

**THE  
ENCYCLOPEDIA  
OF QUEER  
ANIMALS**

# introduction

**A**nimals have always lived in pairs, one male and one female, bonded together—a narrative for the centuries, creating order in a seemingly chaotic world. The creation of such a myth is understandable. We humans have abided by it as well. In the times of thrones and wealth, this false structure guaranteed survival. And so, we superimposed this ideal onto the animal kingdom, never really looking to be proven wrong. Our infinite quest of understanding the world around us has vastly oversimplified animal behavior, and in doing so, we overlooked our own behavior for too long as well.

Human queerness has historically been branded “unnatural behavior” as a way to stigmatize non-hegemonic and non-heteronormative practices of anyone. Aided by biblical passages and Western colonialism, this narrative about ourselves and the world around us has spread far and wide. Not just limited to humans, these damaging beliefs extended to other animals as well. The scientific community has just begun uncovering queer animal behavior in the last century and we are finally coming to understand the abundance of queerness in our earthly companions. As we learn to unshackle our thinking from the confines of heteronormativity, we can observe nature in its true, vibrantly queer form. Moving forward, we can expand our understanding of nature as stretching beyond its queer wildlife; nature is inherently queer.

This Encyclopedia of Queer Animals aims to make queer animal behavior more accessible and known. The goal of this book is to open up a world of possibilities and

to educate others about the widespread queerness in nature that has previously gone unnoticed. Maybe, along the way, we will discover something about ourselves as humans and as members of the animal kingdom. Perhaps, we have more in common with our animal friends than we may have previously thought.

Each entry in this Encyclopedia details the behaviors and qualities of a queer animal in the animal kingdom, though it is not an exhaustive list. I have chosen eight animals for various reasons. Some come with previous queer cultural associations, others are much more surprising, while others are more abstractly queer. Overall, the animals I have chosen give us an insight into the various aspects of queer nature.

In these entries, particular animal behaviors will often be used to discuss queerness. These behaviors, which are used by scholar Bruce Bagemihl in his book *Biological Exuberance*, aim to create discussion around queer mannerisms that go beyond just sex. Courtship, affection, sex, pair-bonding, and parenting will be used to situate the behaviors in more concrete and clear terms. Ultimately, I will have to rely upon human terms and language to clarify the concepts at times, though I understand these animals do not exist in the same cultural environment that humans do. Keeping with this effort, I will try to avoid using terms such as 'gay' or 'lesbian' and instead use "homosexual" or "heterosexual" to describe acts of affection between two animals. Unfortunately, the language surrounding these behaviors is, at present, still underdeveloped. Perhaps though, in using human terms, we can discover a kind of congruency to animals and begin to erase the lines that separate us from our animal and queer natures.

queer creatures, there is still an enormous world of queer animals that are under-discussed and under-researched. As Bagemihl puts it, "homosexual behavior occurs in more than 450 different kinds of animals worldwide, and is found in every major geographic region and every major animal group<sup>1</sup>," yet he points out later that these estimates do not show the whole picture. It is possible that, in our constant researching and striving for knowledge, we will uncover even more queer animal behaviors in increasingly surprising ways. We are just beginning to understand animals in ways we never have before and this is just the beginning.

The Encyclopedia of Queer Animals is a journey of discovering, learning, and shifting our views of nature and maybe ourselves. This book is meant to shake up the established; what is natural? What is normal? What should we accept? Maybe we're not so different from these animals at all.

Though I have narrowed the entries to eight different

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<sup>1</sup> Bagemihl, 12


The universe is not  
only queerer than we  
suppose,

it is queerer  
than we can suppose

—*J.B.S. Haldane*



## deer



**C**ulturally, in many countries but most prominently in North America, the deer is associated with masculinity. With imposing antlers and a large physique, the stag dominates woodland landscapes. Hunting these creatures, in most parts of the North American woodlands, is a proudly masculine tradition; the ultimate show of man's dominance over nature. However, within queer behavior, the deer shows a different side. A closer inspection makes it seem as if the deer deconstruct these preconceived notions on their own.

Male Mule Deer are known for mounting each other as a form of play fighting or as they take part in jousting rituals. Additionally, deer of the same sex chase each other for long distances as part of courtship practices<sup>1</sup>. For female Red Deer, nearly two-thirds of sexual interactions are same-sex<sup>2</sup> and some White-tailed Deer have been known to form bonded trios of same-sex deer<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, White-tailed Deer have only been observed to form same-sex bonds<sup>4</sup>. In appearance, deer also bend heteronormative constructs. While adult stags are often associated with human masculinity, young male and female deer often appear to be similar in gender, giving the appearance of the human concept of androgyny with "half-developed, velvety antlers and diminutive, fine-boned proportions."<sup>5</sup>

Female Chinese water deer have been known to mimic male attributes by growing unique "tufts of hairs on their

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1 Bagemihl, 17

2 Bagemihl, 27

3 Bagemihl, 22

4 Bagemihl, 23

5 Bagemihl, 9

jaws that resemble the tusks of the male,<sup>6</sup> a form of animal genderbending. Though deer have cultural associations with extreme masculinity, further inspection shows that deer are not as straightforward as they seem.

