

Catch Word #186 – I'm from the sticks

Episode description

If you like the countryside, this episode is for you! In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Morag discuss two terms that you can use to refer to rural areas: the sticks and the boonies.

Fun fact

In Canada, an area is considered rural if it is inhabited by fewer than 1,000 people. In the United States, an area is only considered rural if it is inhabited by fewer than 500 people per square mile.

Expressions included in the study guide

- The sticks
- The boonies
- The middle of nowhere
- A badge of honour
- En route



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Andrew: Hey everybody. My name is Andrew.

Morag: And my name is Morag.

Andrew: And we're back with another Culips episode.

Morag, hey! How are you?

Morag: I'm really well and also really tired at the same time.

Andrew: Why are you tired?

Morag: Well, I just started a new office job where I'm doing writing. And it's awesome, but I have to wake up and be there for 9:00 in the morning. And I am not used to waking up that early.

Andrew: Wow. It's funny to me because I think 9:00 in the morning is kinda late, but if you're not used to it ... I know that before you worked at night, right?

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: So this is a big adjustment.

Morag: Yeah. Although it was really crazy, I kind of feel like a superhero sometimes because getting the same amount of sleep every night at the same time means that when I am awake, I have boundless energy. But then all of a sudden, at 11:00 p.m., I fall asleep. It's so strange.

Andrew: Oh, that's very interesting.

Morag: Yeah.

Andrew: Congratulations on the new job. I hope that it works out really well for you.

Morag: Thanks, Andrew.

Andrew: OK, let's get to our main topic for today. And actually, we're doing a Catch Word episode. And in Catch Word episodes, we describe and explain and give you usage examples of some interesting and useful slang expressions or idiomatic expressions. And today, our two expressions are used to describe rural places, so places that are far away from cities or towns.

Without waiting any longer, let's introduce the listeners to these two expressions. The first one is **the sticks**, OK? **The sticks**. Morag, how can we spell this expression? Maybe you could spell it out for everyone.

Morag: Yeah, no problem. S-T-I-C-K-S—**sticks**.

Andrew: Yeah. **The sticks** is just a nickname for a rural area or the countryside, a place in **the middle of nowhere**, far away from civilization.

Morag: Yeah, it's somewhere where there is probably more trees and, well, sticks than there are buildings and people.

Andrew: Yeah. This is actually really funny because I did a Google search. I was like, "Why do we call the countryside **the sticks**?" I just didn't understand why we called it that. And the answer that I found was that we call it **the sticks** because there are more sticks in the country because there are more trees. And of course, a stick is like a twig or a branch from a tree, right? Once it comes off the tree, we call it a stick. So there's lots of sticks in the countryside. Hence, **the sticks**.

Now, one more thing that we should mention about this expression is that we always use the plural form, right?

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: We always say **the sticks**, with an S on the end. We can't say the stick.

Morag: No.

Andrew: That doesn't work. It's always **the sticks**, right?

Morag: "I'm going to go to the stick" sounds very strange, and I would be very confused if someone said it.

Andrew: I don't want to know what the stick is.

Morag: It kinda sounds like a ... I don't know, bad bar or something.

Andrew: Yeah, let's stay away from that one.

Morag: Yeah. No ...

Andrew: But anyways.

Morag: **The sticks** can be nice, yeah.

Andrew: Yeah, **the sticks** can be nice.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: Yeah. So one more time, **the sticks** is just the country. OK, let's listen to a few examples using this expression, **the sticks**.

Friend 1: Hey, would you wanna catch a movie next week?

Friend 2: I'd love to, but I'm going to be out of town for work.

Friend 1: Oh yeah? Where are you going?

Friend 2: Believe it or not, I'll be going to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.

Friend 1: Whoa! Way out in **the sticks**.

Friend 2: Yeah, you can say that again.

Andrew: In this example, two friends discuss going to see a movie, but they have to delay their plans because one of the friends is going to be going on a work-related trip to **the sticks**. So the friend will be going way out to **the sticks** for a business trip and won't be able to go to the movie. Now, we know that **the sticks** means the countryside. So the friend will be going to the country for a work trip.

OK, let's listen to the next example.

Friend 1: How long have you lived in Montreal? Were you born here?

Friend 2: Nah, I was born in **the sticks**, in a real small town. I moved to Montreal just a couple of years ago.

