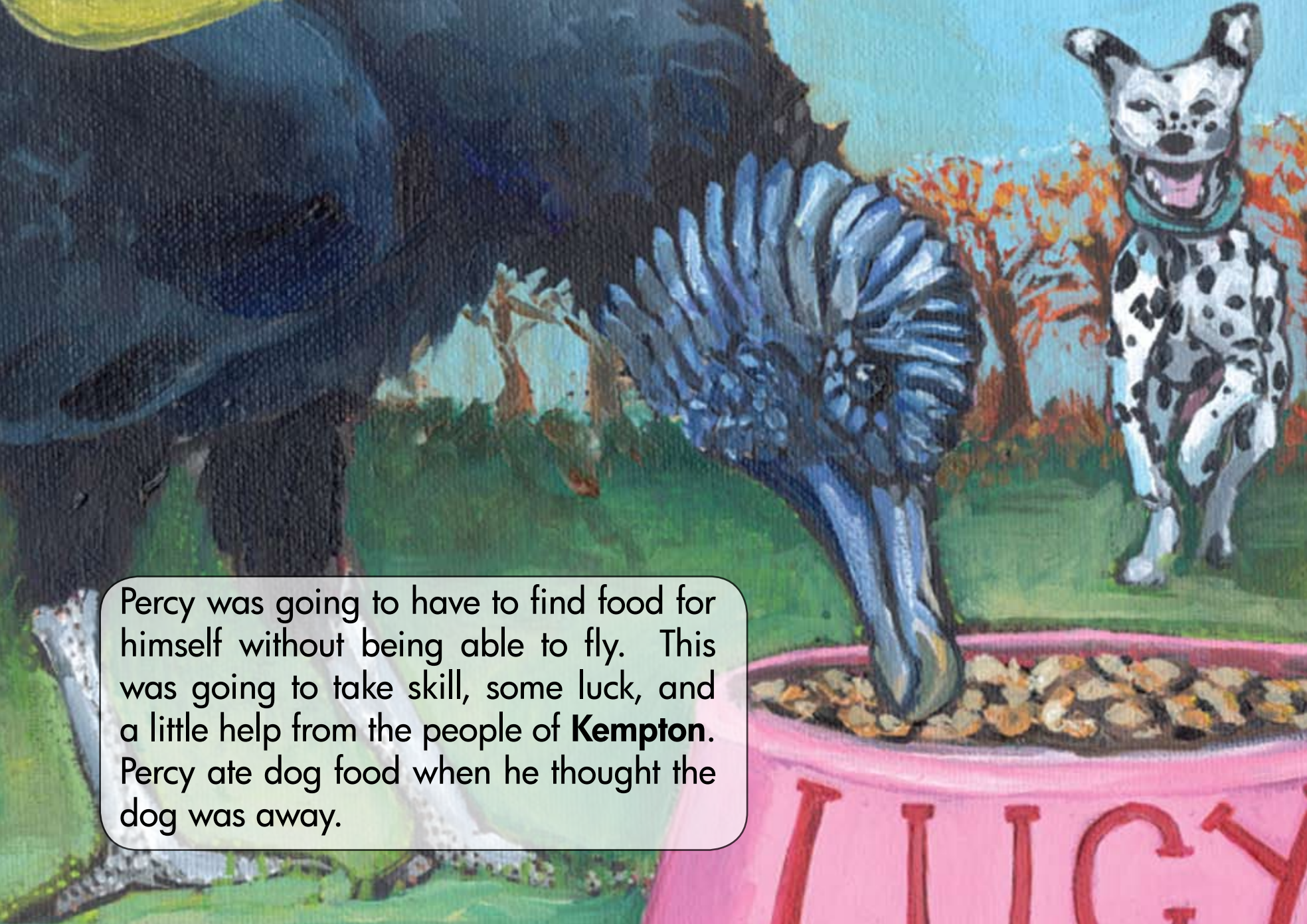
Percy saw the truck too late and tried to fly away, but his long wing was hit by the truck as it drove by. Percy's wing hurt and no longer seemed to work, so he walked back to his roost site.



Percy could not fly up to his favorite perch at the top of the tree. Instead, he hopped up to the lowest branch to roost for the night.



