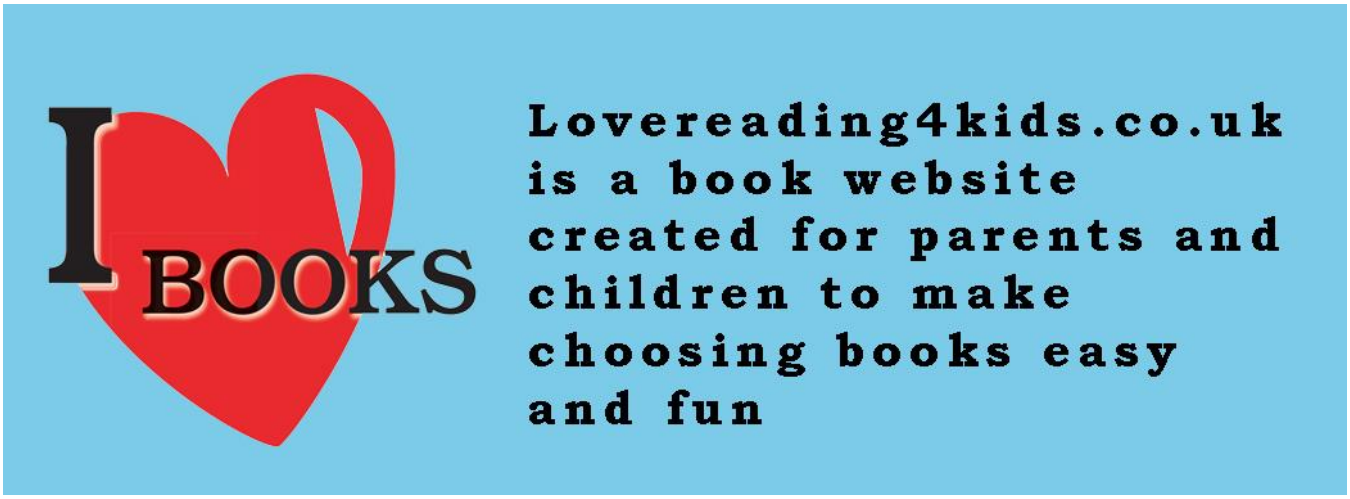


Opening extract from

Animals Behaving Badly

Written by

Nicola Davies

Illustrated by

Adam Stower

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INTRODUCTION

ANIMALS are clever. They may not drive cars or operate computers, build skyscrapers or make videos on YouTube, but they are clever in the ways they have adapted to survive in every kind of habitat, all over our planet. We need submarines to explore the sea's depths, but a sperm whale can dive to the bottom of the ocean as easily as we'd run down a flight of stairs. Without water we would die within days in the middle of a hot desert, but a kangaroo rat can live all its life without drinking. We would need a powerful saw to open the seedpods of the Brazil nut tree, but an agouti's teeth can do it in moments. Adaptations like these don't happen



overnight. It takes a lot of time, thousands or even millions of years of evolution, for animals' bodies and behaviours to become so well adapted to their environment and way of life.

Sadly, we humans are changing the planet around us so fast that there isn't time for animals to adapt to the changes *we* make to the places where *they* live. All over the world, all sorts of different kinds of animals are disappearing because of what humans are doing – cutting down forests, polluting rivers and seas, even changing the climate! I don't know about you, but this makes me very sad and very cross. So I'm always happy to hear about animals that *can* get the better of humans, and manage to survive in spite of all we do to make their lives difficult and dangerous. This book is about some of those creatures. Humans say these animals are behaving badly – and a lot of other nasty things

besides – because they get in our way. But the truth is, they are just surviving and being clever at it. The only really badly behaved animal on Earth is *us*.

Demon Wolverines

You might not know what a wolverine is, so let me introduce you. Imagine a low-slung, weaselly sort of a beast, about the size of a Labrador dog. OK so far? Now, make its legs a bit longer and its fur thicker and shaggier.

There! You've got a wolverine!



If what you have in your mind doesn't look particularly impressive to you, then prepare to be surprised...

Near Point Hope in Alaska, in the early spring of 1944, an Inuit hunter was out on the sea ice when he saw a big male polar bear. The human and the bear were searching for the same thing – seals – but the bear found a wolverine instead. The bear, like you perhaps, was not impressed. How much trouble could an animal a twentieth of its size cause? It snarled and took a lazy lunge at the big weasel.

The bear clearly didn't know much about wolverines. But it soon learnt. Instead of running off, the wolverine leapt at the bear, clamped its jaws around its windpipe, and held on until the bear was dead. An animal weighing less than a six-year-old child had just taken out the biggest land-living carnivore on Earth.


Uh-oh!

This was a surprise for the polar bear, but not for the Inuit, because although wolverines don't usually hunt on the sea ice, they have a reputation that every hunter in the far north knows.

Wolverines live from Alaska to Greenland, from Norway to the Chukchi Peninsula in Siberia: wherever the winters are long and cruel, and snow lies deep on the ground from autumn to spring. They are known to be solitary, fierce and fearless; there are reports of lone wolverines seeing off a grizzly bear or a pack of wolves. They are known to have the strength of a much larger animal; a wolverine can drag a deer carcass halfway up a mountain. And they are known for something else, too: their ability to get the better of human beings.

They are said to be "spiteful" and "devilish"; they will destroy traps and wreck human homes and food stores. "Fiend", "demon", "devil" and

"vandal" are just some of the not very complimentary words that people have used to describe wolverines.

I first got interested in wolverines when I was a little kid, because I read another true story called "Arch Criminal of the Wild". It went like this. In the north of Canada, around Hudson Bay, a Cree hunter was making his living by trapping animals like foxes, beavers, pine martens and wolverines, and selling their fur. Many people did that back then and a few still do today. A wolverine moved into the trapper's area, ripped apart every single one of the many steel traps he had set to catch animals for their fur, and killed his dog. One night, while he was sleeping, it got into his cabin and chewed through his store of furs. It gobbled up his food and what it didn't eat, it left ruined by the horrible stink of its musky scent glands. It dragged his gun off into

the woods and, finally, shredded his snowshoes, which made it very difficult for him to struggle back through the snow to town and replace all he'd lost.

You could easily see this as a tall story, made up as an excuse for human mistakes – a lost gun, some broken traps – but stories like this were common. So common that a company that bought furs from hunters across Canada had a handbook for all trappers that said:

"When a wolverine moves into his territory, a trapper has but two alternatives: he must trap the wolverine or give up trapping."

The trappers of course thought wolverine trap-wrecking and food-spoiling was "wicked", but even as a little kid I was on the side of the wolverines. It seemed to me quite fair to destroy the traps, weapons and food stores of someone who was out to kill you and your kind. I especially

loved the part of that story where the snow-shoes get wrecked and the gun disappears. But did the wolverine really know what it was doing?

Probably not. Wolverines survive by being able to eat anything, alive or dead. They'll catch small mammals, eat eggs, gobble up any dead body they come across. They'll chew on old skin and their jaws are so strong that they can crunch their way through bones and eat the bits just as you would eat a bag of crisps. As they can never be sure where their next meal is coming from, they can eat *a lot*. Their scientific name, *gulo gulo*, means "glutton" twice over! They're territorial too – they don't want to share the food on their patch. Like many mammals, their way of saying "this is mine" is to scent-mark it by squeezing the stinky, oily contents of their glands (which are like little pockets round their bottoms), all over the food.