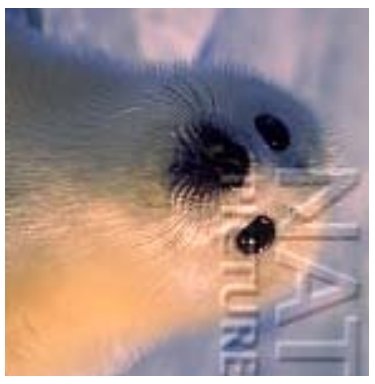


What's *your* favourite animal?



Why do we like some animals, yet find others scary or repulsive? Is there a scientific reason for our feelings or are they simply a reflection of irrational prejudice? **MARK STRATTON** asked a range of wildlife experts to throw some light on the matter.



SHE WAS LEATHERY-SKINNED, bald and left a groove the width of a country lane in the sandy beach. Nevertheless, I was smitten. There may be no accounting for taste, but my first-night shuddering leatherback turtles in Costa Rica was the start of a lasting love affair.

I've long been interested in what motivates our favouritism towards certain animals. For me, a leatherback's colossal size and sense of mystery form part of its appeal, yet these same features may well repel someone else. Such preferences often seem mystifying and quite contrary. I've never warned to dogs, for instance, despite their popularity – I find them far too demanding. And why do tigers scarcely register a blip on our Richter scale of terror, when a tiny, harmless spider is enough to induce blind panic?

Over the years, surveys of our favourite animals typically throw up the same familiar faces. Tigers topped a recent Animal Channel poll and were runners-up in *BBC Wildlife's* 2000 survey, behind dolphins and ahead of elephants and chimps. And looking back at a London Zoo poll published in 1961, chimpanzees triumphed ahead of the now-perennial favourites pandas and lions.

The key reason for these preferences, says zoologist and author Desmond Morris, is an innate bias towards animals that exhibit humanoid qualities. In other words, we prefer animals that resemble ourselves. In his book *Peoplewatching* (2002), Morris summarised the qualities we favour: "Hair rather than scales or feathers... rounded outlines, flat faces, facial expressions and a body posture... some way or other vertical." Our favouritism is also swayed by

anthropomorphism – attributing human characteristics and values to animals (with no scientific basis). Thus, wrote Morris, "The hyena has become the epitome of an ugly, scavenging coward... the eagle, in contrast, is lauded as a brave, dignified warrior, swooping down from the skies." "Cuddly" animals, he suggested, represent childlike symbols. Radio 4 presenter and *BBC Wildlife* columnist Brett Westwood adds his own criteria. "Animals have to be pleasing to

MARTIN WARREN

HEAD OF BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION
Favourite RED ADMIRALS
 "They've always amazed me – seeing them on buddleias with their black, velvety wings and red sashes, you can't make that up."

WRENFORMS
 "When was young, fiddling around in our garden, I got stung quite nastily by them."



IT'S IN THE FACE: We examine the physical characteristics that most people find attractive – and repellent.

TIME AND AGAIN studies have shown that the most popular animals – those described as the 'most beautiful' or 'cutest' – share a few basic physical qualities that humans find irresistible. Likewise, the reasons we don't like certain animals can be boiled down to a few key features that

ATTRACTIVE

FLAT FACE

In such a face, the animal's features are in a similar position to our own. This also gives potential expressions that we can identify with.



BIG EYES

Large eyes, preferably both facing forward at the same time, are an instant hit, particularly in baby animals.

