

Talk to the animals. Wouldn't it be great if we only could?

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We know animals are smart. They have minds. They have brains, and they use them, just like we do—for experiencing the world, for thinking and feeling, and for solving the problems of life that every creature faces. Like us, they have personalities, moods, and emotions. They laugh and they play. Some show grief and empathy and are self-aware.

But we cannot really know what animals are thinking. They see the world so very differently from humans. Their senses are so different. Some can hear what we can't even imagine. Some can smell what we can't even imagine. How could we possibly begin to know what they are thinking or feeling? But we can make a guess.

I realize that I'm probably preaching to the choir here, but let me share some things I have learned about animals, in the hope that you will share it with others and maybe someday everyone will become caring of all animals and all humans and come closer to truly understanding us all.

I've read several books this year about animal emotions and thoughts, and that is what I am drawing on today. It all started because of my nephew, Brendan, who is an avid bird lover and has been since he could crawl over to the window and sit staring at the birds—all day he'd stare at the birds. We try to give Brendan books on birds every Christmas to nourish this intense interest. I like to read each of the books we give him, just to make sure they are appropriate for his age and interest. This year I read two books I want to give him—one on robins and birds in general and one on crows. The book on robins taught me that robins are really great alarm mechanisms if you want to know what's going on in your yard. Interesting, but it didn't leave me wanting to get acquainted with any robins.

The book on crows, however, made me want to meet a crow and talk to him. Oh, sure, they're noisy and they eat baby birds and have otherwise rather disgusting cleanliness issues, but they're also darned smart.

Picture it—a tall, clear vertical glass tube. Inside the tube, lying on the bottom, is a teensy little basket with a teensy little handle on it. Inside of the teensy little basket is a bit of food that a wise crow would find exciting. But there's no way the crow can reach into the tall glass tube to get the food. What to do? What any wise crow would do. First, it picks up in its beak a length of wire lying nearby and tries to spear the food. No luck.

Then she tries to edge the food up and out by pressing the wire against the walls of the tube. Still no luck.

Next she holds the wire with one foot and with her beak bends one end of the wire into a hook. With this tool, she fishes the handle of the teensy little basket and lifts the prize from the cylinder just like you'd heft a bucket full of water from the bottom of the well.

But, that crow used a tool—something we used to think distinguished humans from other animals. Actually, that crow not only used a tool, it made a tool. Crows are very smart.

We all know how intelligent pigs and dogs are. In fact, there is a retired psychologist in South Carolina who has taught his border collie 1022 words. That's phenomenal. The dog could have learned more, the psychologist says, but the human was bored.

If you have an interest in testing your own dog to see how clever and empathic he is, you can go online to dogition.com and for a few bucks, I think, you can see tests that you can give your dog at home. But, beware. You might discover that your little pooch is smarter than you think he is and that might just change everything.

It is supposed by many that cats are equally as intelligent. However, scientists are having much more difficulty coming up with tests to prove it. That is not because the cat is not intelligent;--it is because the cat is too independent to take the test. One group of scientists devised a test for cats. However, they found that one subject cat would only agree to take the test once a day, and it had to be in the morning. Their second subject cat would only take the test once a day, and it had to be in the afternoon. So, the scientists just threw up their hands and studied dogs instead.

Humans have always had a sort of mystical relationship to all kinds of animals. The American Indians, of course, with their animal totems and legends of the wily coyote. Ancient Egyptians believed the cat was sacred, in India it is the cow, in the Far East, it was the rat. The Brits, however, even today, find the raven to be a somewhat sacred animal. It's true. The British Crown ensures that there are always six ravens in residence at the Tower of London, where a Royal Keeper of the Ravens tends the six birds, plus reserves, whose tenure there in the Tower is said to prevent the fall of the empire. The birds are commissioned privates in the British Army. Clearly the Brits know that ravens are very smart birds.

Here's some scientific evidence of the brilliance of crows:

When a crow, in a scientific test, mind you, was faced with the situation of a tasty morsel of food floating in a glass of water, but the water level made it too low for the crow to reach the food. So, with no hesitation, the crow picked up pebble after pebble and dropped it into the glass and raised the water level and the floating food. Scientists set up the test, they watched crow after crow pass the test. It's not just anecdotal. It's science.

