

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

What's the Cleverest Thing A Hippo Can Do?

July 15, 2021

Jane 00:21

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from you, and we find interesting people to help answer them. Today we're going to answer seven questions about animals. I love the episodes about animals, and you send us lots and lots of animal questions. Sometimes we do a whole episode about one type of animal like our shows about cats, dogs, spiders, ants and unicorns. Okay, I guess the unicorn one doesn't really count as a real animal. But it is a fun episode to listen to. Other times we get to as many different animals as possible in one episode. And that's what's happening today. We're going to learn about hippos, we're going to learn about bird poop. We're even going to learn about why cows like to stick their tongues up their noses. So let's get right to it.

Elliot 01:17

My name is Elliot, and I'm eight from England. I want to know, what is the cleverest thing hippos can do?

Jane 01:28

The cleverest thing hippos can do? I can't wait to hear the answer to this.

Jane 01:38

We turned to Kenan Stears for some help. He's an ecologist with the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Keenan 01:46

The species that I'm currently setting is a common hippopotamus. I am interested in the social behavior of hippos, as well as how hippos interact with their environment. I am specifically interested in how they move and how they navigate through the habitats in which they live.

Jane 02:03

So we put Elliott's question to Keenan.

Keenan 02:05

I think this is a really great question. And the first thing that comes to mind that really highlights intelligence of hippos is the ability to identify the hippo friends from the hippo enemies by the smell of their dung.

Jane 02:16

Do you know what dung is? Its poop.

Keenan 02:20

Dominant male hippos use dung middens to mark their territories. A dung midden is a place where animal repeatedly goes to drop their dung. These dung middens act as a way that hippos can keep track of other hippos in the area. So when moving through the environment, hippos can actually sniff out areas where their hippo friends live versus areas where the hippo enemies live. And they can do all of this just by smelling the dung middens.

Jane 02:48

Bet you didn't think the cleverest thing hippos can do might involve poop. And just in case it wasn't totally clear, a midden is basically a waste pile. So a dung midden is kind of like a toilet or an outhouse. It's where the hippos go repeatedly to poop. But as Keenan told us, it also serves another purpose. While I can't tell your poop from someone else's, and that is totally okay with me. Other animals can sniff out individuals this way, using dung or urine, pee, to mark their territories and let others know that they've been there and to see who else has been there. Hippos aren't the only animals to use dung middens this way, by the way, rhinoceros is do it to. Other animals like dogs, cats, bunnies, and monkeys also sniff feces and urine as a way to learn about their fellow species. But they don't always leave their messages in the same place like hippos do.

Alice 03:48

Hello, I am Alice. I am eight years old. I live in Houston, Texas. And my question is, why do elephants like peanuts? Thank you.

Jane 04:00

Great question, Alice. When we're learning about animals, we tend to get our information from a lot of different places. What we read, what we see if we can observe an animal, and sometimes what we watch on TV. And the idea that elephants like peanuts probably comes from the cartoons and movies we've watched over the years. Elephants are herbivores, that means they eat grasses and bark vegetation. In zoos they'll eat fruits and vegetables, hay and sometimes pellets of food that kind of look like pet food. The connection between elephants and peanuts is that in early zoos and circuses, lots of peanuts were sold for human visitors to eat. Sometimes these zoos and circuses would let humans feed the animals. And just like your dog might sometimes eat people food if you give him or her some, the elephants would eat the peanuts they got offered. These days zoos don't let you feed the animals and that's a good thing. Biologists and veterinarians say peanuts aren't a great food for elephants. So while it's funny to see elephants eat peanuts in cartoons, they don't do it in the wild, and it's not really a food they like better than anything else.

Frankie 05:13

Hello, my name is Frankie. I am an eight year old girl. I live in England. And my question is, why do cows put their tongues up their noses?