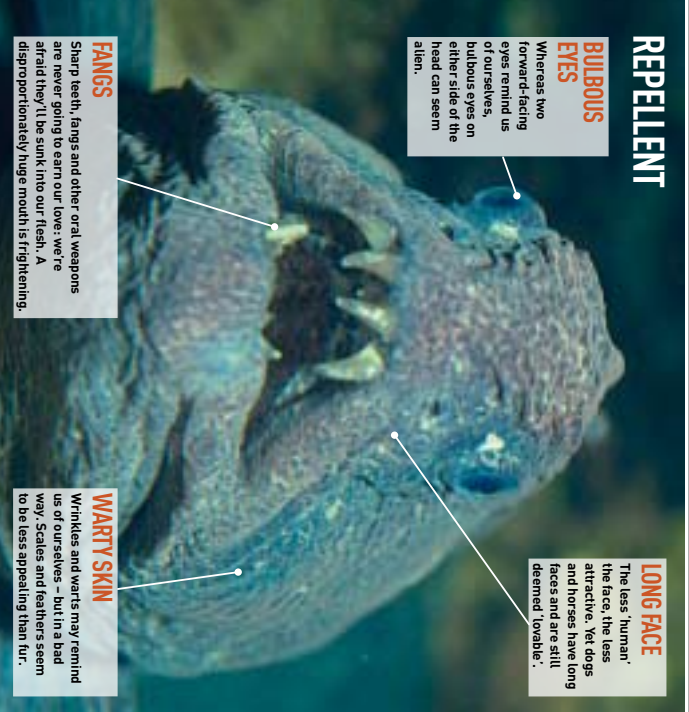
FUR

It's warm, soft, fluffy and strokeable – enough said. The down of baby birds can appeal for the same reasons.

REPELLENT

BULBOUS EYES

Whereas two forward-facing eyes remind us of ourselves, bulbous eyes on either side of the head can seem alien.



FANGS

Sharp teeth, fangs and other oral weapons are never going to earn our love: we're afraid they'll be sunk into our flesh. A disproportionately huge mouth is frightening.

LONG FACE

The less 'human' the face, the less attractive. Yet dogs and horses have long faces and are still deemed lovable.

WARTY SKIN

Winkles and warts may remind us of ourselves – but in a bad way. Scales and feathers seem to be less appealing than fur.

TALKING POINT FAVOURITE ANIMAL

ALAN TITCHMARSH PRESERVER
Favourite ROBINS

"I currently have one in my garden that comes within a foot of my wellies when I'm fiddling over the ground. It's a bold bird with a bright eye that gives me a chorus for nothing."

Least favourite COCKROACHES

"It goes back to my student days when I'd pull on the lights in the morning and see them scuttling away. I've never been able to look at them without shuddering."

BBC

Professor Graham Davey has other ideas. With only 0.1 per cent of the world's 35,000 arachnid species delivering venomous bites, he argues that spiders cannot have forced this kind of gene selection pressure. "We do not significantly fear large predatory species (such as tigers) to back this evolutionary theory," he says, and questions inherited fear in the context of our dislike of, say, harmless snails: "Were hordes of predatory snails chasing our ancestors across the savannah 20,000 years ago?"

DISGUST THEORY

Man-eating molluscs aside, Professor Davey offers disgust theory to shed light on our dislikes. Disgust, he explains, is an emotion we have evolved to avoid the transmission of illness and disease, and our dislike of seemingly harmless animals is actually disgust-triggered. "We revile cockroaches and rats because we associate them with disease," he says. "In the Middle Ages, spiders were also considered harbingers of plague." Other species, says Davey, such as slugs, resemble the "primary disgust stimulants" of disease – faeces, mucus and vomit. So what does this say about those who love these revolting creatures? Television naturalist and author Nick Baker champions all things creepy-crawly and keeps myriad snakes, spiders and bugs. "I love insects" oddness, their mystery and X-factor attraction," he enthuses. "The stuff going on under a rock in your backyard is far more accessible and exciting than anything unfolding on the screen!" But does he understand why people don't share his passion? "We don't take time to relate to such creatures," he claims. "It's easier to be disgusted by them than to get to know them." He partly blames the media for this: "We film less than 20 per cent of animals existing on this planet – the rest scarcely make an impression."