Morag: In this example, we hear a guy tell his friend that he was born in **the sticks**. So in other words, he was born in a rural area far away from a city because **the sticks** means a small place in the countryside.

Andrew: Morag, it's really interesting, this expression, **the sticks**. Because depending on the context it's used in, it can have a positive meaning or a negative meaning.

Morag: Yeah, I mostly associate it with having a negative meaning or a neutral meaning. But that might just be my personal context.

Andrew: Well, let's think about these two examples that we just heard.

Morag: Mmhmm.

- Andrew: Because in the first one, when the friend was saying, “Oh, I’ll be going to Moose Jaw,” and the reaction was, “Uh oh, way out in **the sticks**,” it’s kind of negative, right? It’s like, “Oh, the country. Oh, it’s small and gross.”
- Morag: “All the way out there? Why would you go there?” That kind of thing, right?
- Andrew: Exactly. It’s got a negative attachment to it.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: But in the second example, the guy said, “No, I was born in **the sticks** in a real small town,” and he’s kind of proud of it.
- Morag: Hmm!
- Andrew: It’s like, “Oh, I came from the country.” He sort of wears it as a **badge of honour**, I think. It’s one of those words that if the person using it owns it, it can be positive, have a positive sense to it.
- Morag: Fair enough, yeah.
- Andrew: But I think most of the time, we could say this word is a pejorative. It’s used negatively to look down on somebody else.
- Morag: I would agree, yeah.
- Andrew: Well, that is a nice transition into our next expression, which is **the boonies**. And the reason why this is a nice segue is that **the boonies** is also used as a pejorative. It’s also used to look down on people, and we’ll get to that in a second.
- But first, yeah, let’s take a look at this word, **the boonies, the boonies**. How do we spell that, Morag?
- Morag: This is a funny word. It’s **the boonies**, spelled B-O-O-N-I-E-S, **the boonies**.
- Andrew: **The boonies**, yeah.
- Morag: Mmhmm!
- Andrew: Even saying this word, I kinda laugh.
- Morag: Yeah, me too.
- Andrew: And **the boonies** is a shortened version of a longer expression, which is the boondocks.
- Morag: I don’t know what boondocks are.

- Andrew: Just a rural place.
- Morag: Really?
- Andrew: It's a place off the beaten track, usually used to refer to a rural place in the mountains, OK? But we can use it to describe any place in the countryside too. So yeah, **the boonies** or the boondocks is a place outside of a city in a very small village or small town where not many people live.
- Morag: And this one, **the boonies**, is definitely mostly used as a pejorative, in a negative way, to say that places aren't as modern or have as many amenities, right?
- Andrew: Yeah, and maybe the people are a little less sophisticated or less educated than city people. So yeah, when you say, "Oh, that guy's from **the boonies**," there's a judgement there, a negative judgement.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: But I still like using this expression. Not so much to describe people that come from the countryside, but just to talk about a place that has a very different feeling than a city, has that small-town vibe.
- Morag: I think it's cute, the word, so I'm more likely to use this one in a positive sense. It's like, "Let's go to **the boonies**!" You know?
- Andrew: Exactly, exactly.
- Morag: Yeah.
- Andrew: OK. So let's listen to a couple of examples with this expression, **the boonies**.

- Friend 1: You know, sometimes I wish I lived out in **the boonies**.
- Friend 2: Really? Why's that?
- Friend 1: Well, the city's really busy and dirty and loud. Some peace and quiet would be nice once in a while.

Andrew: In this example, a woman says that she sometimes wishes that she lived in **the boonies**. Let's listen to that part of the example a couple more times.

Friend 1: I wish I lived out in **the boonies**. I wish I lived out in **the boonies**.

Andrew: Of course, **the boonies** is another word for the countryside. So this woman, in our example, wishes that she lived out in the countryside, in a place where she could escape the stress of city life, where the birds are singing and everything is happy.

Morag: Mmhmm, I wish this sometimes, very occasionally.

Andrew: Hmm, me too. OK, let's listen to our final example with **the boonies**.

Friend 1: I can't wait for our big road trip this summer.

Friend 2: I know, right?!

Friend 1: Sea to sea—San Fran to NYC. Oh, it's gonna be great.

Friend 2: Yeah, so good.

