

Animal Behavior

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The study of animal behavior is known as ethology and it encompasses everything from understanding why your dog counter surfs to the parenting behavior of African cichlids. It tries to find immediate and evolutionary reasons for behaviors in everything from unicellular organisms to domestic pets to wild animals.

There are many ways to conduct research and it is one of the few sciences where old fashioned observation of the animal in its natural habitat can still yield many unique discoveries. But animal behavior is not limited to simple observation.

Studies and experiments in laboratories and natural situations examine how animals perceive and make use of magnetic force fields, learn new things, communicate, adapt to new elements added to their habitat, etc.



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Pets

There is a branch of animal behavior that is devoted to domesticated pets ^[1] and their interactions with people and other animals.

Because dogs have evolved in close companionship with people for thousands of years, there are many behaviors that are related to human actions and they may be the species that best understands us despite the lack of genetic similarity as compared to primates.

Understanding how dogs perceive us, develop vocabulary and react to situations is a newer field that is experiencing a lot of growth at the moment.

Wild Animals

Most animal behaviorists study wild animals. They look at individual behaviors, behaviors within a population of animals of the same species, and inter-species relationships.

Natural selection plays a heavy role in the study of behavior. Behavioral adaptations that allow an animal to better cope with its environment, reduce the risk of predation, or increase sexual success will make an animal more likely to be able to pass its genes on by increasing its odds of survival and reproduction.

Because passing your genes on to future generations is the ultimate definition of evolutionary success [2], it is also how many behaviors are classified and explained.

When a new behavior is observed, the scientist seeks to understand how it contributes to future generations. They are looking for its cause, its function and how it evolved. It is studied on both the individual organism level and also at the genetic and physiological level, looking at the internal mechanisms that cause a behavior such as hormones and neural responses.

Unique Adaptations

Many animals have developed unique adaptations to improve survival and reproductive success. Different species may evolve very similar ways of handling issues within their environment.

For example, many animals from bees to birds, bats, and whales make use of magnetic fields as a way to guide themselves to their destination.

Nature is full of very unusual adaptations that have evolved over and over again in different species. Many behaviorists focus on these adaptations and how they can be applied to improving human lives.

Innate vs Learned Behaviors

Some behaviors are considered innate [3]. These are behaviors that are instinctive and performed from birth without ever learning how to do them. They can also be learned by watching other organisms, experimentation and experience.

Animal behavior is a very diverse field with something that will interest virtually anyone. Whether your main interest is at the genetic or cellular level or you hope to spend hours observing animals in their natural habitat, animal behavior has something to offer as a field of study.

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Links

[1] <http://www.usask.ca/wcvm/herdmed/applied-ethology/problems.html>

[2] <http://mcat-review.org/evolution.php>

[3] <http://users.rcn.com/jkimball.ma.ultranet/BiologyPages/I/InnateBehavior.html>