

Unit 2. Reading comprehension: short-answer questions



**Example-
answering
short-answer
comprehension
questions**

Read the passage, ‘The Lost Lagoon’, which is an account of a visit to the Esteros del Ibera in the north- east of Argentina, and then answer the questions below using your own words wherever possible. Read through the commentary that follows and which contains guidance as to what your answers should be.

The lost lagoon

Philip Smith

Yellow and black, it was hiding among the sun-bleached branches at the water's edge. Our boat nudged closer to the island. I lifted my camera and pulled the creature's beady eyes into focus. Then, in a quarter of a second, measured by the camera's rapid frame-burst, the anaconda snapped open its jaws, sprang forward, and hissed in my face. In the Esteros del Iberá, I learned, it's hard to avoid getting up close and personal with nature.

Our guide, Maximo, was smiling. There was no danger, he told me. Anacondas aren't poisonous – they squeeze their victims to death. I can't have looked convinced because he quickly edged the boat away from the bank, and soon we were threading our way through the streams and inlets that weave an unknowable pattern through the embalsados – hundreds of floating



islands which bump and skitter across the surface of this vast lagoon system, in a kind of slow-motion game of dodgems.

The Esteros del Iberá is the least known of Argentina's natural wonders. Its 63 lagoons are spread across an area the size of Wales and mark the former course of the Paraná River. In these vast wetlands an improbably rich ecosystem thrives, but until recently it received only a passing mention in many guidebooks. Only now, with a flurry of low-rise, eco-friendly development, is the Esteros finally opening up to tourism.

To reach the Esteros from Buenos Aires we took an overnight coach to the dusty town of Mercedes. After a further hour's journey in a 4x4 truck down the dirt track otherwise known as 'provincial route 40' and as a red sun crawled over the horizon, we approached the makeshift bridge which serves as a gateway to the Laguna Iberá. Iberá means 'bright water' in Guaraní, and as we rattled over the bridge, the surroundings fell away as if we were driving across a gleaming ocean.

The sweeping lawns of the Posada de la Laguna were dotted with a selection of multicoloured birds. One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been dunked headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint. The birds barely noticed us; it was hard not to trip over them as we rolled our luggage through the freshly cut grass. Later, at breakfast, I turned to see a pair of hummingbirds on the veranda. They would return every morning.

We were staying in the small town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, an ideal base for exploring the Esteros. The posada was built in 1997, and in recent years a number of other lodges that share its emphasis on conservation and tradition have opened nearby. But none has such a privileged position, right on the water.

Walking to the small jetty, it was difficult to see where the posada's four acres of gardens ended and the water began, so dense was the covering of aguape and irupé: water hyacinths and lilies. As Maximo readied the boat, he told us that these plants spread so quickly he has to clear a new path through the water each morning.

We pushed away from the jetty, thrilled by a glimpse of a basking yacaré. Soon, sightings of this South American alligator would prompt little more than a nod of recognition. It seemed that every few metres you could spot a leathery snout and pair of prehistoric yellow eyes poking through the water.



Due to their relatively small size, the yacaré are generally not considered to be fatally dangerous to humans.

The yacaré feast on the local fish. Fat and happy, they pose little threat to humans. And some say it's OK to swim, as long as you don't mind the odd nibble from the palometas, a type of piranha found in these parts. I decided that any swimming would be confined strictly to the hotel pool.

When the Esteros became a natural reserve in 1983, hunting was banned and indigenous Guaranis like Maximo retrained as guides. Each day we explored a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys. We would hear rumours of a beautiful rare deer that constantly seemed to elude us. And then there were the birds. Almost 400 species call these marshes home. Some are difficult to miss, such as the chaja, that resembles an ugly turkey and emits a gurgling scream. Others take a little searching out: kingfishers, heron, ibis and eagles.

The lagoon system is so vast we rarely saw another boat. The wildlife here works in shifts, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces. Back among the water lilies where we had spent our first afternoon, we continued our search for the elusive marsh deer. Here the islands had rearranged themselves so extravagantly that, for the first time, even Maximo looked a little confused. As dusk turned to night and the darkness became inky black, he flicked on a powerful torch.

There was a movement in the reeds. We edged closer. The torch picked out a pair of eyes. And then, finally, there it was. A marsh deer standing glorious in the landscape, the furry tufts of its ears lit up by the tungsten glow of the torch. It turned its gaze towards us for a moment and then, with a twitch of the nose, disappeared into the darkness. It had been worth the wait.

