

**Sex In the Animal Kingdom**  
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For many species of plants and animals spring is the time of peak reproduction. Flowers are in bloom attracting animals to pollinate them, birds are singing to attract mates and drive away rivals. The enormous diversity in the ways animals and plants reproduce themselves is hard to fully appreciate.

When we think about reproduction we think about sex, but even that is not universal. Some simpler organisms such as bacteria, reproduce without sex; the cells simply divide. Other simple organisms like hydra, a tiny aquatic animal, reproduce by growing “buds” that break off and become separate individuals.

In some species, males and females are not the only genders. Paramecia, a single cell critter, can only breed with other individuals within their mating group. Each group can have up to eight different mating types, rather than just the two genders that humans are restricted to. Some species of earthworms are true hermaphrodites - having the sex organs of both males and females. They can breed as either males or females depending on the circumstances.

Even among more advanced animals sexual behavior is no less complex or bizarre. There are some species of fence lizards where there are no males, only females. The females will mate with a male of a closely related species to stimulate egg development. The male’s sperm contributes nothing to the offspring. For these animals it’s truly a female world.

Blue-headed wrasse are small tropical fish that live in harems with one male and several females. However, if the male dies or is lost to the group, one of the females, usually the biggest, will undergo a sex change and become a functioning male in a matter of weeks. These fish are true transsexuals.

Even for practices that we think of as uniquely human, we often find other animals that can match or exceed us. Some examples follow:

*“The Mile High Club”* - Having sex while airborne is no trick for swifts and hummingbirds. They routinely mate while flying, and without the aid of artificial aircraft!

*Monogamy* - Staying with the same mating partner, at least for the breeding season, is seen in many birds and some mammals like wolves and gibbons (a primate). Swans are known to mate for life, something increasingly rare in human culture!

*Black Widows* - In many species of spiders and arthropods, courting males may be killed and eaten by females who aren’t in the mood. For the preying mantis, females may decapitate the males during the sex act. Headless males actually perform better than males with their heads. (Ladies, don’t try this at home!)

*Nuptial gifts* - To escape become a meal for the female, some male flies will bring a freshly killed insect for the female to feed upon during mating. In balloon flies, the male “tricks” the female by bringing her an empty silk balloon. Sort of an engagement ring box without the ring!

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While some biologists have labeled humans the sexiest of the animals it is clear that there are few if any ways in which we are truly unique. Animal research often shows the close ties we have with our animal relatives and that there is rarely anything totally new in human or animal behavior.