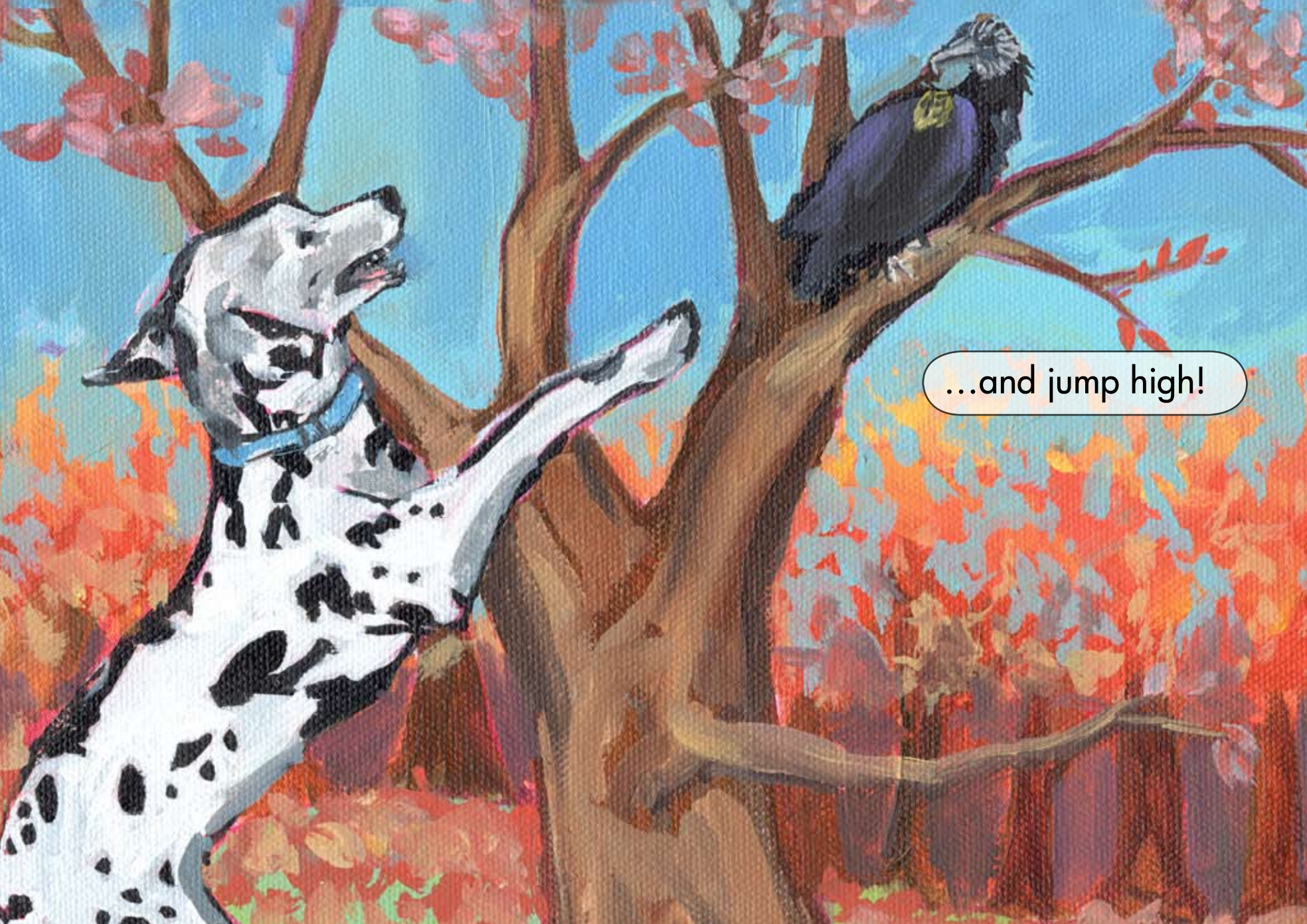
In autumn, the other black vultures moved further south for the cold, winter months. Percy stayed behind.



Percy was going to have to find food for himself without being able to fly. This was going to take skill, some luck, and a little help from the people of **Kempton**. Percy ate dog food when he thought the dog was away.

Good thing Percy could run fast...





...and jump high!