Adapted from the *Guardian*, 29 November 2008

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- 1 From paragraphs 1 and 2, give two facts that the writer gives about the anaconda. (2 marks)

This is a question requiring straightforward interpretation and you are told exactly where to find the answer so you won't need to include information from anywhere else. A correct answer would be something similar to: 'Anacondas have "beady eyes"; they are not poisonous; they squeeze their victims to death.' Note: saying that anacondas are snakes would not be correct as this fact is not mentioned in the first two paragraphs. As is often the case in a structured question paper, this first question is a 'settling in' question.

- 2 What made the lodge in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, in which the writer stayed, different from other lodges in the region? (1 mark)

Again, this is a straightforward question; the answer is that the lodge is the only one in the region that is on the water's edge.

3 By referring closely to paragraph 9, explain, using your own words, what the writer says about swimming in the Esteros.

(2 marks)

This question requires simple interpretation, although you need to reword the original statement to demonstrate your understanding. A good answer would contain the following details:

- the writer is not fully convinced that the creatures living in the water would not do him any harm
- he would much prefer to swim in the safety of the lodge's swimming pool.

4 Using your own words, explain what you learn about the life of Maximo from paragraph 10.

(2 marks)

Notice that this question is clearly focused on the *life* of Maximo and is, therefore, testing specifically your understanding of not just what he does, but also what the word 'indigenous' tells you about him. A good answer would contain the following points:

- he is a native/original inhabitant of the area
- after the Esteros became a natural reserve in the 1980s, he was trained as a guide for visitors.

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5 Which word in paragraph 11 tells you that the marsh deer was difficult to find?

(1 mark)

This is a straightforward question requiring you to identify the single word 'elusive'. It is important that you quote only the actual word and not the whole sentence which contains it (unless you make it clear by underlining which word you have chosen).

6 By referring to paragraphs 3 and 11 explain, using your own words:

a) what the Esteros del Iberá is and how it was formed

(2 marks)

b) what feature of the Esteros caused Maximo to look confused while searching for the marsh deer.

(1 mark)

Again, this is a straightforward question requiring you to explain some details from the passage in your own words. Remember, as there are 2 marks available for the first of the sub-questions, you should attempt to identify two distinct details about the Esteros and how it was formed. A good answer to both parts of the question would contain the following details:

- The Esteros consists of 63 lagoons./It covers a very large area of land.
- It was originally part of the Paraná River which has now changed its course but has left the lagoons behind.
- The islands in the Esteros are floating vegetation and are in continual movement which makes navigation difficult.

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- 7 a) Explain, using your own words, what the writer means by the words in *italics* in three of the following phrases:
- i) 'hundreds of floating islands which bump and *skitter* across the surface'
 - ii) 'One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been *dunked* headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint.'
 - iii) 'a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, *bizarre* spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys'
 - iv) 'The wildlife here *works in shifts*, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces.'
- (1 mark each)
- b) Explain how the words and language used by the writer in each of the phrases you have chosen help to suggest the particular fascination of the Esteros region and the creatures that live there.
- (2 marks each)

This question requires some response to the language the writer uses. It is worth 9 marks in total; 1 mark would normally be awarded for an explanation of the meaning of each of the three words/phrases selected, and a further 2 marks for an explanation of how the writer's choice of words/imagery helps to convey the fascination of the region and the creatures that inhabit it. With questions of this type, it is important in your answers to distinguish between the first part which requires a straightforward *explanation* of the meaning of a word, and the second part which requires a comment on how the words used by the writer help to create a particular response in the mind of the reader. For example:

- ai) The word *skitter* means to skim or glide across a surface (in this case, water).
- bi) The choice of the verbs *bump* and *skitter*, with their associations with fairground rides, suggests the unpredictability and frequency with which the islands are changing shape and position.
- aii) The word *dunked* means to dip something into a liquid (such as a biscuit into a cup of tea).
- bii) The choice of the word *dunked* suggests something done without a great deal of care and effectively conveys the almost haphazard arrangement of the brightly coloured feathers in the bird's crest. The reference to *Day-Glo paint* also suggests a cartoon-like quality of the brightly coloured bird.
- aiii) The word *bizarre* means unusual, freakish and incongruous.
- biii) The choice of the words *uncanny* and *bizarre* suggests that the creatures living in the region are unlike anything found anywhere else on earth, and that they are highly unusual and unexpected. Also, these creatures are found in a *secluded* area which their appearance contrasts with and so emphasises their unusual appearance. The use of the word *array* suggests that they are deliberately putting themselves on show for the visitors.
- aiv) The phrase *works in shifts* means that each member of the wildlife in the region has its own scheduled period when it performs in front of the visitors.
- biv) The comparison of the wildlife to the workforce in a factory gives the creatures human characteristics. It suggests that their lives are organised into a carefully planned pattern of appearances so that the most persistent of visitors are rewarded with an entertaining variety show.

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