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<sup>6</sup> Bagemihl, 38

## dolphins

**I**n the animal kingdom, it would seem that dolphins already have a reputation as a queer animal. It is a common misconception that dolphins are one of the only animals that have sex for pleasure. Dolphins also have a reputation for being unique to exhibit 'gay behaviors'. Neither of these perceptions are true, as many animals' cultures show sexual pleasure as an important aspect of life, survival, and culture building<sup>1</sup> - dolphins are not alone in this. Perhaps it is their playful demeanor or ability to make facial expressions recognizable by humans that led to their reputation as sexually atypical.

One thing is true; dolphins engage in a wide variety of same-sex activity. Oral sex, masturbation, caressing, rubbing, and stroking are all common. Dolphins are known to "stroke and rub each other with their flippers or tail flukes, as well as rub bodies together"<sup>2</sup> and copulate in belly-to-belly, or even more unusual, positions<sup>3</sup>. Male Atlantic Spotted Dolphins have created a form of "sonic foreplay" in which one partner vocalizes a pulsing sound wave which stimulates the other's genitals<sup>4</sup>.

Inserting a fin or tail fluke into a female genital slit has been observed between two female dolphins<sup>5</sup> and female Bottlenose Dolphins commonly clasp each other during sex with each other<sup>6</sup>. Bottlenose dolphins have also been known to insert their erect penis<sup>7</sup> or a flipper<sup>8</sup> into the genital cavity

1 Alaimo, 61

2 Bagemihl, 16

3 Bagemihl, 18

4 Bagemihl, 15

5 Bagemihl, 19

6 Bagemihl, 16

7 Bagemihl, 19

8 Bagemihl, 20

of either a male or female dolphin. Same-sex behavior in dolphins often goes beyond sex. Male same-sex Bottlenose Dolphins uniquely pair off into lifelong partnerships, while this behavior is unheard of between heterosexual pairs<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, both same-sex and opposite-sex groups of Spinner Dolphins have been observed affectionately caressing in large groups<sup>10</sup>.

Though dolphins have a reputation for being distinctively queer or sexually active among their animal kingdom counterparts, they are not much different from many other animals or even human behaviors. Many of their activities, homo- or heterosexual, can be correlated to a human activity or a queer behavior found in another, entirely different animal. Clearly, when looking at the dolphin's wide array of sexual activities in comparison with human activities, we indeed have some things in common.

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<sup>9</sup> Bagemihl, 23

<sup>10</sup> Bagemihl, 18



## jellyfish



**A**s sensual forms aimlessly gliding through the water, jellyfish are certainly strange and abnormal. But what is it about them that makes them seem so queer? Though many ctenophores (a phylum of jellyfish) are hermaphroditic and capable of self-fertilization<sup>1</sup>, this is not the extent of their queer nature.

For Eva Hayward, it is not only their anatomy or strange appearance, but it is also about the sensations they evoke. Jellyfish traverse the lines of light and movement. Their movements are intensely “sensual, even erotic<sup>2</sup>,” evoking feelings of desire mixed with fear of their stinging tentacles. Though Hayward would posit that humans and jellies are linked in nature and society<sup>3</sup>, it can be difficult for humans to see their own qualities in jellyfish. Because we cannot map the parts of our bodies onto jellyfish, the way we do dogs and cats, for example, it can be difficult to empathize with jellyfish. Perhaps this is what is so queer about them, they are never static yet their movements flow endlessly into a blur. They have no face, yet they appear to have a personality. They look soft but really can harm you. All of these contradictions and the jellyfish’s inability to fit inside our normative ideas are what make them so fascinatingly queer.

If we are indeed linked to jellyfish, as Hayward would posit, what does that mean for queer humanity? Can we swim with the jellies without tangling them up in too many human confines? Should we work to gain empathy for our invertebrate animal siblings or should we allow their sensual, queer nature to exist separate from our human notions of queerness?