Yet television has also promoted change, believes John Sparks, former head of the BBC's Natural History Unit (NHU). "When I joined the NHU in 1965, the only good manatee: "I feel sorry for them because boats sail over them and damage them." Infringly more baffling to me, however, is why we dislike certain animals. In such cases, rationality often flies out of the window. Spiders were the children's most reviled animal group, ahead of wasps, snakes and sharks. Comments on these arachnids expressed both fear and absence of human qualities. They were "scary and evil," "eight-legged" and had "too many eyes." I also noticed signs of learned behaviour: Chelsea (ro) explained that "spiders stick their fangs into you and you can die... My mum hates them, too." Our least-favoured animals are underpinned, wrote Desmond Morris, by a perception of danger and their "lack of anthropomorphic qualities." In extremis, animal dislikes manifest as zoophobias – anything from sphenophobia (fear of wasps) to alektrophobia (fear of chickens). Most common is arachnophobia, something that reportedly affects 7.5 million Britons, and, as I soon discovered, can turn even hardened zoologists to jelly.

JOHN SPARKS
AUTUMN FORMER HEAD OF THE BBC NHU
Favourite ALBATROSSSES

"I marvel at them – miraculous movers that fly in the face of the second law of thermodynamics."

Least favourite SPIDERS

"I react very badly to them, though I do find them fascinating."



"Pictures of spiders set me off," confesses wildlife author Robert Burton. He is unable to share the same room as a spider, and feels uncomfortable each autumn when house spiders migrate into his home. "It's not a feeling of fear; as I know they won't harm me," he explains. "I feel revulsion."

Arachnophobia seems to run deeper than simple learned behaviour and has nothing to do with actual experience. Brett Westwood feels uneasy about soft-lunge spiders, despite

CHANGING ATTITUDES: How the once-hated gorilla came to be cherished.



THE GORILLA was once the epitome of the scary beast in the untamed jungle. Images such as Adrien Marie's *L'homme et la pàpe* (1870, above) and the earliest King Kong film (1933) found something chilling in the ape's humanoid qualities – superficially like us but stronger, hairier,

unknowable and dangerous. Contrast them with the famed Attenborough sequence, filmed in 1979 in Rwanda, for *Life on Earth*. Here, the gorilla's similarity to us was revealed in an attractive mix of dexterity, intelligence and playfulness. Since then, the species' popularity has soared.

PAUL APPLEBY WILDLIFE FILM-MAKER
11 Favourite RUFFED LEMURS
"They are a fascinating mix of dog and primate – engaging in a fluffy, cuddly kind of way."



whalers." Burton believes that society's more liberal outlook towards animals has also forced change. "The Royal Family used to shoot tigers, but wouldn't dream of doing so now," he says.

image has been entirely manufactured by television. "The meerkat's popularity, he feels, is down to human characteristics such as its watchful bipedal stance. Meanwhile, advances in filming technology at macro-level have allowed less telegenic creatures to be featured in a more favourable light. Westwood recalls a scene in *Life in the Undergrowth*, in which two great grey slugs were mating, suspended by a length of slime. It was filmed in slow-motion and set to classical music. "The individual components were awful – reproductive organs, slugs and slime – yet the whole thing looked beautiful," he says. Slugs may never become brand icons in

CHANGING FORTUNES

Gorillas are a fine example of such changing fortunes. I dipped into *Lost in the Jungle* (1870) by adventurer Paul Du Chailu. In the chapter *A Killer Gorilla*, his prose roars: "The huge monster, in his rage, had biten the barrel of the gun, and his powerful teeth had gone fiercely into the steel." Even in the 1960s, gorillas languished in a London Zoo

Prinologist Ian Redmond remembers growing up with accounts of gorillas ripping people apart. "When King Kong was made, you had the option of a monster," he says. Rehabilitation came with the work of primatologists such as Dian Fossey, and Redmond also cites David Attenborough's seminal television moment among Rwandan mountain gorillas for *Life on Earth*. "This was when the public noticed that though gorillas can be frightening when angry, if they're not angry, they're not frightening."

