



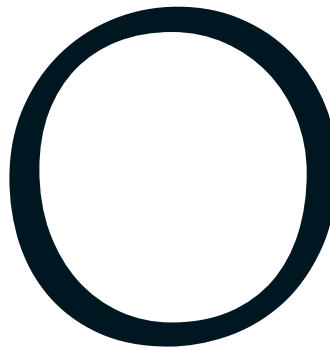


ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

# When Animals Mourn

Mounting evidence from species as diverse as cats and dolphins indicates that humans are not the only species that grieves over the loss of loved ones

*By Barbara J. King*



IN A RESEARCH VESSEL IN THE waters off Greece's Amvrakikos Gulf, Joan Gonzalvo watched a female bottlenose dolphin in obvious distress. Over and over again, the dolphin pushed a newborn calf, almost certainly

her own, away from the observers' boat and against the current with her snout and pectoral fins. It was as if she wanted to nudge her baby into motion—but to no avail. The baby was dead. Floating under direct sunlight on a hot day, its body quickly began to decay; occasionally the mother removed pieces of dead skin and loose tissue from the corpse.

When the female dolphin continued to behave in this way into a second day, Gonzalvo and his colleagues on the boat grew concerned: in addition to fussing with the calf, she was not eating normally, behavior that could be risky for her health, given dolphins' high metabolism. Three other dolphins from the Amvrakikos population of about 150 approached the pair, but none disrupted the mother's behavior or followed suit.

As he watched the event unfold in 2007, Gonzalvo, a marine biologist at the Tethys Research Institute in Milan, Italy, decided he would not collect the infant's body to perform a necropsy, as he would usually have done for research purposes. "What prompted me not to interfere was respect," he told me earlier this year. "We

were privileged to be able to witness such clear evidence of the mother-calf bond in bottlenose dolphins, a species that I have been studying for over a decade. I was more interested in observing that natural behavior than interrupting it by abruptly interfering and disturbing a mother who was already in obvious distress. I would define what I saw as mourning.”

Was the dolphin mother truly grieving for her dead calf? A decade ago I would have said no. As a biological anthropologist who studies animal cognition and emotion, I would have recognized the poignancy of the mother’s behavior but resisted interpreting it as mourning. Like most animal behaviorists, I was trained to describe such reactions in neutral terms such as “altered behavior in response to another’s death.” After all, the mother might have become agitated only because the strange, inert status of her calf puzzled her. Tradition dictates that it is soft-hearted and unscientific to project human emotions such as grief onto other animals.

Now, though, especially after two years’ research for my book *How Animals Grieve*, I think Gonzalvo was correct in his judgment that the mother dolphin was mourning. In the past few years a critical mass of new observations of animal responses to death has bubbled to the surface, leading me to a startling conclusion: cetaceans, great apes, elephants, and a host of other species ranging from farm animals to domestic pets may, depending on circumstances and their own individual personalities, grieve when a relative or close friend dies. That such a broad range of species—including some quite distantly related to humans—lament the passing of loved ones hints that the roots of our own capacity for grief run very deep indeed.

### DEFINING GRIEF

SINCE CHARLES DARWIN’S DAY, two centuries ago, scientists have debated hotly whether some animals display emotions beyond those associated with parental care or other aspects of survival and reproduction. Darwin thought that, given the evolutionary connection between humans and other animals, many emotions must be similar across species. He granted to monkeys, for instance, grief and jealousy, as well as pleasure and vexation. But the attribution of emotions such as these to animals fell increasingly out of mainstream scientific favor. By the early 20th century the behaviorist paradigm held sway, with its insistence that only observable behavior of animals, not their interior lives, could be studied with rigor. Gradually the scientific embrace of animal emotion has revived, thanks originally in part to anecdotes from long-term field studies on large-brained mammals. From Tanzania, Jane Goodall recounted in heart-wrenching detail young chimpanzee Flint’s decline and death from grief only weeks after the death of his mother, Flo. From Kenya, Cynthia Moss reported that elephants attend to dying comrades and stroke the bones of deceased relatives. Field biologists and anthropologists began to ask questions about whether, and how, animals mourn.

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To study and understand grief among animals, scientists need a definition that distinguishes it from other emotions. Whereas “animal response to death” embraces any behavior by an individual following the death of a companion animal, researchers may strongly suspect grief only when certain conditions are met. First, two (or more) animals choose to spend time together beyond survival-oriented behaviors such as foraging or mating. Second, when one animal dies, the survivor alters his or her normal behavioral routine—perhaps reducing the amount of time devoted to eating or sleeping, adopting a body posture or facial expression indicative of depression or agitation, or generally failing to thrive. For his part, Darwin conflated grief with sadness. But the two differ, primarily in intensity: the grieving animal is more acutely distressed, possibly for a more prolonged period.

