

Alien Animal Encounters

By John Scalzi, Staff Writer, *Sol System Weekly Report*

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Each week, we here at *SSWR* step right outside of our offices here on 54th and ask folks on the street our Question of the Week -- sometimes topical, sometimes whimsical, always intriguing. Our question this week:

What is the most interesting encounter you've ever had with an alien animal species?

Rowenna Morello, Accountant, Staten Island:

That's gotta be the time we got the cat high with a glyph. My college roommate worked in the xenobiology lab and brought the glyph home one night in a shoebox. It's just this little mouse-like thing, so of course the cat wanted at it right away. It's cat-food-sized. We pushed the cat away from it a couple of times, but then I had to go make a call. I left the glyph alone in its box on the table, and the cat hopped up and started poking at the thing with its paw, you know, poke poke poke.

Thing is, the glyph is a total predator, and it's got this mouth that opens up like a little umbrella and surrounds whatever it's going to eat. So there's the cat, batting at the glyph, and suddenly the glyph lunges forward, opens its jaws, wraps them around the cat's paw, and clamps down hard. It's trying to eat the cat. Well, the cat's freaking out, of course. It's scooting backwards, trying frantically to shake this thing off its paw and wailing, you know, like a cat in heat. My roommate had to use a Popsicle stick from the trash to pry the glyph's mouth open.

The cat ran away and seemed to be pissed off but okay. Then a half hour later I caught him just staring at a bookshelf and wobbling back and forth. Seems that glyphs paralyze their prey with venom; it kills just about anything on the glyphs' planet but here it just makes you hallucinate. It's a chemistry thing. After we realized the cat wasn't going to die, it was actually pretty funny to watch him bump into walls and stare at his own paws. Although at one point he sprinted right towards an open window and my roommate had to make a lunge to keep him from jumping out. It was a third-floor walkup. I guess the cat thought he could fly.

Anyway, the glyph went back to the lab the next day. The funny thing is that for the next couple of days, the cat seemed to be looking around to find the glyph, circling the table and poking into boxes and stuff. I think he wanted a fix.

Alan Jones-Wynn, Copywriter, Manhattan:

My daughter's third-grade class was taking a trip to the Bronx Zoo and it was my turn to be a parent assistant, so I got the day off from work and helped her teacher herd a couple dozen kids around the place, which, if you've never done it, is just as aggravating as it sounds. This was around the time that the Zoo was just opening their "Alien Animals" exhibit, and the place was jam-packed; it actually helped that we were on an official educational field trip, because otherwise we probably wouldn't have been able to get through the crowds.

We filed through and the tour guide pointed out all the popular alien animals, like those omads and the revers and the neyons, right, the ones they make stuffed-animal toys of to sell at the gift shop. But then we came to this one habitat and the tour guide stopped and pointed out what had to have been the ugliest lump of fur in the whole zoo. She told us that the lump we were looking at was called a corou, and that it was an endangered species on Tungsk, and that the Bronx Zoo and others were trying to start a captive breeding program. As she was saying this, her eyes were welling up with tears, and it seemed like she was about to break down right then and there.

Well, obviously, this seemed like pretty bizarre behavior, but then I looked at the corou, and it swiveled an eye stalk at me, and I swear I was overwhelmed with this wave of sadness and regret that was so overpowering I can't even describe it. It's like what you'd probably feel if you'd just heard that a bus carrying everyone you ever knew just went off a mountain trail in Peru. And it wasn't just me; all those kids, who you couldn't have shut up if you wired their jaws shut, were all just standing there silently, staring at the corou and looking like they'd just seen their dog run over by a car. One of the kids actually tapped on the glass of the habitat and said "I'm sorry" to the corou, over and over. We had to literally drag some of the kids away. I mean, I wouldn't call it telepathy or mind control, but something was going on there.

My kid and I went back a couple of years later and the corou exhibit wasn't there anymore, and I was sort of glad -- it's never a good thing to worry that you're going to get clinically depressed at the zoo. At a dinner party a little later I met a vet who worked at the zoo, and I asked him about the corou. He said that one zoologist working with the habitat committed suicide and another was placed on leave after she took the zoo's breeding pair, drove them up to Vermont, and tried to release them into the wild. She kept telling everyone afterwards that they told her it was what they wanted. They eventually had to get rid of the exhibit altogether. I haven't heard about the corou since. I think they're extinct now.

Ted McPeak, Community College Student, Jersey City:

Some friends and me heard that if you smoked the skin of an aret, you could get monumentally wasted. So we bought one at a pet store and waited a couple of weeks until it shed its skin. Then we crumbled up the dry skin, put it in with some pot, and lit up. We all got these insane mouth blisters that didn't go away for weeks. We all had to eat soup for a month. Though maybe it wasn't the skin; the pot could have been bad or something. We flushed the aret down the toilet after we got the blisters, though, so we'd have to go buy a new one to try it out again. I don't think we'll bother.

Qa' Hungran Ongru, Cultural Attaché for Fine Arts and Literature, Royal Kindran Embassy, Manhattan:

Well, I am myself an alien here, so I suppose you could say that my most interesting incident with an alien animal was with one of your animals, a dog. Shortly after being assigned to the embassy here, I was given a Shih Tzu by a human friend. I was delighted, of course. He really was an adorable thing, and he was very loving and devoted to me. I named him Fred. I like that name.

