

Smart People? Smarter Animals

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First Edition

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Printed in the United States
ISBN: 978-1-63452-554-1
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for pet owners, those who work at rescue facilities or
zoos and scientists studying our four-legged friends

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Introduction

In November 2010, my book, *Save The Animals And Children*, was published. Sometime before that, a friend said I should write a children's book but I figured I couldn't. That changed in late 2010 with my really short book about creatures and the environment – especially that of where I live – written by Wendy the woodchuck. When people ask, I tell them *Save The Animals And Children* is a sophisticated children's book about really smart animals. So is this one. It's also about heroes, the environment, communication, devotion and caring.

Over the last few months I have seen programs on television and read quite a few books about smart elephants, orangutans, parrots, cats and dogs, who also display feelings and use intuition. Those five species are only the beginning of the list. Chantek the orangutan may not be able to talk like you or me, but he knows sign language. He knows it well, even creating his own symbols. He probably can curse in it. He's so smart that he uses tools, emulates Felix Unger, and can tell you where your car is parked so you can take him to the Dairy Queen. Moreover, he leaves his trailer at night – I think he has a date – and to get through the chain link fence, unravels it. Eventually he fixes it so that no one can tell that he escaped that way. Chantek is one smart great ape.

Before he died, Alex the African Grey Parrot was famous. He could talk, just listening to humans. He recognized colors and did simple math. When getting the answer wrong, he was just showing that he was bored, which Greys experience quite often. Alex really knew the right answer. Another Grey was named Charlie Parker. His owner, Deborah Smith, encountered an obnoxious insurance agent on the phone and wasn't making much progress. She was quite frustrated. Charlie heard her and sympathized with her. Sounding exactly like Deb's husband, Michael, the bird offered a few off color remarks, even though he was a Grey.

An eagle named Freedom arrived at a rehabilitation center where Jeff Guidry became his caretaker and saved his life. Months later, the eagle would return the favor. This story is as incredible as the tale of Andre, the seal pup rescued by Harry Goodridge of

Rockport, Maine. Harry took care of Andre, and the seal left the area there and headed out into the ocean. He always returned, even if it was days later. Winter was a challenge for Andre so Harry was fortunate to place the seal at the New England Aquarium for the cold months. The first trip there by car wasn't pleasant for Andre so Harry let him swim back in the spring. He managed to find his way to the Goodridge place, which he did yearly. Even when Andre was losing his vision, he still managed the journey.

You'll read about Aisha and Echo, two elephants who managed well with people as well as their families. A few dogs I talk about are Boo, Ace, Sergeant Rex, Oogy, Marley, Barney, Katie and Pransky. Some you may have heard of. Dewey and Oscar show off their skills as felines. Spirit Bear, Wesley the owl, Otter 501, Christopher Hogwood and Clyde the cassowary – not his real name – are a few others along with their keepers that I'll familiarize you with. I'll also mention some creatures that people stay away from or just don't like. In many cases, the feeling is mutual, and I don't blame the animals.

For some time I've never doubted that many creatures possessed *intelligence* despite not being able to talk – Alex and his buddies are the exception. I'm not getting into the definition of that word, but only say that over the last few months I've come to acknowledge that walruses, sharks, emus, crows and pigeons are equipped with brains and may have more smarts and feelings than many humans. Some scientists don't believe that animals have common sense, intelligence or can feel emotion. This book might convince them and doubters otherwise.

One of the words in my title needs some consideration: *smart*. Combining it with another word or two creates an oxymoron in many cases. It wasn't long ago that we were introduced to *smart bombs*. If they are so *smart*, why do we have collateral damage when they land on hospitals and schools? Wouldn't doctors, nurses, the wounded and students be still alive if these bombs were *smart*? More recently the *smart phone* appeared for sale. I doubt that this item is *smart* since the majority of the people say that the cell phone is the worst invention ever. If I can't find my phone, why doesn't it tell me where it is if it's so *smart*? Another off-the-wall use of the word is with the body part that we sit on. Perhaps that phrase should be coupled with another one that

we hear quite often, *She – or he – has a nice* ■■■, which seems reasonable because you can talk to it since it's *smart*.

Returning to my four word title, the first half might be an oxymoron in too many cases as proven by the warning given at Yellowstone National Park to not take selfies with bears. This was recently reported on *National Public Radio*. Apparently, that advice is necessary. *Smarter Animals* is fine since a comparison is involved. Additionally, owners of pets, those who work at animal rescue facilities or zoos and scientists studying four-legged, crawling, swimming and flying animals are *smart* people. It is my hope that when you finish reading my book you'll agree that my title is quite appropriate.

The photos on the book cover are from top to bottom and left to right: Alex, Barney, Freedom, Su-Lin, Christian, Dewey, Chantek, Seabiscuit with jockey Johnny *Red* Pollard, and Christopher Hogwood. In a few cases the pictures are of trained actors.

