



The Animal Kingdom: A Very Short Introduction

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The animal world is immensely diverse, and our understanding of it has been greatly enhanced by molecular biology and the study of evolution and development ("evo-devo"). Moreover, groundbreaking research on genes, and especially key families of genes such as the Homeobox genes which control the development of body plans, has led to radical changes in the classification of animals. In this Very Short Introduction, Peter Holland presents a cutting-edge tour of the animal kingdom, providing an authoritative summary of the modern view of animal life, its origins, and the new classification resulting from DNA studies. Beginning with the definition of animals (not obvious in biological terms), Holland takes the reader through the revolutionary new high-level groupings of animals (phyla) based on evolutionary relationships and ancestry. Ranging from corals and sponges to nematodes, sea squirts, and vertebrates, and illuminating many key topics in zoology, this fascinating, brief overview will be of great value to all students of the life sciences as well as providing a concise summary for the interested lay reader.

The Animal Kingdom: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Author : Peter Holland

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Cara Kane says

Simple, accessible intro to core evolutionary concepts and discussions

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Grrlscientist says

Did you know that the most resilient animals on earth can survive temps from -200°C to +150°C? (Incidentally, these are also considered to be amongst the cutest of all animals.) Which evolutionary innovation allowed the beetles to evolve such a fabulous diversity of species? How many times have invertebrates and vertebrates colonised land? What dramatic event can be seen only in the DNA of vertebrates? Did you know that fish and reptiles can't be separated into their own groups simply based on superficial appearances? And did you know that, of the 33 animal phyla, 32 comprise only invertebrates whilst one is a mix of both invertebrates and vertebrates?

If you've ever been tempted to read and learn about the most up-to-date information about the animal kingdom but don't want to spend a huge sum of money on an oversized textbook, then you're going to love reading *The Animal Kingdom: A Very Short Introduction* by Peter Holland [2011; Oxford University Press]. In this book, Professor Holland takes us on a whirlwind tour through the higher-level groups (phyla) in the animal kingdom, beginning by defining what is an animal (not as obvious as you'd think!), and providing an overview to the biology of each group of animals, to reviewing relevant DNA data and discussing what these data reveal about evolutionary relationships between animals, and reviewing some of our latest findings from the study of evolution and development?—"evo-devo".

This book provides an appealing introduction to and summary of the newest information about animals and thus, it is a compact survey suitable for biology and zoology students as well as a fascinating journey for the interested general reader. Without overburdening the reader with excessive details, this volume discusses the evolutionary relatedness amongst and between groups of animals based on analyses of molecular sequencing data and morphological data matrices.

Designed for the busy professional as well as the overworked student, this small paperback fits comfortably into your hand for ease of reading whilst strap-hanging on the subway, for example. It is 126 pages long, and includes tables, drawings and diagrammes, a list of additional readings, and an index. Chapters include:

- What is an animal?
- Animal phyla
- The evolutionary tree of animals
- Basal animals: corals, sponges and jellyfish

- The bilaterians: building a body
- Lophotrochozoa: wondrous worms
- Ecdysozoa: insects and nematodes
- Deuterostomes I: starfish, sea squirts and amphioxus
- Deuterostomes II: the rise of vertebrates
- Deuterostomes III: vertebrates on land
- Enigmatic animals

Even though I really like this book, I do have one quibble: I dislike the author's overly simplified description of the speciation process. Without naming it as such, he describes what sounds like allopatric speciation and ignores the other mechanisms whereby new species arise. Thus, his description of speciation is not entirely accurate and is woefully incomplete. In my opinion, Professor Holland could have easily devoted at least several paragraphs to describing the basic mechanisms whereby species arise and used a diagram to summarise that information. (But I do think that Oxford should have someone write a book about speciation for their "Very Short Introduction" series.) However, that said, I think this book is an engaging introduction or refresher for those who are interested in learning about a few of the many weird and wonderful animals out there.

This small paperback is part of Oxford's growing collection of "Very Short Introduction" books that collectively have sold more than three million copies around the world. Written by experts in their fields and small enough to fit into a pocket, handbag or rucksack, these slim volumes are interesting, informative and very readable. Based on the titles I've read so far, I am a fan of this series because each book provides a readable distillation of its topic.

NOTE: Originally published at *The Guardian* on 23 January 2012.

Laura Cooper says

I took his course based on this book and in the last lecture he got a standing ovation, it was adorable. An up-to-date taste of modern zoology, hopefully spurring a greater appetite for the subject.

Bojan Tunguz says

Animals are one of the most familiar and ubiquitous mental categories. They surround all of us, whether they are minuscule flies or oversize pets, and the human history would have been unimaginably different without our oversize reliance on animals. Aside from our daily experience, we learn about animals in school, but unless we end up majoring in biology very few of us go through the trouble of learning about these creatures on a deeper and more systematic level.

In "The Animal Kingdom: A Very Short Introduction" Peter Holland takes us on a journey of rediscovery of animals in all of their fascinating glory. This book can challenge and radically transform one's understanding of what is meant by the word "animal." It turns out that animals are much more diverse and heterogeneous than what most of us suspect. There are estimated millions of species of animals out there, and we'll probably never get a full catalog of them. Like with all other branches of the tree of life, most animals are extremely small or microscopic, live in regions far away from human habitats, and engage in lifestyles that make them

Iman El-shamekh says

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lisa_emily says

A dense book, but enjoyable read as there were many little strange facts. I learned about the animal, Cestrum veneris (Venus girdle)- a sort of comb jelly- and learning that made it all worthwhile.
