

Name _____ Date _____

The March of the Lemmings

Every three or four years, herds of lemmings do a strange thing. Thousands of these animals leave their homes. They begin a long march that ends in death for most of them. Lemmings are small animals that look like fat rats. They have thick brownish fur, short limbs and stubby tails. They live in the cold northern parts of the world. Great numbers of them are found in Norway and Sweden. They live in the hills and mountains.

The lemmings of Norway and Sweden have many enemies. Foxes, wolves, dogs, bears and hawks eat them. This keeps the lemmings from growing in numbers. For three or four years the number of lemmings stays about the same. Then more babies are born. They eat more roots, mosses, grasses and other plants. The number of lemmings grows quickly. Now the foxes, wolves, dogs, bears and hawks keep on eating the lemmings. This no longer stops the lemmings from growing in numbers.

Soon there are too many lemmings in one place. They are too crowded. They become restless. Large herds of lemmings start to migrate, or leave their homes. Maybe they are looking for new food supplies or maybe it's just the crowding that makes them restless. The lemmings travel down from the hills and mountains. Nothing stops them. If they come to a cliff, they go over it. If they come to a stream or a lake, they jump in and swim across. They even eat through haystacks that are in their path.

The lemmings don't hurry. They keep moving steadily. They travel at night and rest and feed by day. As they move along, the herd grows. More babies are born. The animals that feed on the lemmings follow them and eat them. Many lemmings die of disease, too. Soon there are few left, but they keep moving. Lemmings that escape all other dangers come to the sea. They don't stop. They jump into the sea and start to swim. Perhaps they think they can swim across it. They have no way of knowing how wide the sea is. Soon they drown.

The march of the lemmings may take two or three months. It may take even longer. It ends when the last of the marchers enters the sea and drowns. That is not the end of all lemmings, of course. Not all of them leave their homes to make this march. A few always stay behind. They will have babies. Their babies will have babies. In a few years there will be great numbers of them. Then they, too will form herds. Most of them will begin their own march toward death. Why do they do it? Scientists don't have all the answers yet, but they keep studying lemmings. They keep hoping to find out.