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1. Honey

At one time, I had a record album of Bobby Goldsboro's greatest hits. The LP is gone but I copied it to a cassette. Many of the songs were sad, including "Honey," which was a number one hit, selling a million copies. This chapter is about that sweet substance, starting with an animal that loves that sticky stuff.

Looking at him you'd think Stoffel would make a great pet. Then he opens his mouth. The teeth of this honey badger look vicious. Stoffel isn't really a badger, but a weasel, *Mellivora capensis*. He loves honey and belongs to the same family as badgers: *Mustelidae*. Otters, minks and wolverines are all relatives. Honey badgers can be found in India, Southwest Asia and Africa. Stoffel is fearless and such a great escape artist that he might put Dean Gunnarson to shame. Stoffel even inspired a 2011 YouTube video, *Honey Badger Don't Care*, which received more than 60 million views. He was the star of that production. There are many videos of those critters, and he probably isn't in all of them.

Stoffel's residence is in Kruger National Park in northeastern South Africa. Instead of the word, fearless, perhaps a better description of this critter is ferocious. He'll tangle with any animal in the jungle, but probably not an elephant. Stoffel isn't afraid of lions, even though the latter could easily end a honey badger's life. In the process, the king of the jungle would receive quite a beating. The lion would just back off from Stoffel, especially hearing his roar and seeing those powerful teeth. The little guy also has terrifying claws. Stoffel has another challenge from the hyena, but most will move away from this weasel and depart. Even with a few accomplices, a group of hyenas will usually retreat.

Snakes hardly bother Stoffel, even poisonous ones sinking their fangs into him. The weasel even takes the crawling critter home for dinner, but only one of the animals remains in sight after dessert. Stoffel may have to overcome the poison in his body, so he won't be roaming far and wide until he recovers, which he does. The poison he accumulates may be just the immunization he needs, without the sting of the needle. As you can see, a honey badger is carnivorous and has few predators. He's one tough dude.

Spotting a honey badger, you might think it's a very large skunk, because of the white streak on top of his back and head. While the latter is also known as a polecat, the two animals have the common practice of perfuming the area but in no way is it a pleasant experience. It probably should be regulated. Stoffel and skunks may be half cousins once or twice removed, which is what you should do if spraying begins. The polecat has a weapon that humans and pets fear because of the problems of removal of the stench, which is just as difficult as it was for Jerry Seinfeld after his car was perfumed. The good that skunks do is remove grubs and they won't bother you unless provoked, but then, you should run. Those honey badgers missing the characteristic skunk white are of the *Cottoni* subspecies.

Photographing Stoffel is a challenge since he's always on the go, probably a type A. Honey badgers and humans seem to keep their distance, the former figuring the woman with the camera has a gun hidden somewhere. At the Maholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Kruger Park, conservationist Brian Jones cares for wounded weasels and rehabilitates them. He wonders whether there is any enclosure that can fence Stoffel in. His attempt at confinement consists of cement blocks, but the trees inside it offer a way out for the captive. Stoffel bends them and crawls out on them.

Jones removes all but one of the trees, which is in the middle of the pen. Stoffel then breaks off the branches and constructs an escape ladder. There's no stopping him. He always finds a way out. Putting an electrified fence seems to be the next step, but Jones doesn't want to harm the guy, who is some smart animal. His problem solving ability is amazing. I need not remind you that those scary looking claws can dig underneath and provide an escape. Even if you built a cement block enclosure with a concrete floor and cover that Stoffel couldn't get through, he'd probably find a jackhammer and discover freedom.

At a lodge in the park, zoologist Low de Vries does a night surveillance of honey badgers and other animals scavenging for food at the dump. Grownups as well as pups, who stay with their mother for two years, are on the scene. Porcupines are also dumpster divers, but no challenge for the honey badgers. The others are discouraged when the mother badger lets loose her

perfume. Low de Vries is far removed but still affected by the stench. Even entering his car doesn't help much.

In a lodge in the park, beekeeper Guy Stubbs has the assignment of keeping honey badgers away from their love, that golden substance. He works on a few ideas and some fail, but he tries again. This time Stoffel is stifled. However, his girlfriend, Hammy, looks like she is on her way to the honey, which she soon reaches. Then Stoffel joins her. In getting to the treasure, the pair is stung repeatedly, but they'll just sleep off the hundreds of stings. There's no need for any immunization now.

It was a similar honey harvest that resulted in Stoffel having 300 stings and in need of rescue, which Brian did. The honey badger was in distress but was relieved when Jones calmed him down with Hammy. You can see more about Stoffel and his friends on the PBS *Nature* special, *Honey Badgers: Masters of Mayhem*.