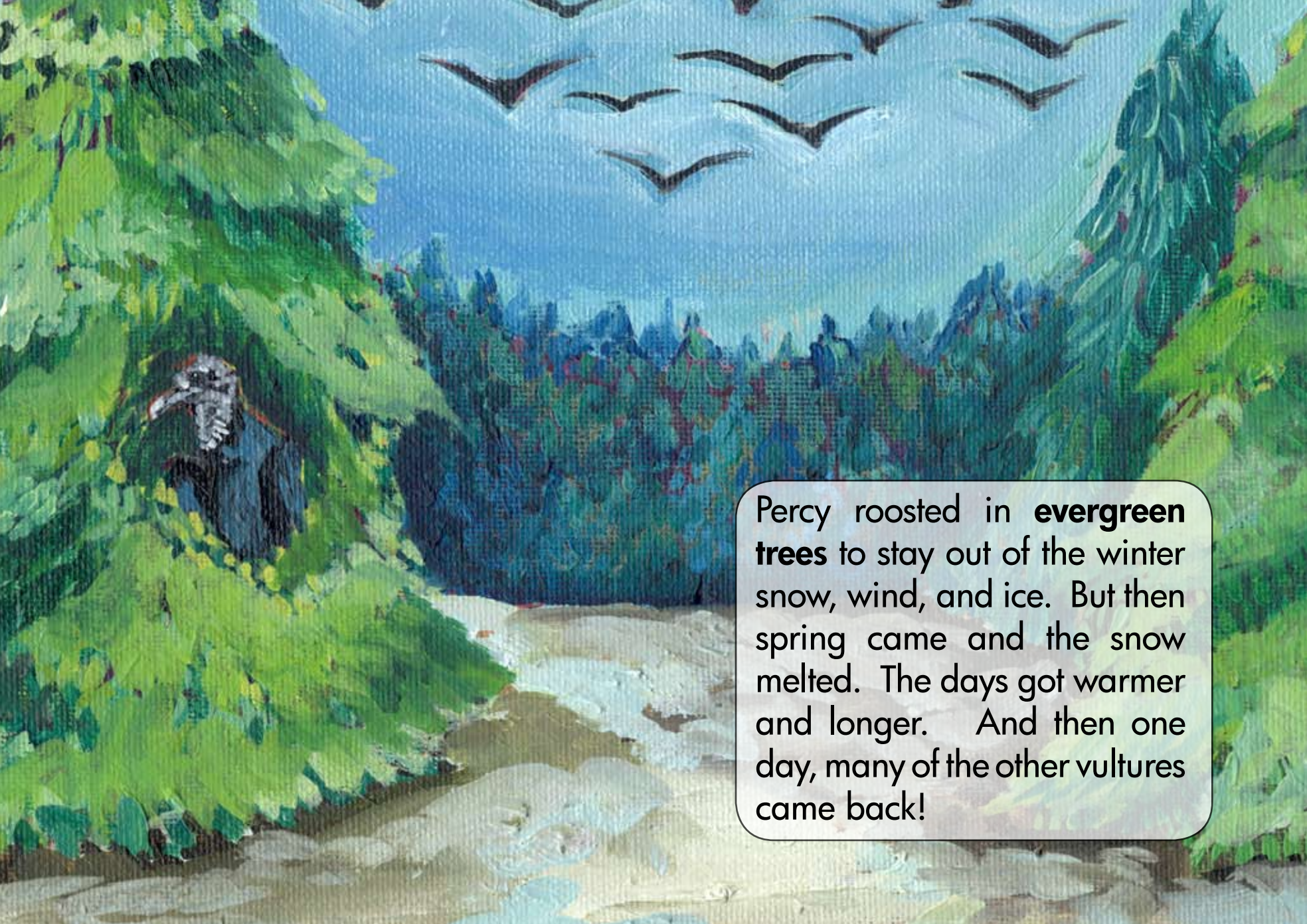


Percy ate cat food that was left outside for him.





