

Tickling Rats and Giggling Dolphins: Some Animals Appear to Have A Sense Of Humor (Video)

By David Cox | [The Guardian](#)

There's a video on YouTube (above) with over three and a half million views, in which a girl appears to make a dolphin giggle by doing repeated cartwheels and handstands in front of its tank at a sea world center.

We still understand relatively little about the extent to which emotions are present in animals, but could it be that the dolphin in this clip is experiencing one of the most distinctly human forms of expression – humor?

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“I would define humor, as we know it, as seeing improbable connections in the upper mind,” says psychologist [Jaak Panksepp](#). “That’s what a joke is all about. You’re not expecting it, and then all of a sudden ... bang! It comes from the ability to put very strange, often illogical things together, triggering positive emotions.”

While the sophistication of human humor requires the medium of language, Panksepp says he would not be surprised if positive emotions could be triggered in some animals by viewing slapstick events which they find startling or surprising.

Dolphins have long intrigued animal researchers because of the [complexity of their communication](#): a rich variety of clicks, buzzes, whistles, and squeals of different rhythms,

frequencies, and lengths, as well as their capacity for self-recognition.

They are among a small group of species (which also includes chimpanzees, killer whales, and magpies but not gorillas, dogs or giant pandas) which can pass the mirror test. A dye is used to place a dot above one of the dolphin's eyes, before placing a mirror in its tank. The aim of the experiment is to see whether the dolphin can recognize the reflection as itself, or whether it perceives the dolphin in the mirror as a separate member of its species.

Humans are not capable of this before the age of around [15-18 months](#), a vital developmental stage which most species do not reach. However, it appears that dolphins do. When confronted with the mirror, they repeatedly circle their heads and move in closer to observe the eye which has been marked.

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Mental self-recognition and the ability to place yourself in the context of a situation is crucial to humor. Whether dolphins have the capacity to do this in some form remains open to debate, but we do know that they have a mode of communication which is akin to laughter.

Ten years ago, [researchers studying dolphins](#) at the Kolmården Wildlife Park in Sweden noticed a particular set of sounds they had never heard before – a short burst of pulses followed by a whistle. Taking closer note, they realized that the dolphins only ever made these signals during play-fighting, never during more aggressive confrontations. They concluded that the purpose of the sound was to indicate that the situation was pleasant or non-threatening and to prevent it escalating into a real fight. For psychologists, this is the reason why laughter ever existed at all.

“The playfighting and tickling we see in animals are harmless

attacks which serve a very social function,” says Peter McGraw, a psychologist at the University of Colorado. “Some of it is bonding and some of it can be learning to fight. But what you always see is that the animal that’s being attacked is the one making these vocalizations which we interpret as laughter. I believe that through evolution, laughter developed as a way of showing that something which would otherwise be wrong, is actually ok.”

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In our world, laughter has a variety of functions, ranging from highly positive to negative or even sinister. But this complexity only really developed in the past 50,000 years, with the evolution of language, interdependent societies, and culture. “Having language meant that the world of things which could seem odd, illogical or bizarre increased exponentially,” McGraw says. “And you laugh not just to say, ‘I get it, this is ok,’ but express a whole variety of feelings ranging from a superiority to fitting in within a social group to filling gaps in conversation.”

To map the extent to which laughter is used in the animal kingdom, Marina Davila-Ross, a psychologist at the University of Portsmouth, went searching for it amongst our closest relatives: the great apes. She recorded the vocalizations made across the primate kingdom during playfighting sessions, and by comparing the acoustics of the sounds to our own laughter, [constructed an evolutionary tree](#) going back 60 million years.

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