

Mountain in my heart



[NOTE: *Microtus Agrestis* - short-tailed Vole
– known by friends as 'Gresty']

Late melting snows swelled the gushing stream, forcing its way along the high mountain valley, eager to roll over the falls and start its journey to the sea. A bubbling curlew joined voice with a skylark trilling a descant above the breezed music of rushing waters. Spring had arrived late in the valley, bringing an added air of excitement to waking creatures among the rising vegetation. Above the darkened mountain slopes bright sunshine topped the heights, greening fern and heather with new emerald tints - a verdure only given to the valley rushes when the afternoon sun squeezed its rays between the rugged slopes.

A blunt sandy brown face peered out from a low boulder crowned with the first yellowing saxifrage. Gresty, a short-tailed vole was momentarily startled by his friendly grey wagtail perched on the boulder above him. Gresty ventured into the open. Clover leaves sprayed him with fine water droplets left by the morning mist. The sky was lightening now. Sheep could be seen grazing on the higher ridges between leafless rowan bushes.

Why are you sitting there? Chirped the wagtail. *Why?* was the wagtail's favourite word and every time she used it she would bow her head and twitch her tail.

I've been watching you. Just sitting there. You haven't moved for ages. What's the matter? Why? Her tail bobbed again.

I've been watching the butterfly, Gresty mumbled.

That's not a butterfly, it's a moth, said the wagtail. *We'll need more sunshine before the butterflies visit us.*

Gresty was in rather a sulky mood and not just because his whiskers were wet. *Moth! Butterfly. It doesn't matter which. They both have wings. They can both fly.*

It matters to them, observed the wagtail.

I wish I had wings and could fly. Gresty was not interested in lepidoptery.

Why? asked wagtail with a specially low bob of her tail.

So I could get away from these damp, dreary stones and mosses. My feet are never dry. I want to go to the top of the mountain where the sun always shines; where the sky is blue and the air fresh, It's all right for you. You can fly up to the top and live down here with the dipper all in the same day.

Wagtail was puzzled. She knew nothing of the stirring of Springtime in the hearts and tails of all male mammals, the restlessness, the urgency, the conviction that the sun always shines brighter on the other side of the hill.

If I had wings ... Gresty started again, wistfully.

Why?

Gresty was irritated by the tail bobbing. *I've told you, haven't I? So I can fly like you and live on the top of the mountain. So I can get out of these dreary old runs we travel along every day. So I can meet new voles, new creatures. So I can see what it's like at the top of the world! It must be wonderful up there!*

No, no, the wagtail said, patiently. *When I asked 'Why?'...* She could not say it without another wag of her tail

I meant why do you have to have wings? Why can't you walk. You do have four legs even if they're a bit short. It was a longer sentence but two *whys* still called for two tail wags.

So far she had failed to fire Gresty's imagination. He replied in desultory tone.
It's a long, long way.

Not if you really want to go. Wagtail was at her most persuasive now. *Perhaps it's just a dream - all in your mind like ...*

Her tactics were working. Gresty showed interest.

But it's a long, long way, he said. And it's uphill too!

It's quicker coming back, observed wagtail.

Why? asked Gresty, and, from habit, wagtail bobbed her tail for his 'why' too.

Because it's downhill on the way back! She flew off laughing. *You think about it.*

I'm off for a snack. I expect you're hungry too. You'll need to eat plenty if you're going mountain climbing!

Gresty did not feel particularly hungry but instinct made him eat, as well as the memory of his mother's *Keep up your strength, lad. Eat often!*

All that day Gresty thought and talked about mountaineering. His family and neighbouring voles thought he was suffering from some sort of Spring fever and while friends laughed at him, closer relatives were genuinely worried about his physical and mental health. There was just one more problem which his conversations kept bringing to the fore. First light - long after the sun had first wakened the high ridges - the grey wagtail was waiting for him.

Are you going to the mountain top, then?

I'd like to, Gresty sounded really enthusiastic. *But everyone tells me how dangerous it will be - out in the open where there are snakes and where hawks and buzzards fly. No-one - no-one - would agree to come with me!*

But there are plenty of safe places to hide.

The wagtail sounded confident.