Christine 05:27

Hi, Frankie. This is Christine Scales from Billings Farm and Museum in Woodstock, Vermont, where we have a herd of about 50 milking jersey cows. Cows will do a lot of different things with their tongues, they'll use them to eat to chew their cud to lick their babies and even to lick their farmers. And there's a few different reasons that a cow might put their tongue up their nose. So the first reason is that like our noses cow's noses will run sometimes, but they can't really use a Kleenex to blow their nose, so they lick it instead. Cows also really like the taste of salt, and the sweat and the mucus in their nose is nice and salty. Salt is actually important to keep cows healthy. And a lot of farmers will even give their cows big blocks of salt that they can lick. That's also why cows lick people, they like the salt that naturally is on our skin and in our sweat. So a lot of times when we're in the barn, we'll get a big old lick from one of our cows.

Jane 06:28

Would you like a wet sloppy cow kiss? I love cows. So I kind of like it when they're affectionate like that. Baby cows will sometimes suck on your fingers if you let them and that's a pretty weird sensation too. Let's go back to the wild animals for our next question.

Jodi 06:44

My name is Jody, and I am seven from England. I want to know if anyone has ridden a tiger before?

Jane 06:53

Yes, Tigers have most certainly been ridden by humans. Sometimes tigers have been kept in captivity and used in circus acts or shows. And you can find videos online of performers briefly riding or sitting on a tiger. But it is very, very uncommon and probably not very smart. For one thing, tigers are wild animals. And even tigers kept in captivity are dangerous predators. But also the way big cats like tigers move would make it hard to ride them comfortably, particularly if they were moving fast. Cats have flexible spines that help them leap and run fast. A person riding a tiger would not have a very smooth ride, and it could possibly hurt the tiger's spine to be ridden. So generally speaking, tigers are not animals that humans can ride. In just a minute, we'll learn about how woodpeckers stay upright on a tree trunk when they're banging away at it and tackle a few more animal questions too.

Jane 08:03

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm and today we're tackling seven different questions about animals. Let's move to the avian world now. Avian means birds.

08:17

Hi, I'm Lyra and I'm five. And and I'm from Cheshire and I wood done woodpeckers stay on the wood when they're pecking?

Jane 08:30

Wow, we have so many questions from England in this episode. We put Lyra's question to our friend Bridget Butler, the Bird Diva. She has done live shows with us about birds and owls especially. And she's been in other episodes as well.

Bridget 08:43

This is such a fabulous question. And it's something you can look for the next time you see a woodpecker feeding. So I want to look for two things. One, look for how the woodpecker uses its tail. It's kind of cool. They use it almost like you use your kickstand on your bike. You put that kickstand down to kind of hold the bike up so that you don't have to stand there and hold it. Well the woodpecker's tail does the same thing. It's super strong, and they actually have special robust vertebrae at the base there that help them be able to use that to prop themselves up against the trunk of a tree. Super cool. Okay, the second thing I want you to look for is their feet, check out a woodpecker's feet. They have very special sets of toes. Now in most songbirds, they have three toes that point out toward the front, and one toe that points out toward the back. On woodpeckers. It's different. It's called zygodactyl. They have two toes in the front and two toes in the back. And that allows them to grip differently and kind of cover more area when they're trying to cling to the bark. Some other birds that have zygodactyl toes are ospreys and owls, parrots, cuckoos, and some types of swifts. So this is something that you can look for the next time you're out and about and you check out a woodpecker feeding. Check out that kickstand tail and those Zygodactyl toes!

Jane 10:15

Zygodactyl: now that's a vocabulary word!

Tamir 10:21

My name is Tamir. And I live in Boston, Massachusetts, and I want to know why some bird poop's black and some would poop's white?

