



Howler's Journey

Written and illustrated by Katie McCulloch
kmcculloch44@yahoo.com



Our story begins in a very special place called Isla de Ometepe. This island is so special because it is the largest island in a freshwater lake in the whole world. People from all over the world come to the island to see the amazing plants and animals that live there. Scientists and students from many places come to the island to study the plants and animals so they can tell us more about them.

But this story isn't about all the plants and animals...there are so many it would take forever to talk about them all! It's about a mantled howling monkey.



Howler had lived on Ometepe all her life. She spent her days happily high in the trees in a **troop** with her friends and family. They passed the time eating lots of leaves and some fruit, taking siestas in the hot afternoon sun, and of course howling. As you might have guessed, howling monkeys are known for their howling. Maybe you've heard them before. Each morning and evening Howler and her friends would create a wonderful ruckus sending their roaring howls across the forest to the other troops of howling monkeys. "Roarwooooo roooooaarwooooo roooooaarwoooo!" The other troops would respond with roaring howls of their own, "Rooooaaaaarrrrwooooo!" filling the forest with a chorus of hoots and whoops. By howling to each other the howling monkeys are able to keep track of where each troop lived and defend their territories without fighting.



Howling is not the only thing that made Howler exceptional. Howling monkeys stand out from most of the other Ometepe animals because they are **primates**. Howling monkeys and humans both belong to a group of animals called primates, so howling monkeys are one of our closest relatives. Just look at Howler's hand. Like humans, Howler has **grasping hands** with nails instead of claws that she can use to grab leaves and vines. It looks almost the same as yours!

Howler is also very special because she has a **prehensile tail**. Not all primates have prehensile tails. Howler uses this tail like an extra hand to hold onto the tree while she reaches for the tastiest, tenderest leaves on small branches. If you had a prehensile tail what would you use it for?



As Howler grew up, she neared the time for her to leave her friends and family and join a new troop of howling monkeys to start her own family. But there was a problem. Recently, when Howler and the rest of her troop howled they could barely hear the other troops respond. It sounded like the other troops were getting farther and farther away. “What is going on?” wondered Howler.

When the day came for Howler to leave home she decided to investigate this mystery. She said a sad goodbye to her friends and family and started on her way. She hadn’t gone very far when the forest suddenly became much sparser, with shorter trees and more bushes and then suddenly ended. Howler was confused. All of the tall trees had disappeared and been replaced by strange plants and structures.



Howler bravely ventured down to the lower branches where she met Dung Beetle. Howling monkeys and dung beetles have a very special relationship. Dung beetles rely on howling monkey's dung for food, amazingly that's what these beetles love to eat! And howling monkeys rely on dung beetles to help produce rich soil and **distribute** new seeds so their food trees can grow.

"Dung Beetle," Howler asked, "Where have all the tall forest trees gone?"

"The farmers have cut them down to plant their crops," replied Dung Beetle. "They don't mean to hurt they forest. They are just trying to feed their families." Howler felt less confused, but was beginning to feel discouraged. She thanked Dung Beetle and climbed back up into the treetops.

"Thanks for the delicious lunch!" called Dung Beetle as he watched her disappear into the leaves. Howler knew that she wouldn't find any other howling monkeys here so she started off in the other direction.



But again, Howler hadn't travelled very far when the trees began getting smaller and the forest ended again. Here too, all the tall trees had disappeared and been replaced by farm crops. Howler climbed up into the tallest branches to get a better look, where she found Urraca.

"Urraca," she asked, "what is going on here? Wherever I travel all I find are dead ends. What have you seen in your flights over the forest?"

Urraca looked at Howler sadly. "Humans are creating **forest fragmentation.**"

Howler furrowed her brow. She'd never heard of that before. "What's that mean?" she asked.

"Humans are dividing the forest up into many small patches and separating the patches by farms and roads. They're creating little islands of forest floating in a sea of buildings, roads, and crop plants. This makes it hard for animals like you to find new homes and new friends. The humans don't mean to hurt you or the forest. They're just trying to make a living."

Howler thanked Urraca and found a comfy branch. She was getting very discouraged. "Will I ever find a new troop to live with?" she wondered as she fell asleep.



The next morning as the sun was rising, Howler awoke to the most wonderful sound she'd ever heard. In the distance she heard the roaring howls of a new howler troop calling through the trees. Howler quickly swung down from her branch by her tail and rushed towards the howls.

As Howler approached the source of the ruckus, she began to slow down. Again the trees were getting smaller and the undergrowth was thickening. And just as she predicted, she hadn't travelled very far when the forest ended again. All the trees had been cleared away and a road had been built. But across the road Howler could see another forest patch. She had heard about roads and the thunderous monsters that travelled on them, so she was afraid to cross the dangerous road. The forest on the other side was so close, but even if they don't have to worry about road monsters, howling monkeys don't like to go down to the ground. They spend almost their whole lives high up in the forest canopy where they feel safe and comfortable. Howler wanted to travel through trees, but there were none. How could she safely get to the other side?



Howler sat down on a branch and sighed, “What ever will I do?”
Hey, I’m trying to sleep here,” said a voice nearby.

Howler looked around. “Oh! Sloth! Sorry I didn’t see you there. You blend in so well with the trees. Tell me, do you know if howling monkeys live in that forest across the road?”

“Of course they do,” replied Sloth sleepily. “And they make it very difficult for me to sleep sometimes with all their loud howling. Thank goodness the road keeps them from crossing over here into my part of the forest!”



Howler knew what she needed to do. If she ever wanted to find a new troop to live with she would have to be very brave and risk crossing the road. Howler rushed to the ground and began to dart across the road before she lost her nerve. But just as she was almost across, one of the deafening road monsters roared around the corner! Howler curled up her tail and ran as fast as she could, barely making it to the other side.

Howler scampered up the nearest tree and sat catching her breath.

“That was close!” said someone behind her.

Howler turned to see a howling monkey she’d never met before.

“The monkeys in my troop never cross the road!” he said.

“I’m so happy to see you!” exclaimed Howler. Then she suddenly felt a little shy in front of this new stranger.

“I’ve been travelling all over the forest looking for a new troop to join. Do you think it would be okay if I joined your troop?”



“Of course,” replied the other howling monkey. “Ever since the road was built we hardly ever get new members for our troop. My name’s Ramon. I’ll take you to meet everyone.”

Howler followed Ramon deep into the forest and he introduced her to his troop. Howler was so happy to have found a new home, but one thing still bothered her.

“What if humans decide to cut down this forest to build more farms and roads. What will we do then? Where will we go?”

“Don’t worry,” replied Ramon. “This is Estacion Biologica de Ometepe. This forest is protected so it can’t be cut down. Scientists and students come here to study us and the other plants and animals. They study us the most because we’re the most interesting,” he added with a wink.

Howler was overjoyed! Her new home was safe! She quickly joined her new friends in a delicious meal of young leaves.



As the years passed, Howler settled into her new troop and had a daughter of her own. They spent their days contentedly munching tender leaves, being observed by the scientists and students, and sleeping in the hot sun. But sometimes Howler would worry about the future. She wondered where her daughter would go when she got older and had to leave the troop. And what was happening to all the other howling monkey troops on other parts of the island where the forest was not protected?

Howler could only hope that the humans would realise how important it was to keep the forest connected so that animals like howling monkeys could travel to different areas. She dreamed that eventually, the humans would learn to compromise with the animals so they could both live on the island happily together. What can be done to make Howler's dream come true?