There are rocks and gorse and heather to cover you. She turned her head to one side in a thoughtful pose - just for a moment - then with a succession of tail wags she declared. *I'll come with you! I can guide you and warn you of dangers.*

Suddenly, Gresty's heart lifted, responding to nature's call to adventure. This wagtail with her annoying, sometimes interfering ways, was a real friend - a trusty companion for the journey of a lifetime. Without further hesitation he called up to the alder where she had perched, *Thanks! Yes. WE will go!*

Get some breakfast inside you, then, said the wagtail. Gresty found his appetite had returned as he tucked in to favourite roots together with new-grown tips of moss and herbs.

The journey was all Gresty had been warned it would be - up-hill - tiring - dangerous, and impossible if it had not been for his companion. The climbing was not so difficult. There were runs and tracks to follow, many with familiar, encouraging vole and mouse smells to them, though more than once Gresty caught the menacing scent of fox. The tracks did not climb straight up, but circled the ridges, gently rising higher as they went. The world was already becoming brighter at every turn. Often Gresty wanted to stop to snack and look around him, but grey wagtail kept urging him on. *It's a full day's journey to the top for you.* she kept reminding him.

There were a few frightening moments. One when a buzzard took notice of Gresty's rapid movement across an open space between the heathers. As the great bird hovered, grey wagtail dived into the fern, calling a warning to Gresty who squeezed between rock and slate to lay panting in fear. A disturbed lizard hurried away, more afraid of Gresty than the vole was of the buzzard. Fortunately, it was the time of year when there were many other small bodies to take Gresty's place on the buzzards's menu. They climbed higher, grey wagtail keeping a careful watch for hungry adders drawn out to lie in the warming spring sunshine.

The hardest part of the journey was through the conifer plantation near the top of the ridge. The canopy of tightly packed trees shut out sunlight and made it difficult for grey wagtail to guide Gresty. *Follow the ditch,* she told him. *It runs straight to the other side.* Following the ditch was not easy through deep piles of cones and prickling fir and holly leaves. Gresty twice slipped into the water and by now was getting almost too weary to drag himself out again. He sensed danger behind every tall tree. Blue tits and a wren assured him it was safe to keep to the ditch. A robin guided him along the last section till at last grey wagtail was greeting him on the higher side of the plantation.

The sun had already started its journey into the night and dark shadows flickered everywhere in a strengthening wind. A short-eared owl flew out from the trees, circled over wild, rocky outcrops and disappeared into the plantation again. Gresty shivered.

We've just this last rocky piece to cross, grey wagtail told him. It's best we leave that till morning. You get something to eat and find a safe place to sleep. We'll do the rest tomorrow. Gresty was too tired to object but not too tired to eat.

Well refreshed, he greeted the first rays of morning light even though they woke him earlier than usual. From his mossy bed in a rock crevice, Gresty was immediately aware of a new light which seemed to give vibrancy to every blade of grass and every deep purple heather bud. Grey wagtail arrived. Gresty felt able to move out. Breathless he stared around him. Blue sky! So much of it! The song of the wind! Deep notes and high sounded together in nature's orchestra as a skylark took up the melody. Gresty ventured further out into the beauty of the morning and the immense overwhelming vista of the mountain peaks - too far away - too immense for him to see clearly.

Quite suddenly, he was gripped by wonder - a sense of the wide expanse of grass and heather and endless sky - all frighteningly awesome. He trembled as the wind combed through his fur, right to the tip of his short tail, and a shadow appeared above him.

Run! Called Grey Wagtail. *The buzzard!* *Run!* But Gresty was too terrified to run. He stood still watching the great bird diving towards him. At that precise moment an old ewe who had been resting close by, rose to her feet, startling the buzzard in his dive. Now Gresty could run, and in one direction - downhill! Grey wagtail was right - it IS quicker going down!

Later in the day, kept safe by his faithful companion, Gresty arrived back to the comfort of his burrow and family, just in time to see the last rays of his sunlight gold-leafing the alder catkins. He listened to the more familiar rushing of his waterfall. There was a cosiness and security here.

Glad to be back then? asked Grey Wagtail.

Yes I am. was Gresty's firm response. *But I'm glad I've been to the top of the mountain. I've seen such wonderful things. Yes, I'm glad to be back. Back is different now. I don't know why, but I feel happy here now. I can still feel the sunshine in my fur. The song of the wind is in my ears. I've got the mountain top inside me!*

A half-cousin short-tailed vole had been listening. *Where've you been then?*

I've been to the top of the mountain! he shouted.

Why? asked his half-cousin and grey wagtail dipped her tail.