

## Ethology: some observations on animal behaviour

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I. Watching the terrestrial sorties of garden lizard (*Calotes versicolor*) as it darted here and there in short bursts was quite fascinating. After a few minutes of frantic dashing about, it stood still suddenly with head erect and extended. The lizard then repeatedly struck the ground with its nose and chin (like a bird pecking at something). This nose banging on the earth was repeated a few times, here and there.

Then after what seemed an inane physical expression of ennui, the lizard appeared smug and satisfied at one particular spot and proceeded to frenetically dig the earth, excavating a pit into which, with studied realignment of its caudal end, it deposited a number of small, pellet-like moist eggs. Job over, it carefully sealed the pit again and moved off into the hedges.

The description here raises a few questions. Why was the lizard tapping its nose all over the area before it chose a particular spot? The only rational explanation is that the forced head-banging probably is the reptile's own ingenious method to assessing soil looseness, hollowness or firmness. The sonar (echo) effect of sound waves reflecting back is much like how the physician's fingertip strike percussion elicits sound reflection that clues him to the state of hollowness, solidity and consistency of thoracic or abdominal organ. The lizard was using a very similar 'percussion' method to judge soil consistency – maybe the echo of its head bang conveys it information to the nature of the soil. Loose earth provides for easy digging and easier emergence of its young. Newts may find tunneling up loose and less compacted roof a less arduous exercise.

II. It has been often noticed that animals held captive in confines for some time are reluctant and loathe to flee free immediately on release: Even trapped mice when released, dilly dally awhile before taking a plunge to freedom this is so too with even large animals like tigers or leopards. Why would an animal want to tarry even a minute longer than absolutely needed in its 'jail or pen' even after the cage's hatches and pen's latches have been unbolted? Is it that the confined animal senses, momentarily at least, safer and more secure within the closed cage than in the wide open? Elephants especially are known to return to their camps even when the mooring chains are unlinked to free them. They do go away, but many return, again to submit themselves to being chained once again. Strangely, this unusual response to captivity and release has been described in man too. Victims of kidnapping or abduction often develop a deep bond and empathy with their captors.

Stockholm syndrome, as the condition is known in medical world, is characterized in its extreme form, with the captive even taking on an active part in promoting the 'cause' of the abductors.

Could the Stockholm syndrome be far more universal and beyond the human than is assumed? Perhaps yes, at least that's what one infers after observing the strange reactions of a wide range of animal species to sudden release from confinement and captivity. Maybe it is time we coined a new term for the animal manifestation of the Stockholm syndrome, the 'Stockade syndrome'?

It is the nature of things that when confronted by peril or danger from a stronger adversary, weaker ones, even if they always at loggerheads and each other's throats, pool resources. Another truism is, when facing a stronger scare, even a hunter and its quarry will stand united. This union among disparate elements, is seen again and again in humans, but is present in equal but less noticeable measure in animals also. It is frequently seen in birds: the strange camaraderie between disparate species when a common threat to both (like a raptor) looms.

III. A country cur, being chased by a leopard the dog, accidentally stumbled into a village well: The hungry leopard in its frantic pursuit, lost bearings and it too fell into very well. They stood, cowering and huddled inches from each other. Fortunately for both, the well was not a very fecund one - the water level being down to a few last inches at the very bottom of the pit. All night long, the dog and leopard shivered, both looking skywards from the depth of their mooring, for deliverance: intriguingly, no longer was the leopard interested in its prey, nor was the dog petrified of its enemy. Facing them both, in too distant a future, was a single common denominator, death. Fortunately, as quite often, both, predator and prey were rescued by local villagers. Numerous such examples of such odd kinships developing whilst facing of common peril are plentiful in the local press.

Why does a lizard bang its head? What prompts a captive animal to reluctance to scam on release and why do two animals, one a hunter and the other the hunted, find companionship and camaraderie when confronted with common danger.

### References

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