Bridget 10:31

Why is some bird poop black and some bird poop white, from Tamir in Boston? This is a great question. Let's break it down into two parts so we can get you an answer. First, let's think a little bit about how birds process waste. Bird bodies are really different than mammal bodies. Mammals produce waste in two different forms in the form of urine, which is a liquid. And in the form of poop, which is a solid. Birds do it a little bit differently, they kind of combine both of those things into one, they produce something called uric acid. That's that white paste that we see when we find bird droppings on the sidewalk or sometimes even unfortunately, on our cars. They take all the water that they can out of the food that they eat, and they turn it into that pasty product. So that's why it's thick and white. Now, sometimes we get some food residue in there the solid stuff if you think about birds that might eat seeds, or eat skeletons from insects, right, you get all those dark parts that might also show up in a splatter of bird poop. Now there are other birds that eat vegetation, so they eat plants or they eat little buds on trees, and their poop is a little bit different. Like with Canada geese, or a bird like a ruffed grouse, their poop is actually tubular and a little bit more solid. But you'll still see that white uric acid part at one end, and a darker brown or black form of the solid material at the other end. So that's why some bird poop is black, and some bird poop is white.

Sidhart 12:29

Hello, my name is Sidhart. I am eight years old, and I live in Highland Park, New Jersey. My question is why do people make animals like sharks and bears sound way more dangerous than they actually are?

Jane 12:43

That's a really good question, Sidhart, and there isn't really one answer. On the one hand, some species of sharks and some species of bears can be dangerous. And occasionally people do die and shark or grizzly bear attacks. It's very rare. So I don't want to alarm you at all. But you should always follow the information from wildlife officials about the wild creatures in your area. So part of why we make these types of animals sound scary is because humans have had to be very wary of large predators throughout our history. And we've handed down stories about how scary these animals are. So now that's part of our culture. But shark researcher Kady Lyons says it's important to keep these things in perspective.

Kady 13:33

In the grand scheme of things, you know, I forget the exact statistic. But you know, considering how many, how many people are in the water at one time, recreationally and the number of shark attacks that actually happened, you know, you have a higher chance of a tree falling on you or getting struck by lightning or a vending machine killing you when you're trying to get that candy bar than you do getting bit or killed by a shark.

Jane 13:56

And Sidhart as you probably know, since you're asking the question, some shark species are tiny and probably couldn't hurt a human even if they wanted to. Where we live in Vermont, the only bears around are black bears. They mostly eat nuts and berries and are kind of afraid of humans. And even the animals that do sometimes attack humans aren't doing it to be mean. They're just being their animal selves doing what comes naturally to them. So it's not accurate to paint a picture of scary beasts that set out to attack humans. And sometimes it's really bad for the animals that they're depicted or made to look scary. People may be less likely to protect something they fear or see as aggressive and that can have an impact on our conservation policies.

Jane 14:45

There's another element we might want to mention here. Sometimes people like to be scared so they enjoy scary movies and books, or scary stories told around a campfire or at a sleepover. I am not one of those people. But maybe some of you are. So things that are slightly scary in our culture like sometimes sharks and bears and stuff get turned into even scarier stories for people who delight in being frightened. If you want to think more about why we fear things like darkness, you should listen to our episode all about the fear of the dark with a Vermont wildlife biologist and the author Lemony Snicket. But Sidhart, I'd love to know how you would answer your own question. Why do you think we make animals sound scarier than they are? Or why we fear certain animals that probably are more scared of us than we are of them.

Jane 15:39

If any of you listening want to share your thoughts with me and Melody, send us a note or have your adult help you. Our email address is questions@ButWhyKids.org? And that's where you can send your questions too of course, your adults can help you record yourself asking and then email the audio file to questions@ButWhyKids.org. And adults, if you haven't subscribed to our newsletter, you can find out how on our homepage ButWhyKids.org we send the newsletter out whenever we have a new episode and we include links to activities you can do with kids and additional articles and things we think you

might enjoy while your kids enjoy the episode. That's it for today. Thanks to our special helpful guests, Kenan Stears, Christine Scales and Bridget Butler. Our show is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio and distributed by PRX. Luke Reynolds composed and performed our theme music. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.