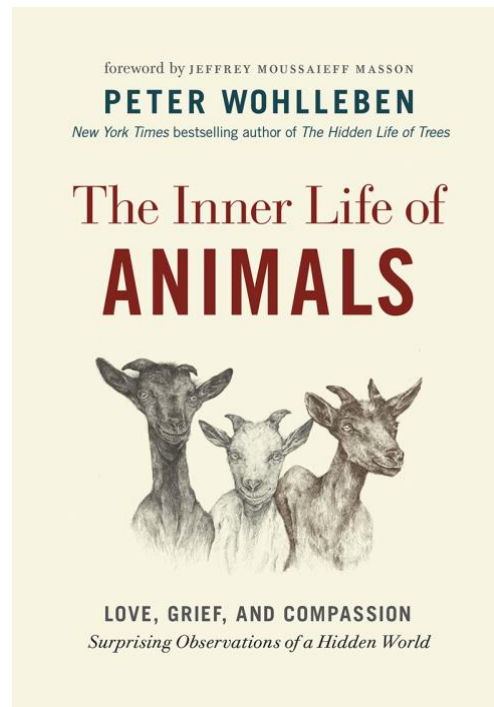


The Inner Life of Animals, by Peter Wohlleben



Through vivid stories of devoted pigs, two-timing magpies, and scheming roosters, *The Inner Life of Animals* weaves the latest scientific research into how animals interact in the world with Peter Wohlleben's personal experiences in forests and fields.

In this, his latest book, Peter Wohlleben follows the hugely successful *The Hidden Life of Trees* with insightful stories into the emotions, feelings, and intelligence of animals around us. Animals are different from us in ways that amaze us—and they are also much closer to us than many would ever have thought.

About the Author

Peter Wohlleben spent over twenty years working for the forestry commission in Germany before leaving to put his ideas of ecology into practice. He now runs an environmentally-friendly woodland in Germany, where he is working for the return of primeval forests. He also runs a nature academy, The Waldakademie Hümmel, where he gives leads guided tours and seminars. He is the author of numerous books about nature, including *The Hidden Life of Trees*, *The Inner Life of Animals*, and, available from Greystone starting in spring 2019, *The Secret Wisdom of Nature*. Together, these three titles comprise the Mysteries of Nature Trilogy.

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Author Interview

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Your first book, the *New York Times* bestseller *The Hidden Life of Trees*, radically transformed the way we think about trees and forests. What do you hope readers learn from *The Inner Life of Animals*?

First and foremost, I would like readers to enjoy their interactions with animals more. For example, many people watch wild animals, but few stop to consider that the animals are watching them, too. Even I have missed attempts at communication, for example, by crows, as I explain in the book.

What inspired you to turn your attention to animals in this next book?

I've been involved with animals for much longer than I have been involved with trees. I got acquainted with trees when I was studying forestry, but as a child I kept spiders in glass jars and terrapins in a big aquarium. A chick even hatched in my bedroom after I incubated an egg using an old electric heating pad belonging to my grandmother. The chick accepted me as its mother right away. I've been delving into the lives of animals for as long as I can remember, so it made perfect sense to me to write a book about them.

Much like *The Hidden Life of Trees*, *The Inner Life of Animals* weaves together the latest research with your experiences interacting with nature. Why do you choose such a personal approach to science in your writing?

Scientific language is very dry and usually completely lacking emotion. And yet our emotions guide most of what we do, and if we distance ourselves from them when we communicate, most people don't get the message. That's why I write with feeling, and include lots of personal stories. Readers feel as though they're coming on a guided tour with me. That's what this book is: a guided tour into the animal kingdom on the printed page.

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You've spent a lot of time working with trees, including more than 20 years in the German forestry commission. Tell me about your personal connection with animals.

Apart from the experiences I had as a child, I've been living full-time with animals for the past 25 years. Dogs, horses, goats, rabbits, chickens, and bees are the pets and domestic animals my wife, Miriam, and I both care for every day. We feed them their meals, and they are part of our family.

What's the most surprising thing you discovered while writing *The Inner Life of Animals*?

Jane Billingham, the wonderful translator of the English edition, drew my attention to an article that described crows bringing gifts to a young girl. That was when I first noticed that "our" crow, the one we feed daily when we go out to the pasture to feed our horses, was also giving us gifts. Small stones, apples, or sometimes even a dead mouse. Up until then I'd never realized why the crow was leaving these objects at the place where we fed it.

How did writing this book change your own thinking about animals?

Interestingly enough, writing the book didn't change my thinking at all. I have always believed that animals are more than simply genetically programmed robots. Dog and cat owners have known this for a long time. But even tiny creatures like flies or bees move their legs when they're sleeping, probably dream, and are aware of what's going on around them. When you know that, it's much more fun to watch animals, and you're more likely to care a bit more about them.

In your book, you offer evidence that animals can experience joy, pain, love, and even gratitude, much like humans do. But for decades scientists have argued the opposite; indeed, some researchers continue to do so today. Why are we so reluctant to accept that animals are capable of human emotion?

It raises questions about the way we treat them. If we accept that animals are not so very different from us, then factory farming is no longer acceptable. It's often said that animals act instinctively and we think about what we are going to do. And in this context, instincts are deemed to be inferior. But instincts are expressed through emotions, which trigger certain behaviors, in people as well as in animals. Love, grief, empathy, and joy all work at the instinctive rather than the intellectual level, and these emotions are among the most important of our lives. When it comes to emotions, animals operate on the same level as we do. They can't fly to the moon or build computers, but they can feel joy and love, just as we can.

