

Interview Questions and Answers for *Milton the Mouse*

1. The story of *Milton the Mouse* begins with Milton being chased by a packrat. Have you ever seen a packrat?

Yes, but not for long. Dusky-footed packrats are found in our corner of the West. Color of fur is dull brown, belly white or gray; they are 3 to 4 times larger than a white-footed deer mouse. Packrats are nocturnal, so rarely seen. When he saw me, he ducked into a hiding place in a rock crevice. Spilling out of that crevice was a huge pile of sticks and rubbish the packrat had built up. All that debris makes it easy to find a nest. Packrats are famous for picking up almost anything and hiding it in their nests. That is how they come by the name “packrat.” Campers who leave small items sitting around are apt to lose them, especially at night when packrats are active. They love shiny objects like spoons, jewelry, or trinkets, but will carry off socks or food items, especially food items.

We had a packrat incident in our early camping days. We stopped overnight on our way to the mountains and bunked in our homemade camper shell. Darkness overtook us, and we inadvertently left a cardboard box of food supplies on the picnic table with a full-size loaf of bread sitting on top. Of course, in the morning, the bread had disappeared—the whole loaf, wrapper and all. We searched the area---how far can a varmint take a whole loaf of bread??? We made do with breakfast, and soon we were packed up and ready to leave.

Don climbed into the front seat of our 4W pickup truck and turned the key in the ignition. Funny sound, odd sound. Motor didn't turn over. Don climbed back out, opened the hood, and there was our loaf of bread---bits, chunks, and slices of bread tucked, spread, and plastered all over the motor. The plastic bag too, off to one side. The packrat was nowhere in sight, of course. What a job it was cleaning off that motor, but we were laughing the whole time. Lesson learned for us naïve campers: put the food away!!

2. Where would I go to see a packrat?

We were in the mountains of northern California. Terrain was open woods with rock out-croppings. Watch for telltale signs of debris mounds around rocks, tree stumps, protected places, even outbuildings on a farm, but don't expect to see the packrat. They are very secretive.

3. Did you ever hear a mouse sing?

Chitter yes, sing no, but Don did. He wrote about it in a Nature Notes Blog:

(<https://www.janiceekirk.com/nature-notes-the-mouse-that-howled-part-2/>)

“ . . . The grasshopper mouse makes several different calls, probably to communicate with other family members. Its masterpiece is a wolf-like howl. The sound is much more than just a mouse squeak. The furry little animal rises on hind feet, lifts its nose in the air wolf-fashion, opens its mouth and emits a high-pitched, whistle-like call that can be heard at some distance. A distinctive, rather spooky sound if you don't know what it is, likely to be heard only on dark, moonless nights. . . ”

4. Did Milton have further adventures?

Yes. At home, of course, there was always the chance he would escape the cage again. It happened rarely after the children learned how to prevent that. One summer, however, we took him camping with us, cage and all. In retrospect, that seems like an odd thing to do, but at the time we had no one to care for him at home. We removed the water bottle for travel. The trip went well until the morning we drove on a very bumpy, gravel road. The cage jiggled enough to loosen its fasteners and come apart at the bottom. Milton escaped. Well, he escaped into the camper, which had piles of camp gear, luggage, and supplies. After we got back to camp, we proceeded to try to catch him. Matt had the tennis ball can handy, which you may remember from the story, p. 36. We started removing the gear. Every time we caught a glimpse of Milton, he ducked behind something else. We ended up taking out every speck of gear and piling it on the camp table and in the tent until there was nothing left for Milton to hide behind. By then he was hungry and meekly slipped into the tennis ball can for his reward, a granola bar. We strengthened the cage fasteners before we put him back.

5. Did you feel safe living so close to a rodent?

These adventures happened 50-60 years ago before the hantavirus and other rodent troubles were commonly known. We felt safe at that time. We had owned a pet store at one time and were used to dealing with pets in cages. We kept the cage clean, water fresh, food fresh. Milton was a clean animal to take care of too. Except for the nuisance of taking along a live animal on trips, we had no problems.

6. Why name him Milton?

When I first began thinking about writing the story of our stowaway mouse, we happened to be on Sabbatical, an extended camping trip to the Southwest. One morning we stopped in at the Taos Book Store in Taos, New Mexico; everyone in the family needed a new book to read. I emerged with a dusty 1907 copy of *The Poetical Works of John Milton with a Sketch of His Life* for which I had paid one dollar.