Here's another scientific test:

Researchers challenged crows in a three-stage problem—there was a box that had a bit of inaccessible food, further away was a perch that had a string dangling from it, which was attached to a short stick, and further away was a longer stick in another box.

The test required the birds to get food by first pulling up a string that held a short stick tool, untying it, then using the short tool to get a longer stick tool, and finally using the longer stick to push food out of a hole in a box. On average, each bird looked at the crazy array of sticks, strings and boxes for 30 seconds, then flew right to the perch, pulled the string to retrieve the short tool, untied it, took it to the box to get the long stick, and then used the long stick to push out the food.

What is particularly interesting about this test is that the test crows had previously learned that the short stick would not work in pushing food out of the box and had all given up using the short stick altogether in any tests. But, when faced with this situation, they immediately went to the short stick tool. Clearly, they analyzed the situation and figured out the logic problem.

Sure, they can learn to solve eating problems, but can they play and have fun?

A few years ago, scientists scoffed at the idea of animals playing. But nowadays, after years of study on animals play, they accept what we all have always known—animals love to play.

Birds love to play as well as we do. I'm sure you've all seen pelicans or vultures sailing on the heat thermals high up in the sky. We see them doing that every year over the lake in South Texas. There is a particularly windy spot in Colorado where a hefty wind near a cliff wall produces a powerful late afternoon updraft.

One day, a group of 8 ravens took their wind sailing play to a whole nother level. They all appeared surfing on the wind, with a small piece of tree bark in their claw, holding it as if it were a surfboard. Without flapping their wings, the birds used their legs to angle their bark surfboards into the wind so that they soared, then dived. They played like this for an hour—just having fun.

In the mountains of Japan, Alaska, Canada and Wales, ravens have been seen and photographed sliding like otters down icy, pitched roofs and steep snowy banks. They slide headfirst on their bellies and backs or roll sideways, like kids in a barrel. Sometimes they grab a bit of snow and carry it as they swoosh. When they reach the bottom of the slide, they fly back up to do it again. In Russia, hooded crows have been filmed using plastic lids as sleds to slide down steep roofs.

Well, I guess having fun is a sign that crows have emotions. But, how about those deeper sadder emotions that we tend to think only humans can experience. Let me tell you about that...

A man noticed one fall afternoon, more than a hundred crows perched silently in the sycamore trees fronting a local roadway. Many of the birds were circling over one particular part of the roadway, then one by one, the crows would glide down and a few were actually landing and wandering into the road itself. The object of interest was a dead crow, its rigid legs in the air, its wings spread limply at its sides. As car traffic cleared, more birds landed and approached the corpse. All the while, the birds overhead continued to pitch out from the branches to circle low over the body.

After fifteen minutes the noisy gathering of crows began to disperse, and the birds flew off in different directions.

Were these crows expressing their grief? Was this just a random gathering of crows? You decide. But, I'm betting on the idea that these crows recognized their dead

companion, were flying around trying to figure out how it could have died, and MAYBE they were grieving.

Compassion and grief we have always felt are very human emotions. But, to see all the stories showing that many animals feel these same emotions was quite powerful to me.

There are accounts of chimpanzee mothers that refuse to surrender a baby that has died, holding the body for days or weeks after it has gone cold.

There are elephants that stay by the body of a fallen herd mate long after a death—examining, touching—or stop to caress and examine elephant bones they find.

There are dogs and cats that languish and refuse food when a playmate dies, the cats expressing their grief with a terrible keening cry. Bonobos sometimes throw rocks at a dead troop mate and pound its chest in apparent frustration before pounding their own chest.

In Seattle, a woman watched as crows approached a dead bird like a phalanx of determined soldiers walking toward a fallen comrade. In turn, each crow hopped on an elevated curb to view the body and then moved on.

In Alaska, hundreds of ravens spiraled, like debris in a tornado, above a computer store where moments earlier two of their brethren had been electrocuted. The eerie scene lasted only a few minutes.

