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opening extract from

Crazy Creatures

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CRAZY CREATURES

by

Gill Arbuthnottt

INTRODUCTION

If you tried to invent an animal that did something really bizarre, the chances are you'd find it already existed, and had been doing it for millions of years. That's one of the things I love about animals. They don't have to have cute little furry faces to be fascinating. In fact, they don't need to have faces at all.

This is a guided tour round some of my favourites. I've arranged them into four sections: Yuk, Weapons, Weird and Wonderful and Lazy Bones. This means you can decide which ones you might want to avoid reading about when you're eating your breakfast! There are also some Fantastic Facts that you can use to impress your friends – who could resist knowing what animal to use to commit the perfect murder?

YUK!

VAMPIRE BATS

Yes! Vampires really do exist! Vampire bats live in South America, and yes, they do suck blood. They fly or crawl onto a sleeping animal, very quietly. Their front teeth are triangular and razor sharp, and they use them to bite the animal carefully, so they don't wake it up. They often bite large mammals like cows or humans. When they bite they put saliva (spit) into the wound, and this stops the blood clotting. The bats don't actually suck the blood, they just lick it up as the wound bleeds. They need about two tablespoonfuls of blood a day, and they need to eat at least every two days.

They hardly ever attack dogs. Some people think this is because dogs can hear the high squeaks that bats use to find their way around, so the bats can't sneak up on them.

A drug has been made based on bat spit to stop blood clotting in humans. It's called – wait for it – DRACULIN!

FULMARS

Fulmars look a lot like seagulls with very stiff wings. You don't find them in towns like seagulls, though, unless they're near the sea. They nest on cliffs, and that keeps them and their chicks safe most of the time, but if they feel threatened they don't fly away or try to peck you. Oh no, it's much smellier than that. They're sick all over you. Lovely! They eat fish, including guts thrown off fishing boats, and they love dead seal, especially if it's been floating around for a while. After that's been in their guts for a bit, it's *very* smelly.

Don't wear your best clothes if you decide to annoy a fulmar, because the smell won't come out – ever. All you can do is burn your clothes. And stand well away from the fire when you do it.

SEA CUCUMBERS

You thought fulmars were bad, but it gets even more disgusting!

Sea cucumbers must be one of the most boring animals in the sea. They're related to starfish, and it's as if they've put all five arms together over their heads and fallen onto their side. They crawl around very slowly, eating tiny bits and pieces. They look a bit like – you guessed – brightly coloured, lumpy cucumbers. If another animal tries to eat one of these things, they aren't just sick on it, they vomit up their whole gut all over it. This is very sticky, and while its attacker is busy trying to scrape guts off itself, the sea cucumber escapes – very slowly! If it does get away, it grows a new set of guts, and in about two weeks, it's ready to puke again.
You find sea cucumbers in shallow water anywhere the sea is warm (not Britain, obviously). Children in countries that have them often use them as water pistols and squeeze them until they spray their guts all over the other person. I don't suppose it's a very popular game with whoever has to wash their clothes ...

HAG FISH

Not a very flattering name, it's true, but they really don't deserve a nice name. These dear little fish are about as slimy as it's possible to be. They look like eels and have no bones – they don't even have a jaw. Instead of a proper mouth their face has a sort of sucker on the front, covered with spines and hooks, and with a spiny tongue in the middle. They use this to attach to a fish and stay stuck to it. Then they use the tongue to scrape away its flesh. The poor fish gets eaten alive!

MAGGOTS

Maggots are our friends. You didn't expect that, did you? But it's true. If it wasn't for maggots we'd be knee deep in dead animals. Maggots help get rid of all the bodies. But what are maggots? Cute little baby bluebottles! (Well, maybe they look cute to their mums). And what do they like to eat? Meat – lots of it – but it has to be rotting. Delicious.
When an animal dies, a bluebottle will find it within a couple of hours and lay a few hundred eggs on it. When the maggots hatch out of the eggs they start eating, and don't stop until they've finished every scrap. Once they've eaten enough, they change into bluebottles.
So, could you be eaten alive by maggots? Well, no, because if you are alive, you aren't rotting. You'd be quite safe sitting in a bath of maggots. Probably not happy, but safe.

Here’s another surprise. Maggots are used in hospitals. If someone has a wound that won’t heal because bacteria have started to kill the flesh, doctors can use maggots to clean it out. They breed the maggots under special sterile conditions for this, then put them in the wound and bandage it up. Because the maggots only eat *rotting* flesh, they nibble off all the bad bits, and the wound will heal properly.

The only problem is the noise. Apparently you can hear them chomping away … Still, I suppose it’s worth it.