



12-1-2014


Book Review - Wild Connection: What Animal Courtship and Mating Tell Us About Human Relationships

J. Matthew Hoch

Nova Southeastern University, jhoch@nova.edu

Find out more information about [Nova Southeastern University](#) and the [Oceanographic Center](#).

Follow this and additional works at: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/occ_facarticles

 Part of the [Marine Biology Commons](#), and the [Oceanography and Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology Commons](#)

NSUWorks Citation

J. Matthew Hoch. 2014. Book Review - Wild Connection: What Animal Courtship and Mating Tell Us About Human Relationships. *Quarterly Review of Biology*, (4) : 393 -394. http://nsuworks.nova.edu/occ_facarticles/771.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Marine and Environmental Sciences at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oceanography Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

Although some may find discomfiting the results of such an approach to the analysis of the social-learning literature, the method is compelling. Further, if as this volume suggests, both field and laboratory studies of social learning and tradition in animals are going to become far more model-driven, mathematically based enterprises than they have been in the past, then the final five chapters of Hoppitt and Laland's monograph will prove invaluable to graduate students interested in undertaking future research in the area.

In sum, *Social Learning* provides the first compelling synthesis of the social-learning literature and is of value not only to newcomers seeking an introduction to a complex, multidisciplinary field, but also to established researchers looking for challenging views on familiar topics. A copy should not only be on the bookshelf of but also read by anyone interested in the study of social learning.

BENNETT G. GALEF, *Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*

NOBLE SAVAGES: MY LIFE AMONG TWO DANGEROUS TRIBES—THE YANOMAMŌ AND THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS.

By Napoleon A. Chagnon. New York: Simon & Schuster. \$32.50. ix + 531 p.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-0-684-85510-3 (hc); 978-1-4516-1147-2 (eb). 2013.

This volume hits readers viscerally. Dirty tricks. First contact. Underhanded monks. I could not put the book down. Chagnon's gritty writing style takes readers out of their chairs and puts them into the rainforest. Readers share the author's awe when he finally understands the geography of Yanomamöland, which contradicts maps of the time. Readers feel his joy when he realizes he has made true friends, people who help him at costs to themselves, among the Yanomamö. Readers feel his sorrow when Yanomamö die, especially when they die because of outside machinations.

Students considering fieldwork should read this volume. Chagnon shows the challenges: dangerous rivers, tricky adversaries and, sometimes, green snot. But he also shows the rewards of fieldwork: lasting friendships, a profound understanding of the physical and biological world, and a healthy respect for political enemies and friends.

Nobel Savages hits readers intellectually, too. It reviews the author's vast body of work on social organization, the underlying causes of violence, and the politics of fighting. For scientists familiar with his publications, the overview offers remarkable details. For instance, his 1988 *Science* paper has a bar graph showing a man who had *unokaiied* (killed) 16 times. *Nobel Savages* puts a face to that man. Anthropologists who want to understand hu-

man behavior using an evolutionary framework should read this book.

Chagnon uses his last three chapters to address the dark rumors swirling around him. You can his feel anger simmering beneath his words, but this is not a vitriolic diatribe. Instead, he gives a clinical assessment of the players and their motives, much as he did for the Yanomamö.

If you have heard rumors of bad science, questionable ethics, and fraudulent data—and want more knowledge before judging—this volume is for you. If you want to better understand academia as a blood sport, this book is for you. If you are a Salesian monk or a proponent of Marvin Harris, you probably will not enjoy this work.

Nobel Savages provides an in-depth review of Chagnon's career. His data and interpretation represent foundational work in biology and anthropology that will stand the test of time.

SHARON POCHRON, *Sustainability Studies Program, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York*

WILD CONNECTION: WHAT ANIMAL COURTSHIP AND MATING TELL US ABOUT HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.

By Jennifer L. Verdolin. New York: Prometheus Books. \$18.95 (paper). 302 p.; index. ISBN: 978-1-61614-946-8 (pb); 978-1-61614-947-5 (eb). 2014.

