

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Incident at Hawk's Hill

by  
Allan Eckert

### Book Information

Allan Eckert, Incident at Hawk's Hill

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191 Pages

Book Level: 7.2

Interest Level: MG

Set in 1870, this story about a boy and a badger is based on an actual incident.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Adventure, Lost/Abandoned; Adventure, Survival; Animals, Misc./Other; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

### Main Characters

**Badger** the female badger who gets caught in one of Burton's traps and adopts Ben after she loses her litter of pups

**Ben MacDonald** the principal character, a six-year-old boy who is the size of a typical three year old and is more comfortable with animals than with people

**Esther MacDonald** Ben's mother; patient, gentle and understanding of Ben

**George Burton** the MacDonalds' disreputable neighbor, who sets traps on the MacDonalds' land

**John MacDonald** Ben's sixteen-year-old brother, who finds Ben on the prairie

**William MacDonald** Ben's father, who thinks Ben is developing abnormally in the beginning of the story, but learns to communicate with Ben by the end

### Vocabulary

**burrow** a hole dug in the ground by an animal

**pelt** the skin of an animal with the fur or hair attached; used to make clothing, rugs and other items

**prairie** flat or rolling land covered with grasses with few or no trees

### Synopsis

*Incident at Hawk's Hill* is a slightly fictionalized story about a boy who survives on the prairie by living with a badger. The story is set in 1870 on the MacDonald family's land, near the Red River in Canada.

Ben MacDonald is a six-year-old boy who spends most of his time observing animals and learning to mimic their calls and actions. Animals often let Ben get close to them, and they seem to know he is not a threat. Two incidents demonstrate Ben's ability with animals. When George Burton visits the farm to ask permission to trap on the MacDonalds' land, Ben approaches his mean dog Lobo without being attacked. Then, while examining a nest of baby mice, Ben is approached by a growling badger. Ben calms, feeds and touches the badger. Although he is comfortable around animals, Ben rarely speaks to anyone and fears most people, including his father.

One day, Ben becomes lost on the prairie while observing animals. To escape a thunderstorm, he crawls into the den of the badger he had fed. The badger had lost its litter of pups to starvation while its foot was caught in a trap. She adopts Ben as her own, feeds him and teaches him to hunt. Ben helps heal her wounded paw and together they kill Lobo when he attacks her. As time goes by, the bond between Ben and the badger grows. Ben becomes more badgerlike, while also growing weak and sick.

After eight weeks of searching, John MacDonald finds Ben. At first, Ben snarls and bares his teeth at his family. Then, he embraces them and tells them about his adventures. The badger follows Ben home. Though she will let only Ben touch her, she learns to trust the rest of the family. When Burton arrives at the farm, he shoots the badger. Mr. MacDonald is furious because he knows it will hurt Ben, and a fight erupts. Mr. MacDonald chases Burton off of his property. He then doctors the badly injured badger. Although it is not likely the badger will survive, it is obvious Mr. MacDonald and Ben have formed a bond.

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### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

The author said Mr. MacDonald found "exactly the right words" when he said, "Of course, Ben. If she doesn't make it and if you think it's the right thing to do, we'll take her together out to the place where you lived with her and we'll put her there in her den where she belongs for the last time." Why were these words "exactly right"?

*These words showed Mr. MacDonald understood Ben. Earlier he had offered Ben a knife to dig a grave. Now, though Ben did not say where he planned to bury the badger, he realized Ben would want to bury her in the den. When he said "if you think it is the right thing to do," he was talking "with" Ben. In the past he had talked "to" Ben.*

#### Literary Analysis

Describe a typical badger's den using a brief paragraph or a diagram with the parts listed.

*The entry hole was oval-shaped, ten to eleven inches high and nearly eighteen inches wide. The first part of the tunnel angled down for five feet, then leveled off and continued another ten feet before reaching the chamber. The chamber was a domed, circular room about four feet in diameter and three feet high. An escape shaft angled down for five feet, then leveled off and continued another thirty-five feet until it reached the chamber.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Would Ben have "opened-up" if he had not had the experience with the badger? Support your answer.

*Ben's experience with the badger caused a quick change in his behavior because he felt important knowing things no one else knew. Without this experience, Ben probably would have become less shy, though not as quickly. When Mr. MacDonald first makes an effort to give Ben more attention, he begins to respond to his father.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Choose a specific event from the story that would be hard to believe if it were not based on a true story. Explain why it is hard to believe. Explain the conditions the author described to help the reader understand how it could have happened. What did the author include to help you understand how it could have happened?

*An answer might look like the following: It is hard to believe the badger would not attack Ben when she found him in her den. Badgers are fierce animals that are well equipped to fight. She may not have attacked because Ben fed her, her paw was wounded and she wanted to nurture Ben as she had nurtured her pups.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** This story is set on the prairie north of Winnipeg, Canada. The author provides a brief description of the area in the mid-1800s and its history in the preface of the book. Ask students to draw a time line listing major events of Canadian and American history. Include the events mentioned in the preface of the book as well as other significant historical events of that time. Discuss the importance of fur trading to the early settlements.

**Recognizing Details** Through patient observation, Ben learned more about animals than most people learn in a class. Help students sharpen their observational skills with the following activity. Place a common object, such

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as a cut apple, in front of the class. Ask students to examine the item carefully and to list or briefly describe what they see. For example, a student might describe the varying shades of red on the skin, or the pattern of the seeds. Encourage students to write descriptively using many adjectives. Compare the lists. Discuss what was noticed about the item that is often overlooked. Ask students to repeat this activity with a more complex item of their choice, such as an animal's appearance or behavior, or a busy lunchroom.

**Understanding Dialogue** Discuss how the use of dialect can bring life to a character in the book. Ask students to rewrite a paragraph of Burton's dialogue, changing his dialect so he speaks like the other characters. Or, choose dialogue between Burton and Mr. MacDonald. Rewrite the paragraph so Mr. MacDonald speaks with Burton's dialect and Burton talks as Mr. MacDonald does. Discuss the impact of these changes on the text.

**Responding to Literature** In this story, Ben is adopted by a badger, an animal known for being a fierce fighter. Understanding the nature of the badger will help students appreciate how incredible this true story is. Research the badger. Focus on its habits, the physical attributes that make it dangerous and its reaction to threatening intruders. Compare the findings to the descriptions of the badger in the book. Discuss how the author's knowledge of badgers contributed to the story.