

## Cooperation in Animals: From Ants to Rats to Clusterflocks

From Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions

March 2022

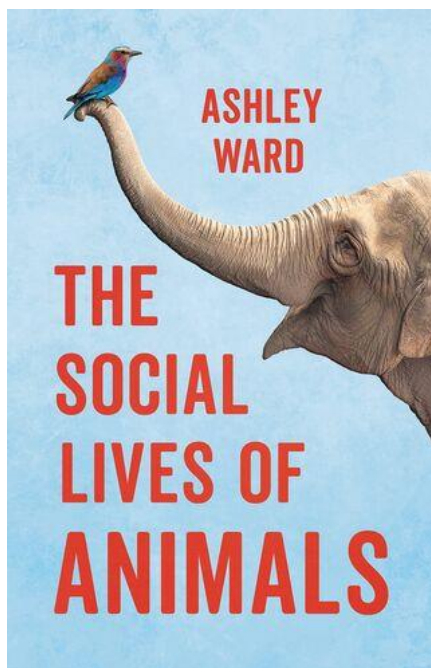
**A new book is a delightful and informative read about "all things animals."**

Given my keen interest in the social behavior of nonhuman animals (animals), especially the importance of [cooperation](#) and [empathy](#) in how they build societies rather than competitive and divisive interactions, I was immediately attracted to a new book by University of Sydney professor Ashley Ward called *The Social Lives of Animals*.<sup>1</sup> When I read it, I wasn't let down and learned quite a bit about animals with whom I wasn't all that familiar.<sup>2</sup>

Here's what Ashley had to say about his fascinating and easy-to-read tour through the animal kingdom.

**Marc Bekoff: Why did you write *The Social Lives of Animals*?**

**AW:** The book marries my passion for writing with my fascination for animals. The process of writing *The Social Lives of Animals* was an absolute joy, but my broader aim was to try and communicate my enthusiasm for the science of animal behaviour to a wide audience. Part of the process of my research at the University of Sydney is to produce academic papers that detail new scientific advances in the field. However, these papers are tailored to a relatively small audience of other researchers in my discipline. Consequently, so many fascinating discoveries fail to reach the public's notice because we scientists often don't do a good enough job of publicising our findings, despite their inherently fascinating nature. I wanted to address this in my book, to engage with a wide range of readers, to share the wonderful things that are going on in the study of animal behaviour, and, hopefully, to make them as excited as I am about the subject.



Source: Ashley Ward, used with permission

**MB: How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?**

**AW:** Studying animal behaviour has been my passion since I was a child. Both the vividness and the profusion of life captured me at a young age like nothing else, and I was incredibly fortunate in later life to make the scientific study of animals into my [career](#). From my graduate and postgraduate studies in the U.K. to my current base at the University of Sydney, I've traveled the world to see some of the most incredible creatures in the flesh and I relate many of these adventures in *The Social Lives of Animals*.

**MB: Who is your intended audience?**

**AW:** Readers from all walks of life. In part, this was a reaction to an academic book that I wrote in 2016. Though it was a fascinating project, the downside was that academic writing is by necessity formal and, often, very dry. In writing *The Social Lives of Animals*, my aim was to break free of these strictures and to excite and enthuse a much larger group of people. Essentially, I hope this book appeals to anyone with an interest in the natural world.

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**MB: What are some of the topics you weave into your book and what are some of your major messages?**

**AW:** I think that the incredible diversity of species that have opted to live socially, in groups, represents one of the most extraordinary stories in animal behaviour. Think of ants, fish, and the tadpoles I mentioned earlier. Then there's so many birds that flock or nest in colonies—clusterflocks—as well as a host of mammals, including dolphins and primates, who live in tight-knit groups.

Sociality is one of the most widespread and important strategies out there, and it's something that so many animals, not least us, have to thank for their success. That success comes, in large part, from the cooperation that is fostered by group living. Yet despite this, we've long seemed to focus on aspects of behaviour such as [aggression](#) and [competition](#), summed up by phrases such as "nature red in tooth and claw." These elements can, of course, be dramatic—think of two elephant seals battling for supremacy, for instance—but if we view life solely from this perspective, we're missing the point. The bonds that social animals form provide one of the most powerful forces in nature and it's by working together that they've succeeded. I think that this viewpoint has long been neglected and it's one that I bring to the fore in my book.

Another theme is our exceptionalism: we've long thought ourselves to be distinct and separate from the rest of the animal kingdom. Yet we, too, are social animals and it's through this tendency to build alliances and to cooperate which provides the foundation for humanity's achievements. Moreover, we can see the roots of our social tendencies in the behaviour of the myriad animals that live in groups. Simply put, by understanding animals, we learn about ourselves.

**MB: How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?**

**AW:** It differs in both scope and style. Many wonderful books are written with one particular species in mind, or with a focus on a very specific aspect of their behaviour. My aim was to connect the behaviour of a range of animals from the humble insects to the great whales and our closest cousins, apes such as chimpanzees and bonobos, by examining the crucial aspect of sociality. Moreover, I wanted to tell the story balancing expertise and humour, I want to entertain people rather than just inform them.

**MB: Are you hopeful that as people learn more about the amazing lives of our nonhuman kin they will treat them with more respect and dignity?**

**AW:** I really hope so. So many of us in the modern world live in urban environments where animals have been pushed out, or at best, to the margins. In some cases, this can lead to a separation between ourselves and the natural world. If people don't often engage with animals it can lead to a kind of indifference toward them. This is problematic for all sorts of reasons, but there are two immediate things that spring to mind. If we're indifferent to animals, if we don't value them, then that can have awful consequences both for the animals themselves and the environments in which they live. I think we have a moral duty to nurture the life that we share our planet with. Furthermore, as people come to notice and appreciate animals more, they gain immeasurable benefits for themselves. What could be more inspiring than getting out into nature to watch animals going about their everyday lives and interacting with one another? It's breathtaking.

## References

In conversation with Ashley Ward.

1) [Ashley](#) is professor of animal behaviour at the University of Sydney.

2) Because dogs are among the animals I know best, it's important to note that there's far more evidence that coexistence models of domestication are more credible than scavenger hypotheses (pp. 237-238). See, for example, the work of [Mark Derr](#), "[Dumping the Dog Domestication Dump Theory Once and For All](#)," and "[The First Domestication: How Wolves and Humans Coevolved](#)."

Bekoff, Marc. [Friendliness and Cooperation Are Secrets of Humans' Success](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. [Chimpanzees Choose to Cooperate Rather Than to Compete](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. [Nature's Perfect Partners: A PBS Film on Animal Cooperation](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. [Cooperative Feather Play Between an Orca and a Dolphin](#).

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