This two-part definition is imperfect. For one thing, scientists lack a metric for evaluating exactly what counts as “more acutely distressed.” Should the criteria for grief differ according to species, and might grief in other animals assume forms that are difficult for humans to recognize as mourning? The data are not yet available on these questions. Furthermore, mothers or other caretakers that constantly provide food or protection to infants that subsequently die cannot be said to have met the first criterion (going beyond survival-oriented behaviors), yet they remain among the strongest candidates for suffering survivor’s grief.

Future studies of animal mourning will help refine this definition. For now, it furthers our critical assessment of responses made by animals when others around them die. For instance, baboon and chimpanzee mothers in wild African populations sometimes carry the corpse of their dead babies for days, weeks or even months—a behavior that on the surface of things might look like grief. But they may not exhibit any significant outward indicator of agitation or distress. When the animals carry on with their routine behaviors, such as mating, their behavior does not meet the criteria for mourning.

### A MENAGERIE OF MOURNERS

A WIDE RANGE of species do exhibit behaviors that fit the two-part definition of grief, however, elephants among them. A particularly compelling example of elephant mourning comes from Iain Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants and his team at Kenya’s Samburu National Reserve, who in 2003 tracked elephants’ responses to the dying matriarch called Eleanor. When Eleanor

#### IN BRIEF

**Animal behaviorists** have traditionally shied away from attributing human emotions, such as grief, to responses by animals.

**But a growing body** of evidence indicates that species ranging from dolphins to ducks mourn the passing of relatives and close companions.

**These observations** suggest that although the ways in which we mourn may be uniquely human, our capacity for grief has deep evolutionary roots.



**DOLPHIN MOTHER** carries the body of her dead calf on her dorsal fin in the waters off Dana Point, Calif.

collapsed, a matriarch named Grace from another elephant family immediately came to her aid, using her tusks to support Eleanor back onto her feet. When Eleanor fell again, Grace stayed with her, pushing on her body, for at least an hour, even though her own family moved on. Then Eleanor died. During the course of the week that followed, females from five elephant families, including Eleanor's own, showed keen interest in the body. Some individuals appeared upset, pulling at and nudging the body with trunk and feet or rocking back and forth while standing over it. Based on the females' reactions (at no point during this period did a bull elephant visit the carcass), Douglas-Hamilton concluded that elephants show a so-called generalized response to dying and death—grieving not only for the loss of close kin but for individuals in other families.

Wild cetaceans also seem to exhibit a generalized grief response. In the Canary Islands in 2001 Fabian Ritter of Mammal Encounters Education Research observed a rough-toothed dolphin mother pushing and retrieving her dead calf's body in much the same way that the Amvrakikos dolphin mother had with her baby's corpse. She was not alone: two adult escorts swam synchronously with her at certain periods, and at other times a group of at least 15 dolphins altered their pace of travel to include the mother and dead baby. The mother's persistence was remarkable, and when on the fifth day it began to wane, the escorts joined in and supported the infant on their own backs.

Giraffes, too, appear to grieve. In 2010 at the Soysambu Conservancy in Kenya, a female Rothschild's giraffe gave birth to a baby with a deformed foot. The baby walked less and remained more stationary than most calves. During the youngster's four weeks of life, wildlife biologist Zoe Muller of the Rothschild's

Giraffe Project, based in Kenya, never saw the mother more than 20 meters away. Although individuals in a giraffe herd often synchronize their activities, foraging together, for example, the mother deviated from this pattern, preferring to stay close to the baby. Like the dolphin mother in the Amvrakikos Gulf, she may have risked her own health in doing so—though in this case for a living offspring.

One day Muller discovered the herd engaged in highly atypical behavior. Seventeen females, including the calf's mother, were vigilant and restless as they stared into a patch of bush. The calf had died in that spot about an hour before. All 17 females showed keen interest in the body that morning, approaching and then retreating from it. By the afternoon 23 females and four juveniles were involved, and some nudged the carcass with their muzzles. That evening 15 adult females clustered closely around the body—more closely than they had been during the day.