Wild Connection is both a popular science work written for a general audience about animal reproduction and a collection of information, anecdotes, and personal reflections on human romance. The book is organized into 10 chapters, each exploring different questions of reproductive behavior such as: First Impressions (Chapter 2); Sorry Guys—Size Matters (Chapter 4); or Getting Cuckolded (Chapter 9). These chapters open with a humorous account of the author's (or one of her friends) experiences on the dating scene, followed by comparisons of the observed behaviors with those from the animal kingdom. Verdolin builds upon a foundation of zoological and psychological scientific literature as well as pop-culture references and tales of romance gone wrong. For example, the author tells a story of a dinner date forgetting his wallet (pp. 56-57) and compares it to the deceptive croak of a tree frog trying to disguise his quality. In addition to the goal of educating readers, the book also serves as a memoir, documenting the author's search for love. The volume is interspersed with fun facts such as that the first engagement ring was given in 1477 (p. 118) and the difference between "friends with benefits" and "booty calls" (p. 176). Verdolin carefully straddles a tone of irreverence and scientific seriousness, such that young readers might be titillated, but their parents will be unable to object to the content.

The book uses many ad hoc comparisons between animal behaviors and humans. Many are explained with statements such as: “there must be a reason for it” (p. 64); “[i]f you think about it, it makes perfect sense” (p. 131); and “[t]his means that there is actually a biological reason” (p. 119). These statements may be criticized as “just-so stories” or “evolutionary spandrels,” however, their purpose is to inspire thought about why we behave the way we do, not to dogmatically state the literal truth.

The book invites comparisons to Olivia Judson’s *Dr. Tatiana’s Sex Advice to All Creation* (2002. New York: Metropolitan Books), another volume that uses animal courtship and mating to educate a general audience about reproduction, sex, and behavior. Judson’s volume is slightly more technical from a biological standpoint, but relies a great deal on trying to evoke emotional reactions. *Wild Connection*, on the other hand, is more relatable, as the author writes as a partner in conversation rather than as an all-knowing, unimpeachable expert. The current book would probably work better as a point from which to start classroom discussions.

The main conclusion that one draws from the volume is that humans are animals, but by being aware of our animalistic proclivities we can better understand ourselves. The format, switching between facts and observations of animals and humorous accounts of romantic misadventures works well to maintain the interest of readers. It also challenges misconceptions of human mating and romantic behavior, like the “Cinderella Myth” or that men are wired to be more promiscuous than women. I found the book to be enjoyable and a relatively quick read.

J. MATTHEW HOCH, *Math, Science & Technology*,
Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

ANIMAL COMMUNICATION THEORY: INFORMATION AND INFLUENCE.

Edited by Ulrich E. Stegmann. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. \$99.00. xviii + 452 p.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-1-107-01310-0. 2013. Do animal signals contain information and have meaning, like words in a language, or are they potent stimuli that influence the sensory systems and behaviors of intended recipients? This book debates the role of information in animal communication by presenting opinion and evidence from diverse disciplines, such as evolutionary biology, ethology, linguistics, and neurophysiology. It also includes valuable philosophical contributions about the nature of information and

meaning, although these are overused and consequently somewhat distracting.

The volume includes an introduction and 18 contributed chapters organized into five parts: information-based communication; communication based on influence and manipulation; case studies; evolutionary perspectives on animal communication; and the relationship between animal signals and human language. The core of the debate is in the first two parts, which, in my opinion, should appear in reverse order, since most chapters in the first section are in part responses to arguments presented in the second. Regardless of their order, the chapters throughout this book are engaging, and are made even more so by their appended commentaries. These are critique-and-defend-style exchanges between other authors from the volume and those of the focal chapter. They reveal the passion of the authors and the tension among them, but they also highlight points of contention that were not apparent following the book’s general introduction.

The volume includes many excellent chapters advocating an information-based approach. When considered collectively, however, multiple notions of information emerge, which seems to diminish its utility for the scientific study of animal communication. At the same time, opponents of the information-based approach provide a compelling alternative based on influence and manipulation. The outstanding chapter by Drew Rendall and Michael J. Owren articulates the problems inherent in the information-based approach. It shows how pervasive these problems are in the literature, and provides an alternative framework for how researchers can proceed. Michael J. Ryan’s chapter, which in my opinion was the highlight of the book, implements this new framework by applying it to a classic biological system, the túngara frog (*Engystomops pustulosus*). In doing so, he provides a comprehensive understanding of a wonderfully complex communication system that is grounded in sensory biology, ecology, and evolutionary history.

The book’s value for animal communication researchers might have been greater if there had been a general conclusion that summarized the state of the debate and provided future direction. For example, on which issues do the authors generally agree and disagree? How prevalent are the information and influence views within the field of animal communication? Are there unique predictions for information- and noninformation-based communication that could help distinguish between these alternatives? Even without such a conclusion, the volume has value because it will encourage researchers to describe animal communication more

Copyright of Quarterly Review of Biology is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.