People have always been curious about the inner lives of animals, and animal emotion has only become more popular recently. Why do you think people are so fascinated by this topic—especially now?

It shows that we have distanced ourselves from nature too much, even though we know that we are still a part of it. The similarities between humans and animals reassure us that we are not alone in this world. While some people are waiting for alien civilizations to be discovered and for the time when we will make contact with other life forms, millions of such creatures are waiting right here and right now. Realizing how similar their emotional lives are to ours and observing them just being who they are is a gift that brings us not only a great deal of joy but also strength to pursue our own lives every day.

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Key Facts from the Book

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- **Animals are capable of incredibly nuanced communication.** Ravens greet friends and foes with calls of different pitches and add meaning by “gesturing” with their beaks—much like people do with their hands.
- **Social structures are important in the animal kingdom too.** Rabbit communities follow strict social hierarchies, with higher ranking rabbits living longer, more relaxed lives than their less fortunate peers.
- **Animals will take orphans into their care—sometimes from outside their species.** We see this most strikingly in the story of Baby, a French bulldog who adopted six young wild boar whose mother was shot by hunters. Baby snuggled the piglets each night as they fell asleep and kept a watchful eye on them during the day.
- **Animals have adapted to human influence in incredible ways.** In France, the wild boar have learned to flee when hunting season begins. As soon as shots start to ring out, these clever creatures swim to safety across the River Rhone to Geneva, where hunting is forbidden.
- **Even creatures without brains are “intelligent.”** For example, some slime molds—unicellular fungi that are literally mindless—can use their own slime trails to navigate their way through complex mazes.
- **Young animals learn essential life lessons from their parents.** Young deer learn to move safely through the forest by following the ancient paths of their elders. Goats, meanwhile, keep their kids in line with gentle discipline: a sharp bleat and—if that fails to do the trick—a swift butt from the horns.
- **Animals care deeply for their kin.** Wild boar, for example, are more kindly disposed to family members than they are to strangers and are able to recognize loved ones even after years of separation.
- **Animals may be capable of expressing gratitude.** Accounts of wild birds sharing their most prized treasures with kind humans certainly suggest this is the case.
- **Animals of all shapes and sizes take care of each other.** Bees huddle together for warmth when temperatures plummet, with each insect taking its turn on the chilly outskirts to give others a turn in the cozy middle.
- **Many animals like to joke around and have fun just as people do.** For just one example, there are stories of crows tobogganing, even when there is no “adaptive advantage” to doing so.
- **Mice experience empathy.** They feel pain more powerfully after watching a fellow mouse suffer, and react more strongly to the aches of their friends than to those of strangers.
- **Pigs are surprisingly neat and tidy.** They prefer to use some kind of a toilet—a designated place where they do their business—and, if possible, fall asleep in the same “bed” every night.
- **Some species are shockingly faithful.** Beaver pairs can remain monogamous for as long as twenty years, while ravens stick with their mates for life.
- **Some animal acts, however, are less benevolent.** Great tits, for example, sometimes deceive their neighbors when food is scarce by issuing false alarm calls. As the other birds quickly fly to safety, the tricksters are left alone to eat as much as they like. And squirrels frequently steal food from each other, which is why the cleverest ones will sometimes dig empty caches when others are watching to lead potential plunderers astray.

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Discussion Questions

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1. Peter Wohlleben's attachment to animals started early. As a young boy, he hatched a chick in his bedroom, and the bird immediately accepted him as its mother. Did you have a strong bond with an animal as a child? If so, did that early connection affect the way you think about animals today?
2. When asked about his communication style, Peter has said, "Scientific language is very dry and usually completely lacking emotion. And yet our emotions guide most of what we do, and if we distance ourselves from them when we communicate, most people don't get the message. That's why I write with feeling." How is Peter's emotional language effective in *The Inner Life of Animals*?
3. What do you think of Peter's assertion that "instincts are expressed through emotion," and that, therefore, animals are as emotional as humans? Does this change the way you see the ethical questions such as factory farming, leather jackets, or even eating meat?
4. Do you believe that an animal has ever tried to communicate with you? Do you think that people can learn to understand some forms of animal communication, as Peter suggests?
5. In the chapter "Loving People," Peter questions the nature of the bonds that exist between humans and animals, writing "Some might argue that people simply project their emotions onto animals and see them reflected back." What do you think? Can people ever truly "love" their pets?
6. Popular books, films, and other media predominantly focus on animals that we perceive as cute, majestic, or wise. But *The Inner Life of Animals* features less obviously loveable creatures, like insects and fish. Did you find it more difficult to relate to these animals? Why or why not?
7. Peter explains that the animal kingdom has social hierarchies just like in the human world. Have you ever seen an example of this in your own life? Did the experience make you think differently about that particular animal or species?
8. Did you have any misconceptions about animals that were changed by reading Peter's book? If so, what were they? And how did it feel to have your perspective change?
9. In the final chapter, Peter wonders whether animals have souls, just like many believe humans do—however that may be defined for them. What do you think about this controversial question?
10. What do you think is the most important lesson that human society can learn from animals?

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