Other animals have emerged from obscurity to become national favourites. "Fifteen years ago, people had little idea what a meerkat was," says Brett Westwood. "Their

world that prey upon our predisposition for 'lovable' animals to sell products (through I'm convinced that blood-sucking leeches would make fine advertorial ambassadors for mortgage providers). Animals with 'va-va-voom' lead the way, whether they're magnificent tigers romping along beaches in the name of petroleum or cute puppies embalmied in toilet roll. *BBC Wildlife* editor Sophie Stafford concedes that using certain animals on front covers influences magazine sales. "Tigers and red foxes sell better than issues featuring, say, a beautiful poison-dart frog on a bromeliad," she says. This leaves me pondering whether conservation charities have been forced to use similar tactics, focusing on flagship species to garner support. Clearly, single-species campaigns can tug at both heartstrings and conscience. Movements such as Save the Tiger have been very effective in transforming this big cat from a feared man-eater to a conservation cause *à la mode*.

ANIMAL CELEBRITIES

John Burton worries that we may have gone too far in creating animal celebrities. Commenting on gorilla campaigning, he fears "bandwagon successes" could lead to duplication of resources and effort. "There are now more people making a living out of mountain gorilla conservation than there are mountain gorillas," he says. "Species do not live in isolation; all parts of an ecosystem need our attention."

The final word goes to naturalist Richard Mabey, who was concerned that an article about animal favourites might reinforce stereotypes. "Seemingly innocuous personal prejudices are at the root of most of our destructive behaviour towards wildlife. From the persecution of birds of prey to beliefs that saving the tiger is more important than the conservation of fungi that inconspicuously keep the world's trees alive," he says. Clearly, the influences affecting how we perceive wildlife are as diverse as the animal kingdom. Let's hope both remain so.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BRITISH MAMMAL?

Back in 2000, *BBC Wildlife* asked you to tell us your favourite animal. Eight years on, we want to see if things have changed.

In our Millennium Survey, we asked you to vote for your favourite British animal. The dolphin was the clear winner, and mammals occupied 7 of the 10 slots. Here is the full list:

1. Dolphin
2. Fox
3. Hedgehog
4. Rabbit
5. Badger
6. Barn owl
7. Red squirrel
8. Fallow deer
9. Robin
10. Golden eagle

In our 2008 Survey, we want you to vote again – this time for your favourite British mammal. You can vote by filling out the coupon below or completing the online poll at forum.bbcwildlifemagazine.com.

You can select three mammal species in order of preference. Your choices can include any of the animals pictured below, and/or any other British mammals.

Win a great book
 Everyone who votes – by post or online – will be entered into our Favourite Mammal draw. We have xx copies of xxxxxx

xxxxx to give away to the first xx entries picked out of the hat after xx June 2008. Usual rules apply.



BBC WILDLIFE ENTRY FORM: WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BRITISH MAMMAL?
 FAVOURITE BRITISH MAMMALS (IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE)

1. NAME _____ ADDRESS _____
 2. _____ POSTCODE _____
 3. _____ TELEPHONE _____
 EMAIL _____

HOW POST YOUR ENTRY TO: BBC WILDLIFE FAVOURITE MAMMAL, 14TH FLOOR, TOWER HOUSE, FARRAX STREET, BRISTOL BS1 3BN.
 BBC Wildlife will receive your entry and will send you a certificate of entry. Please tick here if you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone. Please tick here if you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone. Please tick here if you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone. Please tick here if you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone.

Clockwise from top left: John Conroy; Niall Byrne; Doug Perren; David Meyer; Igor Smolnik; Pete Carns; Andy Sands; Ingo Thiel; Paul Hobson; T. Rich; Andrew Parkinson; Duncan McEwan; H. J. Eriksen; Brian Lightfoot; Philippe Clement; Iain Stewart