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<sup>1</sup> Hayward, 180

<sup>2</sup> Hayward, 175

<sup>3</sup> Hayward, 178



# brittlestars

**F**aceless, brainless, spineless. Brittlestars are, to the naked eye, utterly indistinguishable. There is nothing much remarkable about them from the outside, but brittlestars are complex creatures. What makes them truly unique is their mode of vision. Brittlestars are astonishingly able to see through calcium lenses that cover every inch of their body, essentially giving them 360-degree vision. The world to a brittlestar must be a strange thing indeed, but what makes them queer?

Perhaps, as Karen Barad states, it is their “inseparability of knowing, being, and doing<sup>1</sup>” or their oneness with their environment. Due to their ability to connect with the space all around them through their special sight, they are always in flux with their environments, always responding and reacting to it. They blur the lines of being. Where they begin and end is not ever quite clear to them or even to us. Brittlestars also possess the ability to lose limbs with little or no damage done. The limb then regrows on their body, and the fragment often grows into another Brittlestar as a form of queer reproduction<sup>2</sup>. Once lost, the limb dances around, simultaneously a part of and separate from the brittlestar. As Barad puts it, “Brittlestars are not fixated on the illusion of the fixity of “their” bodily boundaries<sup>3</sup>” they are always reconfiguring, always becoming<sup>4</sup>.

In the context of sexual behavior and reproduction, brittlestars exhibit queer qualities as well. The methods of reproduction are quite diverse, from “broadcast spawning”, hermaphroditic self-fertilization, or asexual clone

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1 Barad, 233

2 Barad, 230

3 Barad, 227

4 Hayward, 184

reproduction from fragments of body parts<sup>5</sup>. Brittlestars are not tied to one method of reproduction like humans and many animals are. Even in their reproduction, brittlestars move beyond hegemonic and heteronormative structures.

What can we learn from this constantly changing creature, who cares not for boundaries or labels? Can we learn how to be better queer thinkers or how our queerness should take shape – or rather lose shape if we take a cue from the brittlestar? Conceivably, our biological composition limits us, but we can learn to understand our presence as more encompassing in the naturecultures we are inevitably a part of. As Barad succinctly puts it “what is on the “other side” of the cut is not separate from us<sup>6</sup>.”

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5 Barad, 230

6 Barad, 234

## bonobos

**A**s one of the animals with the closest DNA makeup to humans<sup>1</sup>, bonobos share much in common with us in the way of culture, intelligence, social behavior, and language. But they also share sexual similarities. While many species of monkeys and apes engage in unique sexual behaviors, Bonobos are some of the most diverse in their queerness.

Kissing, mounting, oral sex, hugging, and genital stimulation are just a few queer behaviors that Bonobos exhibit. While Bonobos engage in both male and female same-sex activities, around 70 to 80 percent of same-sex activity is lesbian<sup>2</sup>. Female Bonobos are quite sexually active in a variety of ways. Female Bonobos uniquely participate in group same-sexual activity, which is usually more prevalent in males across the animal kingdom<sup>3</sup>. Female Bonobos, while not specifically forming pair bonds, will engage in "open" or "non-monogamous" relationships with a preferred partner while still engaging in sexual activity with other female Bonobos<sup>4</sup>. Sexual activity for females takes many forms such as kissing, sitting in each other's laps, hugging, embracing each other from behind, mounting face-to-face, clitoral rubbing, inserting the erect clitoris into their partner's vulva, or rubbing anal regions together<sup>5 6</sup>. For male Bonobos, a form of genital rubbing called "penis fencing" can take place in which males rub their erect genitalia while suspended from a tree<sup>7</sup>.

1 Ehrenreich, 2007

2 Bagemihl, 27

3 Bagemihl, 28

4 Bagemihl, 21

5 Bagemihl, 21

6 Bagemihl, 18 - 20

7 Bagemihl, 19


Overall, Bonobos are enthusiastically sexual creatures, whose sexual activities take many forms that can, in some ways, be compared to human sexual activities and in many ways can not. What we can learn from Bonobos is their freedom in expressing sexuality, their unabashed behavior, and the pleasure they get from these activities. It is also speculated that the free sexual activities of Bonobos, both same-sex and opposite-sex, contribute to their peaceful way of life<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps we can use the Bonobo's casual, free, and slightly hedonistic view of sex to erase the rigid Puritanical views that American culture has adopted surrounding sex as a way to break through heteronormative practices surrounding sex.

