

Twelve Interesting Biological Tidbits



I have recently discovered some interesting facts related to the animal world, which I would like to share with the readers of “The Green Journal.” These interesting tidbits could be used as conversation starters at a cocktail party or when sitting next to an attractive individual in a pub.

1. Scientists at the Australian Museum in Sydney, Australia are gathering DNA from preserved specimens of the now-extinct Tasmanian tiger, a dog-like marsupial that was eradicated by Tasmanian farmers who feared the animal would destroy their livestock.¹ To make amends for this extinction, these investigators are seeking to clone and restore this creature. This attempt raises the ethical and environmental issues that have been discussed many times whenever “restoring” a lost species has been suggested, for example, mammoths.^{2,3}
2. When one strokes the belly of domesticated cats and dogs, these animals often enter a state of tranquility said to be associated with release of oxytocin from the pituitary gland.⁴ Similar responses have been seen with alligators and zebra sharks, suggesting that this phenomenon is genetically determined and has a long evolutionary history.^{5,6}
3. 99.9% of dog DNA is the same as that of a wolf.^{7,8} The small difference involves the dog’s ability to relate to humans and the ability to digest carbohydrates. These modifications are the result of biological selection during the 20,000 years of dog domestication.
4. There are approximately 7 billion rats, mostly the Norwegian Brown rat, in the world, which suggests that the rat-to-human ratio is 1:1.⁹ Many individuals fear rats because of their association with disease, for example, bubonic plague. However, others keep rats as pets and find them to be social, playful, and easy to care for.
5. The whale heart beats 2-9 per times per minute at rest and increases to 25-37 beats per minute with exertion. Whale hearts can weigh 1000 pounds or more.
6. The elephant does not use its trunk like a soda straw. It sucks water up in its trunk and then inserts the trunk into its mouth and drinks. The trunk has 100,000 muscles and tendons.¹⁰ Humans are unable to drink through their nose!
7. Fleas can jump 200 times their body length.¹¹ If humans could do that, a person could jump over the Empire State Building.
8. Bats are the only mammals that can fly.¹²
9. The koala has finger linings like a human and can leave fingerprints that can confuse the police.¹³
10. Pandas mostly eat bamboo, but occasionally they eat small animals.¹⁴
11. Sheep have rectangular eye pupils and have better peripheral vision than humans. It has been estimated that the sheep field of vision is between 270 and 320 degrees; humans average about 155 degrees.¹⁵
12. Cats make about 100 different sounds. Dogs make only about 10.¹⁶

As always, happy to hear from readers at jalpert@arizona.edu

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