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Animal Wise: The Thoughts And Emotions Of Our Fellow Creatures

ANIMAL WISE
THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS
OF OUR FELLOW CREATURES
VIRGINIA MORELL
READ BY KIRSTEN POTTER
AN UNABRIDGED PRODUCTION



Synopsis

Noted science writer Virginia Morell explores the frontiers of research on animal cognition and emotion, offering a surprising and moving exploration into the hearts and minds of wild and domesticated animals. Did you know that ants teach, earthworms make decisions, rats love to be tickled, and chimps grieve? Did you know that some dogs have thousand-word vocabularies and that birds practice songs in their sleep? That crows improvise tools, blue jays plan ahead, and moths remember living as caterpillars? *Animal Wise* takes us on a dazzling odyssey into the inner world of animals, from ants to elephants to wolves, and from sharp-shooting archerfish to pods of dolphins that rumble like rival street gangs. With 30 years of experience covering the sciences, Morell uses her formidable gifts as a story-teller to transport us to field sites and laboratories around the world, introducing us to pioneering animal-cognition researchers and their surprisingly intelligent and sensitive subjects. She explores how this rapidly evolving, controversial field has only recently overturned old notions about why animals behave as they do. She probes the moral and ethical dilemmas of recognizing that even "lesser animals" have cognitive abilities such as memory, feelings, personality, and self-awareness - traits that many in the 20th century felt were unique to human beings. By standing behaviorism on its head, Morell brings the world of nature brilliantly alive in a nuanced, deeply felt appreciation of the human-animal bond, and she shares her admiration for the men and women who have simultaneously chipped away at what we think makes us distinctive while offering a glimpse of where our own abilities come from.

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Customer Reviews

The book is a well written interweaving of scientific, philosophical, and ethical reflections about animals combined with stories and interviews about events and experiments related to whether or not animals think and feel. I like the way that the author shows a kind of methodological bias that predisposes the researcher to not believing that animals can think and feel, a criterion that would make it hard to prove that we can think and feel (similar to the behaviorist arguments of B. F. Skinner proposed in BEYOND FREEDOM AND DIGNITY). The author further goes into several select experiments to do prove, to me, that animals can think and feel. There are some choice quotes seeded throughout the book and are designed to provoke some thinking of our own about the subject, like (page 50): "Intelligent circuitry can be assembled in any brain, that's my big belief," Schuster said, where he did several of his archerfish studies. (He's since moved to Bayreuth.) "It's not limited to those animals with large brains and many neurons," he said. "if evolution requires it [this kind of intelligent circuitry], it will be assembled--even with a small number of neurons." And (page 96): "People have wondered about this for centuries," Berg said. In captivity, he added, parrots do not simply react when humans speak to them (as dogs, cats, chimpanzees, and other animals do); they also articulate responses, almost as if talking back, and sometimes even use words in the correct context; as Alex did. "Those kinds of vocalizations absolutely send a shiver up the spine of cognitive scientists," Berg said, because they suggest that parrots have some innate understanding of the purpose and functions of words as sounds that convey meaning.

Do animals have minds? Are they aware of themselves as entities? Do they love? Grieve? Are lower-order animals capable of learning, or do they just operate on instinct? How much of our thinking and emotions do we share with our fellow creatures, and how much is uniquely human? Those who have loved furry companions tend to one extreme; those not fortunate enough to have had a relationship with a non-human companion tend to the other and may regard most animals as little more than a mobile bundle of instincts. In *Animal Wise*, science and nature writer Virginia Morell follows the work of dedicated scientists trying to learn the truth about the inner lives of animals from ants to dolphins and chimps. Each chapter is devoted to the work on a particular species. It begins with ants and runs through fish, parrotlets, parrots, rats (who laugh!), elephants, dolphins (both wild and captive), chimpanzees and other primates, and finally dogs and wolves. Interestingly, Morell, who lives with both cats and dogs, notes that little work has been done on cognition in cats, an omission that I would infer might derive from the innate nature of the subjects as much as a lack of interest. There are many different things to enjoy in *Animal Wise*. The animal behavior she documents is delightful and often touching, whether it be archer fish bringing down

their prey by squirting them with jets of water or dolphins helping injured members of their species. Equally fascinating are Morell's descriptions of the extremes to which the scientists must go to carry out their work. For example, she recounts the almost bizarrely painstaking process whereby Dr. Nigel Franks and his teams paint tiny dots on the bodies of ants so that they can identify individuals in the course of their study.

This review, for some reason, is very hard for me to write. The book kind of missed the mark for me, and I cannot figure out why that is; I think I must have been looking for something different than it offered. Some of the chapters were very interesting. I really enjoyed the one on the birds, and also the one on the elephants and the rats. The other chapters were just really hard for me to get through, and some were actually boring. From the writeup on this book, "ants teach, earthworms make decisions, rats love to be tickled, and chimps grieve . . . dogs have thousand word vocabularies and that birds practice songs in their sleep? That crows improvise tools, blue jays plan ahead, and moths remember living as caterpillars?" I just thought this was going to be a very exciting read. Instead we get blue jays planning ahead is them hiding nuts? And everyone knows squirrels hide away nuts; how is this something different? I was expecting I guess plans that I had never thought of animals as having, instead of something that didn't seem unusual at all. And dogs having thousand word vocabularies was apparently only specially trained dogs. I thought she meant all dogs, and was going to show things about all dogs, not specially trained ones. Now the crows improvising tools was TOTALLY cool! I had NO idea about that and it was very mind opening. I was sorry there wasn't more information on them and what else they might be capable of. As far as the rats being tickled, it was kind of strange, but was interesting and written in a more engaging way than some of the other chapters. I was rather upset though about rats having their feet shocked. What kind of effect does this have on the hearts of the poor little things? I guess the heart wasn't part of the experiments though.

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