As you may know, the male of the Kindra species is a large non-sentient segmented worm which we females attach across our midribs during the mating process; the male stays attached while a four-part fertilization process occurs over several days. It's not very romantic by human standards, but obviously it works well for us. Shortly before one of my ovulatory periods, I had managed to score a rather significant diplomatic coup when I convinced the Guggenheim to tour selections of its collection among the Kindra home planets. As a reward I was allowed to choose a male from the oligarchical breeding stock for my next insemination. The one I chose had deep segment ridges and a nicely mottled scale pattern; again, not something a human would find attractive, but deeply compelling for Kindrae. He was attached to me in a brief conjoining ceremony at the embassy, attended by selected Kindra and human friends, and then I went home to Fred.

Fred came running to meet me at the door as he always did, but when he saw the male across my belly, he skidded across the tiles and then started growling and barking and backing away slowly. I tried to assure him that everything was okay, but every time I tried to reach for Fred, he'd back away more. At one point he snapped at my tendrils. I was surprisingly hurt; although it seemed silly to want Fred and the male to "get along" (considering that the male was doing nothing but lying there), I did want them to get along. If for no other reason than that the male would be attached to me for the next week or so. But for the next few days Fred would have nothing to do with me. He wouldn't eat from his bowl until I left the room. He even peed in my shoes.

On the fourth night of this, I was sleeping when I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my abdomen; it was the male, beginning to unhook himself from me. Then I heard the growling. I snapped on a light, looked down, and saw Fred attacking the male; he had managed to get a bite in between two of the male's ring

segments and punctured an artery. The male was bleeding all over my bed. If the male managed to completely detach himself, it would be disastrous -- my impregnation cycle was not yet complete, and it would be highly unlikely after a noble male was attacked in my bed that I would be entrusted with another ever again. So with one arm I lodged the male back onto me and struggled to keep him in place, with another I reached for the phone to call my doctor, and with the third I scooped up Fred and tossed him off the bed. He landed up on the floor with a yelp and limped away, winding up a perfectly charming incident for all three of us.

I was rushed to the embassy infirmary, where the male's injuries were sutured and he was sedated to the point where he would again willingly reattach himself to me. By some miracle the fertilization process was uninterrupted; I was confined to an infirmary bed for the rest of the process while doctors made sure everything went as it was supposed to. The ambassador came to visit afterwards and I expressed my shame at the incident and offered my resignation; she declined it, and told me that no one blamed me for what happened, but that it would probably be a good idea to get rid of Fred.

I did, giving him to a retired human diplomat I had worked with for many years. I visit them both frequently, and Fred is always happy to see me. He's also always happy to see my daughter. Who is also named Fred. As I said, I like the name.

Dr. Elliot Morgenthal, Doctor, Stamford:

Oh, God. I worked the ER as an intern right around the time of that stupid fungdu craze. Here's the thing about fungdu: they're furry, they're friendly, they vibrate when they're happy, and they have unusually large toothless mouths. You can see where this is going. About two or three times a month we'd get some poor bastard coming in with a fungdu on his Johnson.

What people apparently don't know about fungdu is that if they think that what they've got in their mouths is live prey, these little backward-pointing quills emerge out of their gums to keep whatever they're trying to eat from escaping. These dumbasses get it into their heads to get a hummer from their fungdu, and then are understandably surprised to discover that their pet thinks it's being fed a live hot dog. Out come the quills, and the next thing you know, there's some asshole in the emergency room trying to explain how his erect penis just happened to fall into the fungdu's mouth. He tripped, you see. How inconvenient.

Here's the truly disgusting thing about this: All the time this is going on, the fungdu is usually desperately trying to swallow. And that animal has some truly amazing peristaltic motion. Again, you can see where this is going. The nurses wouldn't touch any of these guys. They told them to clean up after their own damn selves. Who can blame them.

Bill and Sue Dukes, Plumbing Supplies, Queens:

Bill: There was this one time I was driving through Texas, and I saw the weirdest fuckin' thing on the side of the road. It looked like an armor-plated rabbit or something. It was just lying there, though. I think it was dead.

Sue: You idiot. That's an armadillo. They're from Earth.

Bill: No, you must be thinking of some other animal. This thing was totally not Earth-like at all. It had, like, scales and shit.

Sue: That's an armadillo. They're all over Texas. They're like the state animal or something. Everybody knows that.

Bill: Well, what the fuck do I know about Texas? I'm from Queens. And we sure as hell don't got any armadillos in Queens.

Sue (rolling eyes): Oh, yeah, if it's not from Queens, it ain't shit, right?

Bill: You got that right. Fuckin' Texas. Hey, what about those things, you know, that got the duck bill?

Sue: You mean ducks?

Bill: No, smartass, they don't look like a duck, they just got a duck bill.

Sue: What, a platypus?

Bill: Yeah, a platypus! Where are those things from?

Sue: They're from Earth too.

Bill: No shit? Man, Earth is a weird-ass planet sometimes.