In Ohio, a woman was drawn to the window of her house by an early evening ruckus of crows. The birds cawed wildly as they took flight before settling in a large tree where they looked down upon a dead crow. After twenty minutes, the gathering quietly dispersed. And here's where it gets spooky—two weeks later, the dead crow was still there, but something had surrounded the corpse with an outline of sticks. Scientists tell us that this is not an unusual behavior in crows. They often leave sticks or bits of grass and lay them next to or even on top of a dead crow

Now, it's possible that what we're seeing here is not grief at all—although that's difficult to believe. Perhaps the crows are just sizing up their new social pecking order now that one of them has died. Maybe they are learning about survival skills in seeing how one of their own has died. But, I don't believe it. Do you?

Because animals don't sob and moan over a dead comrade, or show other human signs of grief does not mean that they do not show grief in their own fashion. We humans all too often measure the intelligence or the compassion of everything else in the universe by how closely it resembles how humans show intelligence or compassion. A big egocentric, don't you think?

There is evidence that all kinds of animals show grief. In Yellowstone National Park, on a crisp March afternoon, a group of scientists were engaged in a survey of a recent wolf kill site. The victim, two weeks dead, was an old female bison. Her bones had been scattered along the ground, picked clean by coyotes, foxes and ravens. On her final day, the bison had been pursued by a pack of wolves, and, seeking shelter, she had wedged

herself into a boulder that was split in half. The wolves attacked from front and back, killing her. As the scientists were collecting information, about 36 bison came thundering across the plains and the scientists ran for cover. They watched as each of the animals walked up to the dead bison's bones and smelled them. They sniffed the remains and the blood soaked dirt. In all, they remained at the site for nearly an hour. Then they walked through the split boulder where the killing had occurred and filed out of sight. This sounds like grieving to me.

This story is one I witnessed. I live next door to a pasture where, at one time, a donkey (Eyeore) and a bunch of sheep lived. The sheep all died and the donkey was alone and neglected. Eventually, the farmer who owned the field boarded several horses that kept the donkey company in the field. One old horse, Bumpy, became a close companion of Eyeore and protected Eyeore from the other horses. Bumpy would position himself between Eyeore and the other horses who liked to harass the donkey.

Gradually, all the other horses were taken home and it was only Eyeore and Bumpy left to live in the field. Those two circled the field as they ate every day, always no more than 3 feet from each other. Eventually, Eyeore became ill and had to be put down. The insensitive farmer shot the donkey as Bumpy stood there watching. I later watched as they brought a back hoe in to dig a hole to bury the donkey in the field. While the back hoe was digging and Eyeore was being pushed into the hole, Bumpy was standing—clearly hiding-- behind his little shed, pressed tight against the shed wall.

That evening I was walking in our woods and heard Bumpy neighing quite loudly. I had never heard Bumpy do that before, so I went to check it out. Bumpy was standing near the mound of fresh earth, all alone, with his head pointed at the sky and neighing. It makes me tear up just remembering that moment.

I have a picture that I've kept because of the strong reaction I had to it. It's a picture of an old chimpanzee being carried out, dead, on a stretcher, covered by a sheet. She was part of a study on animal intelligence, I believe, being conducted in Africa. I don't recall the details. The woman who was conducting the study was accompanying the stretcher and the body of the dead chimpanzee. She looked up and saw, lined up on the other side of the fenced in enclosure, more than a dozen chimpanzees standing silently, watching the body of their friend being carried away. The woman uncovered the chimpanzee's head and turned it towards her friends so they could see it.

Animals grieve. They feel compassion.

Back to the crows.---A retired medical doctor in Seattle watched as three crows hobbled across a lawn. The center crow's wing drooped lame, likely broken, as the other two birds pressed close, one on each side. The two outer birds appeared to be supporting the hurt bird with their wings. The three hopped past the doctor and disappeared into a nearby forest.

Another story—a group of men were golfing and, as they prepared to tee off, the men heard a loud “pop” and turned to see a crow that had been hit by another golf shot in the next green. The players thought the bird was dead. Almost immediately, another crow began calling loudly, pecking around the fallen bird, and pulling on its wings. Five other

crows were attracted to the calling, and three began pecking and pulling on the injured bird, trying to lift it up by its wings. Eventually, the wounded crow revived, fluttered briefly, and then flew off.

