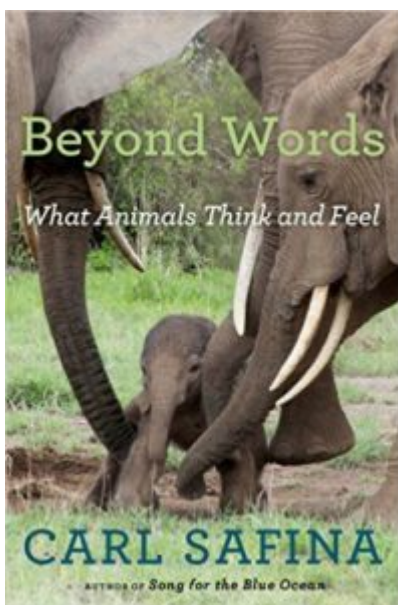


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Book of the Month – Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel – Evergreen Audubon

7-8 minutes



February 2016 Book of the Month

Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel by Carl Safina

Elephants, wolves and killer whales. What can they possibly have in common?

Ecologist Carl Safina visits Amboseli National Park in Kenya, Yellowstone National Park and the waters off the Pacific Northwest to explore the behaviors of animal families that exhibit extraordinary consciousness, self-awareness and empathy.

Safina makes a strong case for studying the inner lives of animals, something that has been frowned upon by philosophers and scientists for generations if not for millennia. He argues that humans are not the measure of all things.

Animals have lives that are equally complex and filled with meaning. Safina does not, however, ascribe human emotions to the animals he highlights in this book. He works with the animal behavior experts in Africa and the United States to understand from the animals' point of view.

Elephants of Amboseli

Part One of “Beyond Words” focuses on the elephants of Amboseli. The elephants that the researchers study are led by matriarchs who use their years of experience with the land to foster the well-being of their families. The matriarchs know when and where to find water and food. They guide, protect and teach their daughters and the youngsters how to survive.

What is most disturbing, however, are the attacks and deaths from poachers and from drought that are together decimating the elephant families. The researcher, Cynthia Moss, has worked with the elephants for 40 years.

She knows of elephant families that mourn the death of their family members. She observes elephants who she calls happy, even joyful, when their families are well fed and have water to play in.

Safina makes a mistake at first in talking with Cynthia about the elephants. He asks, “What has a lifetime of watching elephants

taught you about humanity?” Cynthia replies that she does not compare elephants to people.

Her focus is to understand the animals as themselves, a much harder task. She studies their lives, learning about them as individuals with personalities, individuals who are themselves incredibly complex.

Safina learns and asserts that elephants have a deep and ancient culture. They appear to experience friendship, compassion, grief and satisfaction. They are masters of parental care. These characteristics, so common to humans, have been evolving in many species for hundreds of millions of years.

Animals and humans share a world, and we also share a brain that has evolved many shared feelings.

Learning about the elephants from the researchers Safina visits is spectacular. You learn how they raise their babies, how the females interact with the independent mature males, how they grieve for the dying and how they communicate with one another.

Wolves of Yellowstone

In Part Two, Safina moves to Yellowstone to follow the wolf researchers studying the wolves of the Lamar Valley. In January 2015, Bill Hackos and I went to Yellowstone to see the wolves in winter. We watched one of the Lamar packs hunting bison. It was extraordinary to see them trying to pull a possibly weak bison from the herd. They were not successful, at least while we were watching.

Safina tells us that he is struck by the difference between wolves

and dogs: “Wolves orient and defer to their elders the way dogs do to their human keepers. Maturing wolves, though, become captains of their own lives. Dogs are wolf pups who never get to grow up to take charge of their own lives and decisions. Wolves take charge. They must.”

We learn about the perfect wolf, Yellowstone’s most famous wolf, called Twenty-one. As the primary male in his family, Twenty-one was strong, adept, agile and smart. He was a superb athlete, sort of the Michael Jordan of the wolf packs.

He was one of the first pups born in Yellowstone after wolves were reintroduced to the park, after 70 years without wolves. He led the Druid pack and was “remarkably gentle.” He played with the pups, pretending to lose in their wrestling matches.

At the same time, he was in lots of fights with other wolves. And, he never lost and never killed a wolf he’d beaten. Amazing to find a magnanimous wolf, as Safina explains it.

Whales of the Pacific Northwest

Killer whales are the focus of Part Three. Before reading “Beyond Words,” I knew something about elephant families and had spent time learning more about the Yellowstone wolves. But I knew nothing about the complex societies of killer whales.

We find two types of killer whales, or orcas, their scientific name, in the Pacific Northwest. The resident killer whales eat salmon; the transients eat seals.

Safina speculates that they might even be two different species, their behaviors are so different. The residents have big family and

extended family groups. The transients have smaller groups, travel more widely, and dive more deeply and for longer periods.

Killer whales, like all the dolphins, also use complex sounds to communicate with one another. Each animal has a signature whistle that appears to identify it to others. They call each other by name and answer when called over long distances. They may be spread out over 150 square miles and still be in contact.

The whales are long-lived, much like humans. One matriarch resident is estimated to be about 100 years old. The longest-lived male in one pod lived to at least 60.

The pods are led by the matriarchs, who appear to be crucial to the survival of their adult children. If the matriarch dies, the adult children start dying too. Even males who have lost their mothers are more likely to die early.

Killer whales seem inexplicably interested in humans. Safina recounts many stories of killer whales seeking contact with humans. The researcher that Safina visits tells of being lost in a dense fog bank in his boat about 25 miles from home.

After heading in one compass direction for about five minutes, a pod appeared in front of his boat. He followed for 15 miles. When the fog cleared, he was right next to his home island. He is convinced they were guiding him.

Once you read “Beyond Words,” you will be a strong supporter of ending the captive shows and freeing the whales. In captivity, they go insane.

The resident whales in the Northwest are in trouble. Because of the drought, the salmon runs are significantly down, even gone in

some areas. The pods are having a difficult time finding sufficient food. It's alarming to learn that several resident pods have no living females of reproductive age. Their families are doomed.

Carl Safina is a fascinating scientist and writer. He is dedicated to understanding the animals he and others study. I think you will profit from reading his account of how animals think and feel.

Written by JoAnn Hackos, EA director at large