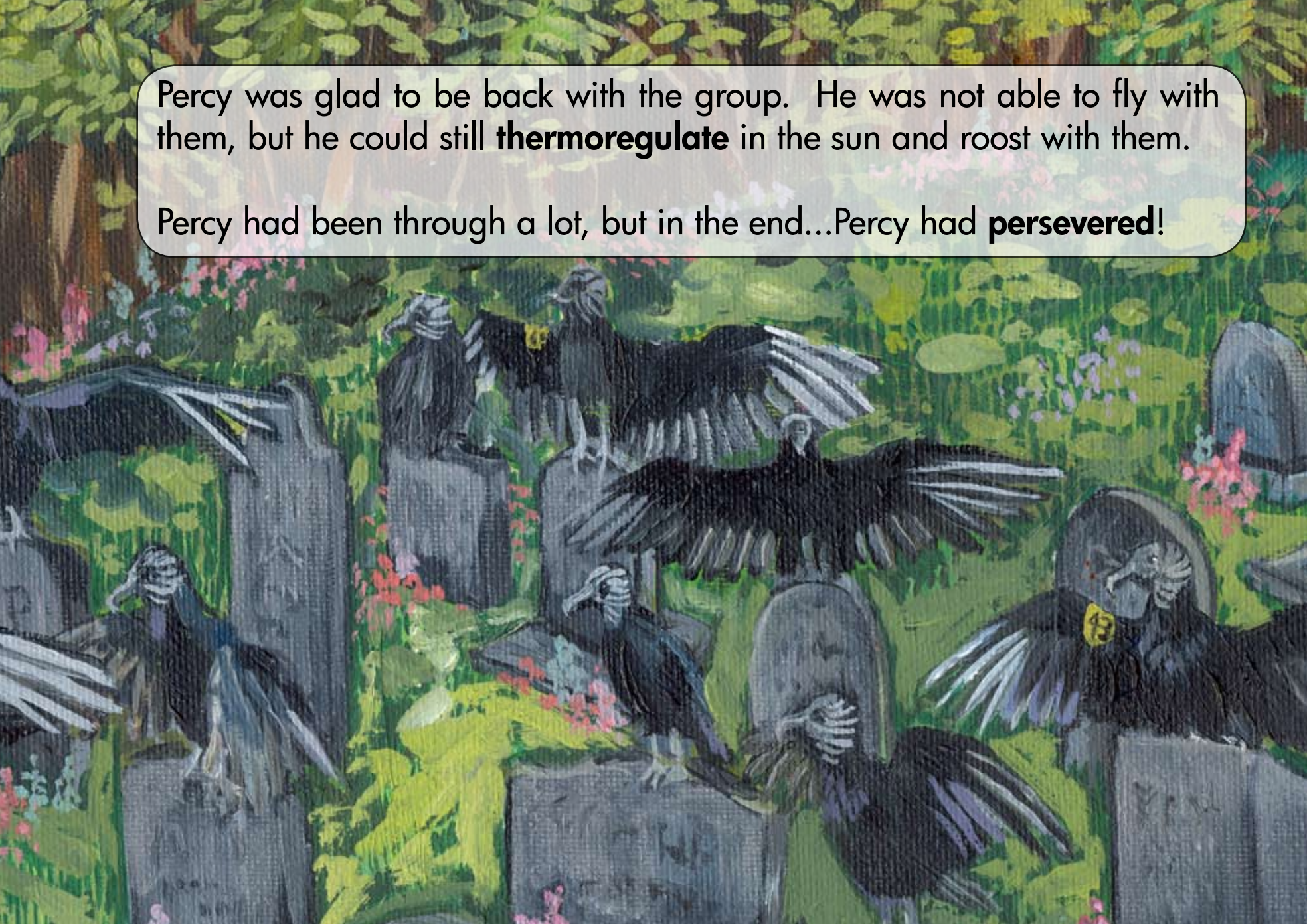
Percy ate **compost**...rotting fruits and vegetables. And of course, he ate any roadkill he could find.



Percy roosted in **evergreen trees** to stay out of the winter snow, wind, and ice. But then spring came and the snow melted. The days got warmer and longer. And then one day, many of the other vultures came back!

Percy was glad to be back with the group. He was not able to fly with them, but he could still **thermoregulate** in the sun and roost with them.

Percy had been through a lot, but in the end...Percy had **persevered!**



# The Importance of Vultures

Vultures are scavengers, meaning they eat other animals that have already died, which are called carrion. Vultures have many tools to help them eat carrion effectively and safely. We should be very grateful to vultures because if they weren't around, we would have some serious problems on our hands!

Vultures provide a great service to nature by cleaning up and recycling dead animals. In this way, we could call them nature's "clean-up crew." By consuming carcasses, vultures help process and return nutrients to the ground, which helps create healthy soil for plants. If it weren't for vultures, rotting carcasses would sit around for a lot longer, attracting insects and diseases such as brucellosis, tuberculosis, and anthrax that could spread to our pets, livestock, and even us!

Since vultures clean up the environment, they actually help humans save money. In some parts of the world, farmers have to pay to have carcasses removed if vultures are not there to do the work for them, so in this way vultures help out by cleaning up the landscape for free! Vultures also can help humans make money - after vultures thoroughly clean off the bones of dead animals, some people in Southeast Asia then collect the bones and turn them into fertilizer that can be sold and shipped to people for use in gardens and food production.