Throughout the following day numerous adult giraffes attended the infant's body. Some adult males approached for the first time, although they showed no interest in the carcass, instead focusing on foraging or inspecting the reproductive status of the females. On day three Muller spotted the mother giraffe alone under a tree about 50 meters from where the calf had died. The body itself, however, was no longer in its resting spot. Following a search, Muller located it, half-devoured, in the spot under the tree where the mother had been earlier. By the next day the body was gone, taken by hyenas.

Giraffes are highly social animals. After caching a newborn out of sight for about the first four weeks of life, the mothers sometimes engage in a crèche system in which one looks after the infants while the others forage. Muller does not use the

words “grief” or “mourning” in describing the incident she witnessed. Yet this case is especially instructive. Not only the mother’s behavior but also that of many of the females in her herd changed significantly in the wake of the infant’s death. Although it is impossible to rule out an alternative explanation, the fact that the females had mounted a protective response against predators taking the baby makes it overwhelmingly likely that grief was involved at some level.

Detailed observations of wild populations of animals, such as the ones Muller reported, are still relatively rare, for several reasons. Scientists may not be at the right place at the right time to observe post-death responses by survivors. And even when they are present, no remarkable grief behaviors may ensue. Especially at this early stage of research into animal grief, observations from sanctuaries, zoos and even our own homes may supply needed clues.

I cannot imagine describing the behavior of Willa the Siamese cat without invoking the word “grief.” For 14 years Willa lived with her sister, Carson, at the home of Karen and Ron Flowe in Virginia. The feline siblings groomed each other, lazed together in favorite parts of the house and slept with their bodies entwined. If Carson was taken from the house to visit the vet, Willa acted mildly agitated until she reunited with her sister. In 2011 Carson’s chronic medical issues worsened, and the Flowes took her again to the vet, where she died in her sleep. At first, Willa acted as she did when her sister was away for a brief period. Within two or three days, though, she began to utter an unearthly sound, a sort of wail, and to search the spots she and Carson had favored together. Even when this startling behavior faded, Willa remained lethargic for months.

Of all the instances of animal grief I have compiled, the most surprising came from a sanctuary setting. In 2006 three mulard ducks arrived at Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, N.Y. They suffered from hepatic lipidosis, a liver disease caused by force-feeding of the birds at a foie gras farm. Two of the rescued ducks, Kohl and Harper, were in bad shape physically and emotionally. Very afraid of people, Kohl had deformed legs and Harper was blind in one eye. The two forged a fine supportive friendship for four years. Ducks are social birds, but even so, the intensity of their bond was unusual. When Kohl’s leg pain increased and he could no longer walk, he was euthanized. Harper was allowed to observe the procedure and to approach his friend’s body afterward. After pushing on the body, Harper laid down and put his head and neck over Kohl’s neck. There he stayed for some hours. In effect, Harper never recovered from his loss. Day after day, he snubbed other potential duck friends, preferring to sit near a small pond where he had often gone with Kohl. Two months later Harper died as well.

#### THE SORROW CONTINUUM

IT IS LOGICAL to think that long-lived species whose members partner most closely with others in tight-knit pairs, family groups or



**FEMALE GORILLA** clutches her dead baby in a zoo in Münster, Germany. Although such behavior is not sufficient to demonstrate mourning, mothers who lose infants are among the strongest candidates for experiencing survivor’s grief.

communities may more readily mourn the deaths of loved ones than other species do. But researchers do not yet know enough about animal grief to make such a claim. We need to test this hypothesis by systematically comparing responses to death in a variety of animal social systems, from gregarious ones to those in which animals come together only seasonally for food or mating.

Still, species-level differences in grieving will not be the whole story, because variation in the immediate social contexts and personalities of individual survivors will complicate matters. For instance, whereas the practice of allowing a survivor to view the body, as Harper did with Kohl, sometimes seems to prevent or reduce a period of distressed searching and vocalizing by the surviving animal, other times it seems not to help at all—attesting to the degree of individual variation in death responses within species. Likewise, evidence for grief in wild monkeys that live in cohesive social units is surprisingly limited so far, whereas in more solitary species such as domestic cats, bonds may develop between two or more kin or friends such that grief responses rival those of much more social animals. I would predict that field observations will show that some monkeys across varied

social systems visibly mourn as much as some domestic cats. Indeed, in *How Animals Grieve*, I recount examples from cats, dogs, rabbits, horses and birds, as well as the other animals discussed here. In each species I find a grief continuum, with some individuals seeming indifferent to a companion's death and other individuals appearing distraught over such a loss.

