Portrait of an Animal Rescue Expert

Justin Matthews has always loved animals. As a boy, he collected turtles and lizards from the pond behind his house in Bradenton, Florida. He terrified his younger sister by slipping the reptiles into her bed at night. By the time he was 12, his bedroom looked like an exhibit at the zoo.

Things have not changed much in the last 40 years.

"At my house, we've got an iguana, a 10-foot alligator, three constrictor snakes, a hybrid wolf, a giant tortoise, a possum," Matthews says. "Every time someone comes by the house, they say it's like a visit to the Florida Zoo!"

Today, Matthews makes his living as a wildlife rescue expert. Each day he takes between 10 and 20 phone calls from people experiencing some kind of trouble with animals. Sometimes a squirrel has gotten loose in someone's living room. Other times an alligator is sunning itself on someone's front lawn, preventing kids from going out to play. On rare occasions, the caller reports an animal attack. In such cases Matthews suggests they call 911. Then he jumps in his truck to see if he can help.

Fortunately, animal attacks are rare. Matthews spends most of his time educating the public about animal behavior. He believes that if people understood animals better, they would not be so afraid of them. At a young age, he learned that animals are our friends. That is the message he tries to pass on to others.

"When I was young, I tried to get to know every type of animal I could," he says. "People are scared of animals like snakes and sharks and alligators because they don't understand them. And they don't understand them because they haven't spent any time with them. But when you get to know a python, for example, you start to realize they are actually very nice creatures. People keep them as pets for a reason. They can be fun to have around!"

That may seem like a stretch. But what Matthews says is backed up by science. Burmese pythons are in fact quite calm creatures. Unless you attack *them*, they will remain peaceful. Pet stores sell Burmese pythons, after all, mostly to teenage boys. The problem is that Burmese pythons can grow to lengths of 20 or even 25 feet. Keeping a 20-foot snake in your house is not the easiest thing to do.

"Those snakes can get awfully long," says Matthews. "And what happens is, after a while, the family can't care for a snake that big. Instead of selling them, they release them into the wild. All of a sudden, you've got 20-foot snakes slithering through people's backyards!"

Matthews says that at least 10 percent of his rescue calls come from people who see snakes on their property. When he gets snake calls, he brings a cooler to put them in. Then he drives them to the local Florida Fish and Wildlife office.

Matthews does not only deal with snakes. People call with all sorts of stories. Once, someone called to say they had spotted three wolves running through the local state park. He knew that wolves were not allowed to be in the park, so he drove out to see what he could do. Within an hour, he had captured all three of the wolves in his van. He relocated them to a large cage in his backyard. One of the wolves, Nakia, still lives with him and his wife.

I asked how he managed to tame these wild wolves.

"Simple," he says. "I threw some chicken into the back of my van, and drove through the park until all three wolves jumped in. I figured they would be hungry. When I got back home, I put them into a cage and lay down beside them for a few hours. After a while they realized I was not their enemy. They started acting nicely toward me. We've been friends ever since."

Matthews is something of a local celebrity in Bradenton. People know him as "the wildlife guy." Some people call him "alligator man." His popularity got a boost when he competed in the Python Challenge 2013. The Everglades, a large state park in Florida, is full of Burmese pythons. So Matthews and others agreed to help park employees catch them. As a competitor, he appeared on national news shows with his best friend, Roy, who helped him search. They didn't catch any. But they did tell officials where the snakes were *not* hiding out.

"It was a thrill," Matthews says of the contest. "I was happy to help the Florida Fish and Wildlife folks search for those snakes. They're a real problem for the state of Florida. People want to be able to enjoy the natural beauty of the Everglades, with its grasses and lagoons. But how can they relax when they know the place is full of big, scary-looking snakes?"

Due to Matthews's high profile during the contest, television stations have expressed interest in giving him his own show. That has yet to be determined. For now, he is enjoying the life of a Florida wildlife rescue expert.

"TV show or not, I'm happy doing what I'm doing," he says. "For me, it's all about the animals."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is Justin Matthews's job?

     A wildlife rescue expert
     B collecting animals to put in his house
     C saving snakes from the Florida Everglades
     D giving pythons to people as pets

2. The author describes what happens when people can no longer care for their pet Burmese pythons. How does the author describe this?

     A The author quotes Matthews explaining that "All of a sudden, you've got 20-foot snakes slithering through people's backyards!"
     B The author writes about how Matthews competed in the Python Challenge 2013.
     C The author quotes Matthews telling how he "threw some chicken into the back of my van."
     D The author writes about Matthews's house seeming like a zoo to guests.

3. Matthews thinks it is important to help people understand animals better so that people would not be so afraid of them. Which evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

     A Matthews spends most of his time educating the public about animal behavior.
     B Matthews has a television show about rescuing wild animals.
     C Matthews answers phone calls about wolves in public parks.
     D Matthews calls 911 when animals attack people.

4. According to the passage, Matthews caught three wild wolves and put them in his van. He says, "When I got back home, I put them into a cage and lay down beside them for a few hours. After a while they realized I was not their enemy."

Based on this information, how can Justin Matthews best be described?

     A He is easily frightened.
     B He is patient.
     C He gets tired often.
     D He is unhappy.

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

     A Justin Matthews likes to catch Burmese pythons.
     B People are afraid of animals because they don't understand them.
     C There are a lot of pythons in Florida state parks.
     D Justin Matthews helps rescue wild animals because he has studied them and understands them.

6. Read the following sentences from the passage:

"Due to Matthews's high profile during the contest, television stations have expressed interest in giving him his own show. That has **yet to be determined**. For now, he is enjoying the life of a Florida wildlife rescue expert.

'TV show or not, I'm happy doing what I'm doing,' he says. 'For me, it's all about the animals.'"

What does the author mean when using the phrase "**yet to be determined**" in the passage?

> **A** Television stations decided not to give Justin Matthews his own show.
> **B** Justin Matthews and the television stations have not yet decided if he will have a show.
> **C** Justin Matthews will begin his TV show soon.
> **D** Justin Matthews does not want to have a television show.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Justin Matthews has many nicknames, _____ Alligator Man.

> **A** as a result
> **B** instead
> **C** such as
> **D** therefore

8. Justin Matthews loves animals. Give examples from the passage of things Matthews does to show that this is true.

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9. In the passage, Justin Matthews says, "People are scared of animals like snakes and sharks and alligators because they don't understand them."

According to Matthews, what is one way to learn to understand animals?

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10. Explain why understanding animals better may make people less afraid of them. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 800

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8. Justin Matthews loves animals. Give examples from the passage of things Matthews does to show that this is true.

Suggested answer: Answers will vary, but might include one or more of the following:

- He has a lot of pets.
- He saves wolves and snakes from parks (and brings them to local wildlife centers).
- He had a lot of pets when he was a child.
- He tamed three wild wolves by laying down beside them and now considers them his "friends."
- He educates the public about animal behavior so that people will better understand animals and not be afraid of them.

9. In the passage, Justin Matthews says, "People are scared of animals like snakes and sharks and alligators because they don't understand them."

According to Matthews, what is one way to learn to understand animals?

Suggested answer: Matthews says that one way to learn to understand animals is to spend time with them.

10. Explain why understanding animals better may make people less afraid of them. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary as long as they are supported by the text. Students may reason that people may become less afraid of animals if they understand them better because they become familiarized with their nature and come to realize that the preconceived notions people have about certain animals are not necessarily true. Students may cite the example of the python which Justin Matthews discusses. Matthews explains that people are afraid of snakes because they haven't spent any time with them but if you get to know a python, you start to realize they are actually very nice and fun creatures.