In some parts of the world, vultures are endangered because of threats such as toxins, including lead and veterinary drugs. In those places, people have noticed that where there are less vultures, there is more carrion available and therefore more feral dogs. This is a problem because the number of people bitten by dogs each year then goes up, which can lead to an increase in a dangerous disease called rabies. So by keeping the landscape clean, vultures also help protect human health!

Vultures also give us helpful clues about how our environment is doing. Since they feed on a variety of animals that have already died, they are more likely to become threatened than other raptors

because their food often contains pesticides, lead, or other harmful toxins. Since they feed together in large groups, it is easier for scientists to tell if there are harmful substances in the vulture's food because many vultures will become sick all at once. Scientists can then determine where the pollution is coming from and hopefully the source can be removed. This would benefit not only vultures but other scavengers and predators that share their habitat.

The importance of vultures does not stop there. In some cultures, vultures have been an important tradition for many years. Ancient Egyptians worshipped a vulture goddess named Nekhbet, Hindu mythology tells of a holy vulture called Jatayu, and Native Americans have included the beautiful California condor in many of their ceremonies. If these birds disappear, some communities would lose a valuable member of their cultural story.

Finally, scavengers like vultures are also becoming popular in ecotourism, meaning that many people will travel to watch and photograph these incredible birds in the wild. This can be a wonderful way for communities to support themselves while also educating the world on how awesome and important vultures really are!

Although we might not want to share a meal with a scavenger, we can still thank them for filling a very special role in our environment and for keeping our land healthy and clean. By telling our friends and family what we know about vultures, we can spread the word that they are valuable friends that deserve to soar in our skies for many years to come.

The next time you see a vulture circling overhead or bent over a carcass, stop and check the wing to join Hawk Mountain as a **citizen scientist**. Simply look for a yellow or blue tag showing a distinct number, then go to [www.hawkmountain.org/vulturesighting](http://www.hawkmountain.org/vulturesighting) and fill out the online vulture sighting form. Your sighting will help our scientists to better understand vultures and their distributions. Will YOU see Percy?

# Glossary

**Appalachian Mountains** - a mountain system in eastern North America, stretching from Quebec in Canada, in the North, to Georgia, in the South. Its highest peak is Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, which rises to 2,037 m (6,684 ft.). Most of the range consists of a long band of valleys and ridges. The Appalachians first formed more than 300 million years ago.

**black vulture** - one of the smallest of all vultures with a five foot wingspan, weighing 3-5 pounds. In flight, this bird has short, broad wings with white wingtips and a square-tipped tail. It can be distinguished from turkey vultures by its black head (turkey vultures have red heads.).

**carcass** - the body of a dead animal.

**citizen scientist** - scientific research conducted, in whole or in part, by volunteers or the public.

**compost** - decayed organic material used by people to fertilize plants and improve soil.

**Conservation Science Trainee** - a student studying raptors at Hawk Mountain.

**evergreen trees** - a tree that has leaves or needles throughout the year and is always green.

**fledglings** - young birds that have developed the muscles and feathers needed for flight.

**Hawk Mountain Sanctuary** - the oldest and largest member-based raptor-conservation organization in the world. Hawk Mountain Sanctuary was founded by Rosalie Edge in 1934.

**incubate**- to sit on eggs to keep them warm so that they will hatch.

**Kempton** - a town in Albany Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania, east of Hawk Mountain.

**Kempton Valley** - the low area of land among the Kittatinny Ridge in the central Appalachian Mountains, which is where the town of Kempton is located.

**migrate** - to move from one area to another according to the seasons.

**nestlings** - birds that are too young to leave the nest.

**persevere** - to continue a course of action even when it is difficult to do so.

**preen** - to straighten, clean, and organize the feathers.

**regurgitate** - to bring swallowed food back up again into the throat and offer it to a young vulture.

**roadkill** - an animal killed by a vehicle on the road.

**roost** - a place where birds regularly settle or congregate to rest and sleep at night.

**scrape** - a shallow depression where birds like Black Vultures lay their eggs.

**thermals** - a column of warm rising air that forms an updraft; thermals are created by the uneven heating of the Earth's surface by sunlight.

**thermoregulate** - to maintain a constant body temperature.

**victorious** - to be triumphant, to win over a situation.

**wing tag** - a durable numbered tag that is attached to a bird's wing and that serves to identify the bird as an individual.