Cognitive differences also play a role in animal grief. Just as there are different levels of empathy expressed by different species and even across individuals within a species, there must be varying levels of comprehension when animals grieve. Do some

## Love in the animal world often entwines with grief in an acute mutuality.

animals grasp death's finality or even have a mental concept of death? We simply don't know. No evidence suggests that any nonhuman animal anticipates death in the way we humans do, a capacity that underlies so much of our compelling literature, music, art and theater—and that costs our species a great deal in terms of emotional suffering.

Indeed, the capacity to mourn may become quite costly for any animal in both physical and emotional terms, especially in the wild where alert high-energy behavior is needed for foraging, predator avoidance and mating. Why then did grief evolve in the first place? Perhaps the social withdrawal that often accompanies an animal's grief, if not taken too far, allows time for rest and thus an emotional recovery that in turn leads to greater success in forging a new close bond. Or, as John Archer writes in *The Nature of Grief*, it may be that “the costs involved in grief can be viewed as a trade-off with the overall benefits conferred by separation responses” seen when two individuals are keenly attached but forced apart from each other. Under such circumstances, the missing partners may search for each other and thereby reunite and live to see another day. What is adaptive, then, may not be grief itself but instead the strong positive emotions experienced before grief comes into the picture, shared between two or more living animals whose level of cooperation in nurturing or resource-acquisition tasks is enhanced by these feelings.

### THE PRICE OF LOVE

FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, we may link grief with love, full stop. That is to say, grief results from love lost. Exploring emotions in a variety of species, ecologist and animal behaviorist Marc Bekoff of the University of Colorado at Boulder embraces the idea that many animals feel “love” as well as “grief,” even as he acknowledges that those concepts are hard to define precisely. We humans, he notes, do not fully understand love, but we do not deny its existence—or its power to shape our emotional responses.

In his book *Animals Matter*, Bekoff tells the story of a coyote called Mom whom he observed for several years during behavioral studies in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. At one point Mom began to make short journeys on her own away from her pack. Her offspring would rejoice when she returned: they licked

Mom and rolled over exuberantly at her feet. Then Mom left for good. Some of the coyotes in her pack paced; others searched for her, setting off in the direction Mom had departed. “For more than a week some spark seemed to be gone,” Bekoff writes. “Her family missed her.” Discussing animal emotion with me earlier this year, Bekoff attributed the family's response to its love for Mom. Generally, the potential for love is strong in species such as coyotes, wolves and many birds, including geese, he said, because male and female partners defend territories, feed and raise their young together, and miss each other when they are apart.

Love in the animal world often entwines with grief in an acute mutuality. Perhaps even more than the degree of social cohesion within a species, it is love between individuals that predicts when grief will be expressed. Can there be any real doubt that Willa, a representative of a species (the domestic cat) not known for its social nature, loved her sister, Carson, or that as the sole surviving sister, she suffered grief in the wake of her loss?

In our own species, grief increasingly became expressed through rituals rich in symbolism. By around 100,000 years ago, our *Homo sapiens* ancestors decorated dead bodies in red ocher, a behavior interpreted by archaeologists to be a kind of symbolic (rather than functional) ornamentation. At a site in Russia called Sungir, two children younger than 13 years, a boy and a girl, were buried 24,000 years ago, together with elaborate grave goods ranging from mammoth tusks to animals carved from ivory. Most astonishing were the thousands of ivory beads found in the pair's grave, probably sewn onto the clothing (long since disintegrated) in which the children were buried. A good portion of this ancient human community at Sungir must have come together in preparing this funeral ritual—each bead alone took an hour or more to manufacture. Although it is risky to project modern emotions onto past populations, the examples of animal grief reviewed here strengthen an emotion-based interpretation of the archaeological evidence: our ancestors of many thousands of years ago mourned their lost children.

In our modern world, grief is no longer inevitably confined to kin, close social partners or immediate members of one's own community. Public commemoratives at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima; the genocide memorial center in Kigali, Rwanda; the Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin; or the site of the Twin Towers in Manhattan or Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., all convey visibly the power of agonized global mourning. Our uniquely human capacity for sorrow at the deaths of those who are strangers to us is built on an evolutionary substrate. Our own ways of mourning may be unique, but the human capacity to grieve deeply is something we share with other animals. ■

### MORE TO EXPLORE

**Animals Matter: A Biologist Explains Why We Should Treat Animals with Compassion and Respect.** Mark Bekoff. Shambhala, 2007.

**How Animals Grieve.** Barbara J. King. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

### SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN ONLINE

For examples of animal responses to death that do not qualify as grief, go to [ScientificAmerican.com/jul2013/grief](http://ScientificAmerican.com/jul2013/grief)