If you've seen the early episodes of *Saturday Night Live*, you may be familiar with John Belushi and the wolverine. Not only was this skit on the premiere performance of the show, it was the very first one. After it ended, Chevy Chase appeared in the scene with the words, *Live from New York, it's Saturday Night*. That was on October 11, 1975, and the program was officially, *NBC's Saturday Night*, eventually becoming *Saturday Night Live*. Chase didn't fall down on that first show, which would come later. Getting back to the wolverine and John, who played an individual learning English, he repeated whatever his teacher said, portrayed by Michael O'Donoghue. This included the line: *I would like to feed your fingertips to the wolverine*. As you can guess, the bit is on the Internet. To find it, search for *Belushi and the wolverine*.

Wolverines may be more ferocious than honey badgers since they're much larger. Also known as carjarou, skunk bear and glutton, the wolverine is a distant cousin of Stoffel and Hammy, especially due to where he resides – northern Canada, Siberia, Alaska and northern Europe. A few years ago, a few were seen near Lake Tahoe and are known to be in Michigan. A solitary member of the *Mustelidae* family, wolverines like the cold, unlike the honey badger, who'd rather be in Africa, where it's warmer. I think the moniker, *glutton*, is unjustified as wolverines can't find that much food where they reside to ever have lavish banquets.

Carjarou manage the extreme cold because of their thick fur. Their legs may be short, but the paws – similar to that of honey badgers – allow them fast movement through the tundra. The quicker you move, the warmer you stay. If they were gluttons, they could never employ such quick movement. These animals aren't dumb. Approaching the size of a Belgian sheepdog, the male wolverine is almost a third larger than the female of the species and can weigh as much as 70 pounds. The only family member that's larger is the otter. Like the skunk, these creatures can liven up the air with an unbelievable stench, which they utilize for protection. They have few predators, but wolverines ignore the warning to *pick on some animal of their own size*, which doesn't worry them. They don't mind if their dinner is still in motion. Some of supper choices are elk, adult deer, porcupines, rabbits, beavers and moose. They must call in other relatives to share the moose. Carjarou probably don't care for bear meat but will stand up to bears and wolves to defend the carrion the wolverine acquired. Their diet can be dead, alive or frozen. To complete their food pyramid, these fearless animals also feast on the eggs of birds as well as on berries, the larvae of insects, seeds and roots.

Like the honey badger, wolverines move fast and avoid being seen. No terrain is an obstacle to them, even steep cliffs, and they don't need carabiners and pitons. They cover an area of about 500 square miles, sharing it with their relatives – but probably not third cousins. Because of their elusiveness, not many researchers study them. They try anyway and if they have any luck, their observations are from a distance. Doug Chadwick has been a fan of them for years, observing them in the wild. He comments: *Like most of the guys on the project, what I really want to do is just be a wolverine. I want to go where I want to go, do what I want to do, bite whom I want to bite, and climb what I want to climb.* Apparently he's not opposed to uncooked frozen food.

Filmmaker Steve Kroschel has spent a quarter of a century pursuing wolverines. Like the care and concern of Brian Jones for honey badgers, Steve works with injured as well as abandoned wolverines in Alaska. Kroschel has raised a pair of orphans since they were born and it hasn't been easy. Nonetheless, he manages because of his devotion to the two as a surrogate parent. There

aren't many people in the world who perform this generous act. There's more information at his web site, www.kroschelfilms.com. You can also watch the PBS *Nature* special, *Wolverine: Chasing the Phantom*, which aired in November 2010.

Every letter in the word, *wolves*, can be found in the word, *wolverines*, but they're not exactly related. Coywolves evolved when coyotes and wolves started dating, and it wasn't through Facebook. They can be found in eastern North America and identified as red wolves, eastern coyotes or eastern wolves. Throwing in foxes, these species are probably all distant cousins in some way. There's another animal that's a more obvious relation, but that's for later. Many of these species have gotten a bad wrap, as witnessed by the 1983 movie, *Never Cry Wolf*. There the wolves were blamed for killing off the caribou herds, when they were just going after the weakest of the herds and thinning them out. The caribou probably would have died anyway, so this action actually strengthened the herd. Wolves do the same with other animals, specifically sheep. If you haven't seen the flick, I highly recommend it. It's a humorous, environmental motion picture that's insightful and worth a few stars. Tyler, the two-legged scientist played by Charles Martin Smith, was a true hero and friend of the earth – except for his culinary meal choices. However, we can excuse him since he was running out of food. His scene underwater was scary, but his beverage choice was all right.

Many farmers and hunters think that predators are harmful to cows and sheep, but ridding a region of wolves can be more of a detriment as has been recently shown. Their absence may lead to a preponderance of some species that devour plants and shrubs that cows may feed on. The result is beef that may not be grass fed and unhealthy for human consumption. In the ecosystem, predators are needed for so many reasons – this includes the two-legged kind.

Packs of wolves once could be found from the tundra of Alaska to as far south as Mexico. By the early 1960s, habitat loss and extermination changed that in most of North America. In the early 1970s, the Rocky Mountain wolf entered the list of endangered species and Greater Yellowstone became one of three recovery areas. In the mid 1990s, over 40 wolves from Montana and Canada were introduced into the national park, which became

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