

Deadly Gas In The Mines

2. Little Birds and Mice in the Mines

The most dangerous gasses in the mine, which could poison the miners or cause an explosion, could not be seen and had no smell. Little animals are more sensitive to such gasses than people are. So the miners used to take small pets down into the mine. The ones that were kept most were either pet mice in cages, or pet birds. Birds were largely preferred because they would be noticed if they were put to sleep by the gasses more easily than mice. Birds would first stop singing then fall off their perches. Mice often just went to sleep anyway just because they were tired or bored.

The type of bird that the miners mostly used was the canary. This is a little bird, about the size of a sparrow, with a nice song. Many people kept them as pets in their homes and miners chose canaries to take down into the mines with them to warn them of gasses. Also, being bright yellow, they were easy to see in the dim light in the mines.

Only occasionally did a canary die as a result of the poisonous gasses. Mostly they just fell asleep and woke up again when given fresh air, but in falling asleep they saved the lives of a great many people who lived in the mines. The last canary in a British mine left its home underground in 1987.

These bright yellow little birds are canaries. Where do you think canaries come from?



There is a sad story about mice that lived in the mines. Lots of mice lived in the mines. Some were the caged pets that warned the miners that there was poisonous gas but most just made the mines their home. These wild mice lived on scraps from the miners' dinners. In 1984 the miners went on strike to try to stop the government closing the mines. While they were away there was nothing for the mice to eat. When the miners returned to work they found that all the mice had died of starvation.