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<sup>8</sup> Alaimo, 62



## barnacles



**W**hile one might not think of barnacles as sexual creatures, this marine invertebrate has surprising queer multitudes hiding inside of its tough exterior. Biologist Charles Darwin studied their anatomy for years, discovering that many of the barnacles, both fossilized and contemporary, had hermaphroditic anatomy<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to female reproductive traits, there was also the presence of “microscopically small” male organs in the process of deteriorating<sup>2</sup>. The queer bodies of these Barnacles became even more surprising when Darwin discovered small parasites inside their mostly female bodies. Upon closer look, he discovered that they were indeed male Barnacles in the process of developing as a separate sex<sup>3</sup>. Rather than this being just a classic case of parasitism, Myra Hird argues that something else was born from the Barnacle anatomy something uniquely queer:

This was not ‘simply’ the case of one sex living inside the other; multiple (sometimes thousands of) males live inside single females. So barnacles can be intersex but they can also be something else – something we have yet to have a common term for. (Hird, 229)

Hird points out the unique qualities of barnacle anatomy as a way to challenge heteronormative practice and to situate animal behavior in a more queer context. In opposition to this view, Elizabeth Grosz argues that mapping human labels and lenses onto barnacle anatomy does a disservice to the barnacle’s inherent anatomy and identity<sup>4</sup>; to say a barnacle is queer is to confine it to the human idea of queer without ever learning from them. But, if barnacles’ naturally queer

1 Grosz, 162

2 Grosz, 162


3 Grosz, 163

4 Hird, 242



reproduction, sex, and gender in such a remarkable way, can humans learn to mimic these forms of intersexuality, transsexing, and hermaphroditism in responsible ways? I propose that humans have much to learn from their non-heteronormative animal counterparts, but that we must be open to fully learning from these animals rather than confining them to our labels.

## swans



**A**nother animal with a queer cultural reputation is the swan. Perhaps it is due to their serene beauty, their elegant movements, or other cultural factors, but Swans have been characterized by many as flamboyant or gay. The assumption is not unfounded, however, the “gay” qualities of Swans do not come from their appearance or their sexual behaviors.

Swans’ lifelong same-sex pair bonds are fascinating. Male Swans are widely known to form lifelong bonds with each other and even attempt to parent babies through various methods. For Black Swans, only males are observed to do so<sup>1</sup> whereas female Mute Swans have been known to form pair bonds and construct adjacent nests so that they can raise their young together<sup>2</sup>. In some situations, Black Swans can form a trio consisting of two male swans and one female<sup>3</sup> that can often aid in a pair of male Swans acquiring offspring. In this situation, the female swan acts as a “surrogate mother,” carrying the male Swans’ eggs. Once she has laid her eggs, she is chased away and the pair of male Swans raise the cygnets together<sup>4</sup>.

Another method for homosexual Swans to acquire eggs is simply to chase mothers away from their nests and take over the nest as their own. Some swans, both male and female, construct a nest even if the nest is empty or the eggs are not fertilized. Male Swans are known to sit on and tend to the nest as if the nest contained eggs. This became especially evident as a couple of Male Swans attacked several Austrian citizens while protecting their nest. Although the

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<sup>1</sup> Bagemihl, 30

<sup>2</sup> Bagemihl, 25

<sup>3</sup> Bagemihl, 22

<sup>4</sup> Bagemihl, 24

"nest they were protecting didn't actually contain eggs or cygnets" but instead contained "at least one colorful plastic cup<sup>5</sup>." This incident shows that male Swans are "formidable" adversaries when it comes to protecting their young and they often find the best territories for raising them<sup>6</sup>. This shatters stereotypes that young raised by same-sex couples are somehow disadvantaged when it comes to survival.

The same-sex behavior of Swans is striking because it does not venture into sexual activities but instead shows how two animals of the same sex can parent young together in a successful, beneficial way. This is something that humans, especially gay adults, have encountered when raising children. If the Swans can succeed, maybe it shows that humans can too.

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5 Dockrill, 2018

6 Bagemihl, 25

## humans

**T**he question remains: where do we as humans fit into all this? One might assume that in pointing to queer animals, we absolve ourselves of all further ethical questions surrounding sexual behavior. Alas, this is a misconception.

Though queer animals are our origin, it is up to us, as responsible queer thinkers, to always push past the current thought constructs. No one can deny that human culture, though inherently entangled with other animals' cultures, still comes with different rules, ethics, and boundaries that may not be present elsewhere in nature. These questions are essential. Yet the temptation to separate ourselves from nature entirely rather than answering them is quite tantalizing.

However, we must consider the ways in which we are both apart *from* and a part *of* nature. As scholars Birke, Bryld and Lykke point out, "we need to understand more about 'animality' – and hence 'humanness,'" yet these discussions must take place in ways that do not alienate animal or remove them from the conversation altogether. Ultimately, the work is essential and must be done. But if we can see ourselves as queer animals, we may elucidate more about our own humanity than we ever thought possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Hird, 243

When animals do something  
that we like we call it  
natural.

When they do  
something that we  
don't like, we call  
it animalistic.

*J. D. Weinrich*



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