Friend 1: And I'm super excited to stop at all the little places in **the boonies** along the way. We're gonna soak up some real Americana.

Morag: Talking about an upcoming road trip, one of the friends says that he is really looking forward to stopping at all of the little places in **the boonies** while **en route** to New York City. So what does he mean by this? Well, he is excited to stop at all of the little villages and towns outside of the big cities. Well, not all of them, but some, a representative sample.

Andrew: This is one of my favourite things about taking a road trip—is stopping in **the boonies** and meeting some of the people that live there, and checking out the cool little stores and roadside attractions.

Morag: Driving across Canada was really fun for that. You get to see how the rural areas changed.

Andrew: Mmhmm.

Morag: I remember when I got into Ontario. All of a sudden, it felt like we were in the United States because it was all guns and hunting and stuff, and I was like, "Whoa," you know?

Andrew: It's true. The cities and the countryside—I'm not sure if this is true for every country, but I think it might be—they really have a different feeling.

- Morag: Mmhmm. Oh no, I think that's been true throughout history. They're always talking about that.
- Andrew: Hey Morag, we're going to have to do a show in the future about Canadian roadside attractions because there are some good ones.
- Morag: Like the ... I'm sure one we've both seen, the World's Largest Hockey Stick?
- Andrew: Oh yeah.
- Morag: Yeah.
- Andrew: The big hockey stick. There's a big pierogi. There's a big goose. There's a big lawn chair.
- Morag: Oh, don't give it all away!
- Andrew: Yeah, well, there's more. There's more.
- Morag: Yeah.
- Andrew: That wraps it up for us today. And I want to thank everyone for listening. As always, we really, really do appreciate your support. And if you have any comments or questions or suggestions for future episodes, please drop us a line. Actually, if you visit our website, Culips.com, you'll see that we have a new comment feature. We revamped our Comments section, and now it's better than ever. So we would love it if you could leave us a comment on Culips.com.
- But if that's not your style, you can send us a message via our Facebook page, which is Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast, or you can email me directly. My address is andrew@culips.com.
- Morag: And you can always find more episodes of the show at Culips.com, or wherever you like to get your podcasts.
- Andrew: We'll be back soon with another episode, so stay tuned guys.
- Morag: Talk to you all soon. Goodbye.
- Andrew: Goodbye.
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Detailed Explanations

The sticks

The first key term in this episode is **the sticks**. **The sticks** means the countryside. It is used to refer to an area in the country that is far away from the city. So if you live in a rural area, and this area is far away from more populated places, you can say that you live in **the sticks**.

As Andrew mentions in this episode, the important thing to remember about this term is that it must be plural. Saying that you live in “the stick” won’t make sense to an English speaker.

Here’s one more example with **the sticks**:

Robert:	Gerald was asking if we wanted to go visit his cottage this weekend. Are you interested?
Sasha:	Spending a weekend at a cottage sounds lovely! How far out of town is his place?
Robert:	That’s the only issue. It’s way out in the sticks .
Sasha:	How far exactly?
Robert:	It’s a 3-hour drive from here, and 40 minutes from the nearest town.
Sasha:	Wow, talk about rural!

The boonies

The second key term in this episode is **the boonies**, which is short for the boondocks. **The boonies** means the same thing as **the sticks**: a rural area that is far away from the city.

Here’s one more example with **the boonies**:

Paul:	Bye Norah! I hope you have a safe trip. Please drive carefully.
Norah:	Thanks, I will! I’m really not looking forward to the long drive out to the boonies to see my aunt.
Paul:	At least you have a chance to get out of the city, and go for a hike or something! It will be fun.

The middle of nowhere

The middle of nowhere is another expression that you can use to describe a rural place. **The middle of nowhere** means a place that is far away from cities and buildings, and sometimes other people. It is mostly used to refer to rural areas.

For example, you might hear someone say that they got lost and ended up **in the middle of nowhere**. In other words, they got lost and ended up in an area that seemed to be a long way away from any landmarks or people.

It's also common for people to use **the middle of nowhere** to refer to places that aren't rural, but simply seem like they're distant from other places. For example, someone in the city might call the suburbs **the middle of nowhere**. Even though the suburbs are much closer to the city than a rural area, the suburbs can seem far away from the city.

So if you're somewhere that's far away from a populated place, or you're somewhere that simply feels far away, you can say, "I'm in the **in the middle of nowhere**."