A story in Smithsonian Magazine tells about a Boston University biologist who witnessed a drama among Rodriguez fruit bats. A female struggled with a difficult birth, assisted for 3 hours by a female helper bat. Bats usually give birth in a head-up feet-down position, but this female was laboring to do so head down. Another female bat approached her and repeatedly assumed the correct position, imitating contractions and straining. Finally, the mother caught on, and changed position with her head up and her feet down. and soon a wing and a foot emerged in a breech birth—a successful one.

Science News tells the story of a scientific study of rats. They put one rat inside a clear cage that could be opened only from the outside. They left another rat to roam free outside the cage for an hour at a time. Initially, the free rat would circle the cage that held the trapped rat, digging and biting at the cage.

After about seven days of encountering its trapped friend, the free rat learned how to open the cage from the outside and liberate the captive. The scientists were convinced that the action was very deliberate. So, they decided to test this situation. When placed in the test situation, the rat outside walks right up to the cage and opens the door to set his friend free. And then, after it is set free, there is a frenzy of excited running by both rats.

Scientists tested this on many many rats. The rats would selectively take action –empty cages didn't inspire rats to learn how to open the door nearly as well as those who were motivated to rescue a trapped rat.

By the end of the experiment where 40 rats were placed free outside an empty cage, only 5 of those 40 learned to open the empty cage. In another experiment with 30 rats, who were running free around a cage with another rat trapped inside, 23 of the 30 learned to open a cage to free a trapped friend. Trapped stuffed animals fared no better than empty cages. The scientists believed that the rats were affected by what the other rat is experiencing and that alone is remarkable.

To push the limits of the rats' goodwill, they tried yet another experiment. The team pitted a trapped rat against a trapped chocolate, forcing a free rat to choose which to release first. These rats adore their chocolate. The rats were equally likely to free a rat in distress as they were to free the chocolate. And the most shocking thing is that they left some of the chocolate for the other rat. The hero rat left a chocolate chip or two for its newly free associate in more than half the trials. On purpose. "It's not like they missed a chocolate. They actually carried it out of the restrainer sometimes but did not eat it."

Now THAT is compassion. Would we make that choice if it involved chocolate? I think not.

When we were vacationing in Zimbabwe several years ago, we were sailing on a small catamaran on a huge lake inside an animal preserve. We were alone which meant that we could sail quietly, with no one talking or flashing cameras. We could sail very close to shore and the animals totally ignored us—except once when an elephant felt we were

getting too close and ran into the water charging our little boat. But mostly the animals didn't even seem to see our presence there on the water.

At one point we were sailing quietly and saw a line of elephants emerge out of an area of tall trees. They were in a line, going to the water to drink. But they would pause now and then to snatch some leaves from the tall trees to munch on as they walked. Near the end of the line were two adult elephants. Huge. They were walking slowly side by side. One of the elephants was reaching up into the trees to grab leaves, but the other elephant was not able to do that. It had an extremely short trunk. It didn't appear to have been an injury, but just a very very short trunk. It didn't come near to reaching the ground. And the trunk certainly wasn't long enough to reach the trees to get food. The other elephant next to her would reach up and grab leaves and feed herself, and then she would reach up and grab leaves and feed the elephant with the short trunk. It did it over and over again. We got the impression that that was a lifelong partnership of elephants, where the one would not have survived without its friend to help it eat and drink. An amazing example of animal compassion.

I hope what I have shared with you has convinced you—if you needed convincing—that animals are people, too. All creatures on this planet are important. They deserve our respect. By watching animals and listening to what those animals are doing and communicating we can be reminded how diverse and amazing our world and all its creatures really are.

I'm quoting someone, but I can't remember who. They said, "*If an alien came down any time prior to about 1.5 million years ago to communicate with the 'brainiest' animals on earth, they would have tripped over our own ancestors and headed straight for the oceans to converse with the dolphins.*"

Here's a quote by Douglas Adams—who wrote, among other great books, Life at the End of the Universe. Adams says, "*Man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much—the wheel, New York, wars, and so on—while all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man—for precisely the same reasons.*"