My fascination with John Milton came from my upbringing. Milton was my family name, and we were regaled through my growing-up years with the idea we were somehow related to the great English poet. Of course, we are not. John's only son died in childhood. Nevertheless, I made my one-dollar purchase and began perusing the brown, brittle pages.

As I read through the masterworks of John, I began picking out one-liners of poetry that might be used to describe the antics of an Escape Artist mouse. Poetry has always been important to me because my father was a Spoken Word Artist in the days when it was called "Recitations." I heard much famous poetry during my early years. When I imagined the character of the father in my story of Milton the Mouse, it was only natural that I would have the father recite famous lines, and I chose the poet John Milton.

Another more subtle association for young readers, is that John Milton was an *overcomer*. He gradually lost his vision and could not see to write. Most of his famous poetry was dictated to a transcriber, one of whom was a daughter, as well as other helpers in later years. He thought up the lines, heard them with his inner ear, and spoke them aloud to be written down. They were subsequently sent to a publisher.

In the book, *Milton the Mouse* (p. 30), Matt gives his own reasons why he named the mouse Milton. Matt thought some lines of Dad's recitations fit the character of the mouse: ". . . Just like the poem says: he has fantastic toes, he wanders, we want him captivity . . ." Naming him Milton seemed just right. Life is poetry, poetry is life!

7. Why did you choose Beethoven for the music?

The other main character besides the mouse is Matt, who loves playing the piano. Easy Beethoven pieces are commonly assigned to intermediate piano students. "Für Elise" is in everyone's repertoire; it's fun to play and students love it. Beethoven is world-famous as a composer, and everyone should know about him. His music is

moving, likeable, inspiring, and holds moments of great beauty. Not even a mouse can resist; Milton grew to love listening to Beethoven.

Again, I wanted to showcase someone who would fit the theme of *overcomer*: Beethoven was such a person. Beethoven became deaf during his life, a tragedy for a musician and composer. He persevered with his craft. He listened with his inner ear; wrote the music down, and arranged for others to perform the works. He never truly heard many of his most famous works.

Many young people have seen the movies of the dog Beethoven, but never realized the association with the famous composer. It is possible to find a documentary movie on the real Beethoven. Check it out.

8. What's it like inside a grand piano?

Matt practiced on a grand piano which had a beautiful ebony black case. The interior of such a piano is built on a cast-iron frame that holds a soundboard and strings. The sound board is made of special wood that produces a beautiful resonant sound that enhances the vibration of the strings. Strings are held taut across the flat soundboard, long strings for low notes, shorter strings for higher pitches. The whole thing is shaped somewhat like a harp laying on its side with the long strings on the longest side, while shorter strings fit the harp base that curves to accommodate them. A complex system of wooden levers transmits the actions of the pianist pressing the keys to the interior where felt hammers actually strike the strings. When strings are struck, the entire metal base and soundboard resonate which amplifies the sound.

When Milton was caught inside the piano, the sound for him was deafening. He could not wait to escape. He jumped for his life the instant Matt lifted the heavy lid of the piano (p. 44). Luckily the soft carpet was his landing place. He got right up and ran.

9. If I want to hear Beethoven's music, what should I start with?

For the story I chose commonly performed piano pieces: *Moonlight Sonata*, *Fur Elise*, *Contra Dances*. That's a good place to start. The *Piano Sonatas* and larger symphonic works are wonderful: *5th Symphony* is famous, as well as the huge orchestral/choral work, the *9th Symphony* with its *Ode to Joy*. Beethoven wrote Art Songs, a *Mass in C*, an Opera, more Symphonies—the *6th* and *7th Symphonies* are

favorites, Beethoven's *Violin Sonata* is also a favorite. With such a large body of work to choose from you can hardly go wrong.

10. Where should a person start if they want to learn about music?

Dance, whistle, hum, singalong, tap your toes, beat a drum to get started. Look for CDs for children. <http://weesing.com/Books-Music> The Wee Sing label is excellent for younger children. Check Amazon for other sources. As an adult, take lessons yourself. It's fun, good for health, livens the brain cells, and provides great enjoyment. In addition, you gain a sense of accomplishment.