Here are a couple more examples with **the middle of nowhere**:

Josie:	Hey Sam, I'm having a movie night tomorrow at my house. Do you want to come?
Sam:	Don't you live in Laval?
Josie:	I do.
Sam:	Count me out. Laval is the middle of nowhere !
Josie:	It's only a 30-minute drive from the city!
Sam:	Anything less than a 15-minute drive is too far away for me.

Sue:	You're late!
Kyle:	I accidentally fell asleep on the train and ended up in the middle of nowhere .
Sue:	Where were you?
Kyle:	A small rural town outside of the city. I don't even think it had a name!
Sue:	Wow, sounds like you ended up in the sticks !

A badge of honour

The expression **a badge of honour** can mean an award or token, like a medal, of distinction. **Badges of honour** are often given for exceptional valour, loyalty, or bravery to honour a person. Many countries give **badges of honour** to soldiers. In Canada, the Victoria Cross is the highest award a member of the Canadian Forces can receive for extraordinary valour and devotion.

A badge of honour can also mean a mark or expression of pride. In other words, if someone is proud of something, they can say it is **their badge of honour**. For example, if a firefighter is injured while saving someone from a burning building, they might refer to their injury as a badge of honour.

When you wear something as **a badge of honour**, you display that something, whether a quality, characteristic, injury, heritage, or story, proudly to others. So **a badge of honour** is a mark of distinction that you are proud.

Here are a couple more examples with **a badge of honour**:

Jake:	Did you hear that Kyle got arrested last weekend?
Megan:	Oh no! What happened?
Jake:	It's really stupid. He got in an argument with a police officer about a speeding ticket.
Megan:	That's nuts. Is he OK?
Jake:	Yeah, he's fine. He's wearing the whole thing like a badge of honour . He thinks it's a good story.
Megan:	He should not be proud of that story.

Douglas:	Kylie, that's a huge scar on your arm. What happened?
Kylie:	It's from a motorcycle accident.
Douglas:	I had no idea you were in an accident! Does it bother you?
Kylie:	Actually, I like the scar. It reminds me that I am strong and can get through anything. It feels like a badge of honour .

En route

If **en route** looks like a strange English term, that's because it originates from the French language! **En route** means on the way or along the way.

In one of the dialogue examples from this episode, a friend mentions that they are looking forward to stopping in small towns **en route** to New York City. In other words, they are looking forward to visiting rural places on the way to New York City.

You can use **en route** as a synonym for on the way or along the way. For instance, instead of saying, "I'm on the way to your house," you could say, "I'm **en route** to your house." So you simply substitute on the way or along the way with **en route**.

Here are a couple more examples with **en route**:

Barbara:	Do you still want to meet in the park for a picnic in half an hour?
Ben:	Absolutely! I might be a little late though. I have to stop at the grocery store en route to the park.
Barbara:	Do you need food for the picnic? I've got plenty, and I don't mind sharing.
Ben:	Thanks Barbara! I really appreciate the offer. Now that I don't have to make a stop on my way to the park, I should be there on time.

Victoria:	I'm leaving work now. Do you want a ride home?
Oliver:	I would love a ride, but don't you live in the opposite direction from me? I wouldn't want you to go out of your way.
Victoria:	I do live in the opposite direction. However, I'm going to visit a friend of mine who lives pretty close to your house. I actually have to pass your house to get to hers.
Oliver:	So my house is en route to hers?
Victoria:	Exactly!
Olivier:	In that case, I'd love a ride home.

Quiz

1. Which of the following terms can mean a rural area?

- a) the sticks
- b) the boonies
- c) the middle of nowhere
- d) all of the above

2. Which of the following terms is short for the boondocks?

- a) the sticks
- b) the boonies
- c) the suburbs
- d) the backwoods

3. Jenny is driving from Montreal to Ottawa. While _____ to Ottawa, she stops at a convenience store for a chocolate bar.

- a) on the way
- b) by the way
- c) after the way
- d) none of the above

4. True or false: The stick means the same thing as the sticks.

- a) true
- b) false

5. Which of the following is the best example of a badge of honour?

- a) a house for living
- b) a trophy for courage
- c) a test on grammar
- d) a ticket for speeding

Quiz Answers

1.d 2.b 3.a 4.b 5.b

Episode credits

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