

Fun & Games

I
WIN!

Games

BY ALINE ALEXANDER NEWMAN

HOW ANIMALS PLAY

When lion cubs chase, pounce, and wrestle, it's more than just having fun. Play gives cubs a chance to practice skills they'll need as adults, including hunting techniques and the ability to get along with others in their group.

Scientists have long known that many mammals and birds play. But recently they've made a surprising discovery—many other kinds of animals play as well. They found that animals with certain physical features such as legs, a tail, or a flexible mouth tend to be better equipped for play. So, for example, a snake is less likely to play than a lizard. A stimulating environment and an abundance of energy also help. Animals that have parents that take care of them seem to have more time and energy for play than animals that have to care for themselves from the start, which is why mammals and birds tend to be the most playful. Keep reading to discover more about animal games.

SHARKS ALIVE!

In order to survive, great white sharks hunt for food. Seals and sea lions are among their favorite prey, and sharks attack from below. "They can chop a seal in half," says Leonard J. V. Compagno, head of The Shark Research Centre, in Cape Town, South Africa.

To study the sharks, one of Compagno's students made a wooden seal decoy with flippers. He set it out in a channel off Dyer Island, near the South African coast. Before long, a great white spotted it. But rather than attack, the shark grabbed the decoy and shook it—like a playful pup shaking a toy. What's more, a second shark slammed into the first, stole the "toy," and began playing with it.

Playing sharks? Hard to believe. "But it's difficult to explain in any other way," says Compagno. "Some attacks on surfboards may be playful, too. Seals are on the menu. We aren't."



A decoy seal (above) makes a toy for a shark (below).



PET CATS...

play a lot like lions do. To invite another kitten to play, a cat will typically crouch, wiggle its rear, and pounce. Lion cubs do the same thing.



NOT-SO-DANGEROUS DRAGON

Kraken, a captive six-foot-long Komodo dragon, was powerful enough to take down a water buffalo. Her teeth were large and serrated. If a wild dragon were hungry, she'd eat any kind of meat—from rats to *(gulp!)* human flesh. No wonder chills shot up her keeper's spine when he spotted her sneaking up from behind at Washington, D.C.'s National Zoo. Before he could react, the dragon struck. *Snap!* Her giant jaws opened and closed—on the bright red handkerchief sticking out of his back pocket. “Her keeper grabbed the handkerchief, but Kraken wouldn't let go,” says animal researcher Gordon Burghardt. Instead, Kraken challenged her keeper to a game of tug-of-war. Not what you'd expect from this fierce predator, who hunts to survive. But in a zoo, safe and well fed, the animals have “time to kill.” And this potentially fearsome predator used her time to play.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Pigface, a Nile soft-shelled turtle, kept scratching at his neck, which then became infected. His worried keeper at the National Zoo couldn't make him stop. Then the keeper suddenly realized something: Although Pigface swam around in his water tank, he had nothing else to do. Could this turtle simply be bored?

“Nobody ever thought reptiles could get bored,” says Burghardt. But when the

turtle's keeper gave him a basketball, everything changed. The 100-pound turtle lunged at the ball with his open mouth. He pushed it with his nose. And he quit injuring himself. Pigface began spending almost a third of his time playing with rings (right) and the basketball. With all that practice, shouldn't they give him a net?

WITH MY SKILLS,
I'M HEADED FOR
AN OLYMPIC
TEAM!



PLAYTIME...

is an important part of dusky leaf monkeys' social life. Play helps individuals bond with each other, which is important because they live in groups.



HE THINKS
I DON'T KNOW
HE'S BEHIND
ME!

TAG! YOU'RE IT!

Screeching so loud they could be heard in the hall, two dusky leaf monkeys alarmed their keeper. “What are they doing?” gasped Mylisa Whipple. Mark, 2, and Charlie, 15, had seemed to get along when Missouri's Saint Louis Zoo first put them together. Now it sounded like big Charlie might be hurting little Mark.

Racing to their exhibit, Whipple discovered the screechers...*playing!* There were two tightropes strung high across their exhibit, one above the other. “Each monkey had one hand on the top rope and their feet on the bottom,” says Whipple. “They were balancing on the ropes and swatting each other.” It was all in fun: The much larger Charlie was deliberately pulling his punches so he wouldn't hurt his playmate.

Today, Mark is full grown. He could easily win any game with old Charlie, but he doesn't. Now *he's* the one who holds back, making sure the games will go on.

GIVE-AND-TAKE

Qila, a beluga whale at the Vancouver Aquarium, makes her own playthings—bubbles. And she does not need a bubble pipe or bubble solution to do it. First Qila swims to the surface and takes air into her mouth. Then she dives underwater and pushes the air out of her mouth in the shape of a doughnut. As it spirals away, the ring can grow to the size of a hula hoop. Qila swims after it, bites at it, then pops it.

“She’s obviously enjoying herself,” says trainer Marcie Tarvid.

The aquarium, located in British Columbia, in Canada, sometimes hosts sleepovers for kids. During one of them, Qila aimed a bubble ring right at a child who was looking into the tank. But when the child touched the glass, Qila suddenly changed her mind. Using her mouth like a vacuum cleaner, she sucked back the bubble!

BOTTLENOSE...

dolphins, relatives of belugas, also play with bubbles. Groups of dolphins blow bubbles, pop them with a bite, and even chase each other’s bubbles.

PLAY WITH YOUR PET!

Just as wild animals benefit from play, so do pets. Play games with your dog or cat. You’ll help keep your pet happy and healthy by exercising its body and mind. Just as important: You’ll both have fun!

TOP TOYS FOR CATS

- big paper bag or cardboard box for hide-and-seek
- plastic ball with a bell inside to chase
- flexible wand with feathers on the tip for leaping and stalking

TOP TOYS FOR DOGS

- squeaky toy to chase and make noise
- tennis ball or hard rubber ball for you to toss and your dog to fetch
- rope toy for chewing (for the dog, not you!) and gentle games of tug-of-war