I recommend piano lessons for beginners. Ages 5-8 are prime ages, or start whenever they show a definite interest and have the patience for practice. Piano teaches them how to play, read music, and perform it. Students acquire the discipline of practice and train a musical ear. A bonafide piano is the best practice instrument. Keep it in tune so the student is hearing correct pitches. A keyboard is better than nothing, but it is not the same. The touch is different, and so is the sound.

Violin is also a good beginning instrument. String instruments come in smaller sizes (quarter size, half size, etc.) for children. Suzuki classes for violin or piano are easy to find in most communities. Fiddling groups are great fun. Guitar is popular for folk and country music.

Listen a lot. Classical stations have special programs for children. Choose music that is fun to listen too. Find music that will not harm a person's hearing. Yelling, screaming can't be called music; it can destroy delicate hearing mechanisms in the ear. Good hearing is essential to a full life.

Go to a classical concert to hear famous works. There are many free concerts for kids. Inquire about these from local performance groups or concert venues.

11. How did you do the drawings of Milton?

We placed him in a homemade glass-fronted terrarium so that I could observe him. We placed a rock for him to climb on, but all he did was hide behind it. We had to remove the rock but did put in some small pieces of wood for him to climb on. Using black/white film we photographed him in different poses. I used every way I could think of to observe him.

I practiced the drawings first with very sketchy, rough drafts. After I was happy with the proportions and different views, I began final drawings on fine drawing paper. I enjoyed the

drawing process: shaping the head, outlining the curve of the body, getting the gestures true to life, and wrapping that tail around him. I placed the eye, indicated whiskers, and then took time to sketch every hair of the fur. At times the strokes felt like I was petting him. It became a labor of love.

12. Do animals belong in a cage?

The family discusses this in the book, p. 12-13. They thought they saved Milton's life. The reasons: because it was too far to take him back home to the Great Basin camp; he would probably die in new outdoor territory at their house; and he would have to avoid the cat.

What would you do? Most people set a mouse trap to kill them. They don't like mice. A mouse loose in the house makes a mess of stored food and clothing.

Cages are needed at times for study or perhaps to heal a sick animal before it is returned to the wild. It is best to study nature outdoors, learn animal behaviors in the wild, and enjoy the sense of belonging to the same eco-community.

13. How should we preserve nature?

We should preserve nature where it lives and belongs. Parks, preserves, and recreation areas are wonderful places to observe and enjoy the life and scenery. Our backyards can be made to be welcoming to native plants and wildlife. Formal gardens have their share of wildlife in addition to the beauty of special plantings.

Spending time outdoors is good for a person's well-being. Try to get outdoors often enough so that you feel like you belong. Learn nature's ways and be a part of outdoor life without intruding or harming the eco-systems. We are the stewards of nature; it is up to us to take care of, restore, nurture, and protect the living systems that keep us alive. We cannot live without them.

14. What if we find a lost animal, a bird, or snake?

Every case is different. Consider these things:

- a. Never remove it from its home.
- b. Can it be safely returned to where it came from?
- c. If you decide to keep it for a short time, can you properly care for it?
- d. Think it through. Can you handle it? Is there a better solution?
- e. Call the local animal shelter and ask for advice or removal.

- f. Taking pets from the wild is illegal in most states. Most states require a permit for collecting.
- g. Consider the “if everybody did it” factor: Robbing tidepools of shellfish will decimate coastal habitats that protect the shoreline and destroy ecosystems. Leave it where it lives.

15. Can you recommend a pet?

Cats and dogs are high on the list. They are domesticated. Some people try rabbits, pigs, chickens; horses to ride and to train. Think through the nature of the animal and chose one you can handle; one that will be happy in your home situation (beagles like to run; so do Border Collies---not good choices for housebound conditions, small yards, etc.).

A budding biologist may wish to observe animals close up. First, try making a nature journal in the outdoors to record observations; add a sketchbook. If you catch something for a short time, do not harm it; after you observe it, then release it where it came from. Build a bird blind near a bird bath, and enjoy watching the birds. Bird feeders are wonderful for observation. Start a bird list, keep it going all your life. Learn wildflowers in spring and summer. Can you name the trees in your area? Look for resources to learn more about nature, such as Field Guides for identification, Dept. of Natural Resources for regional information.