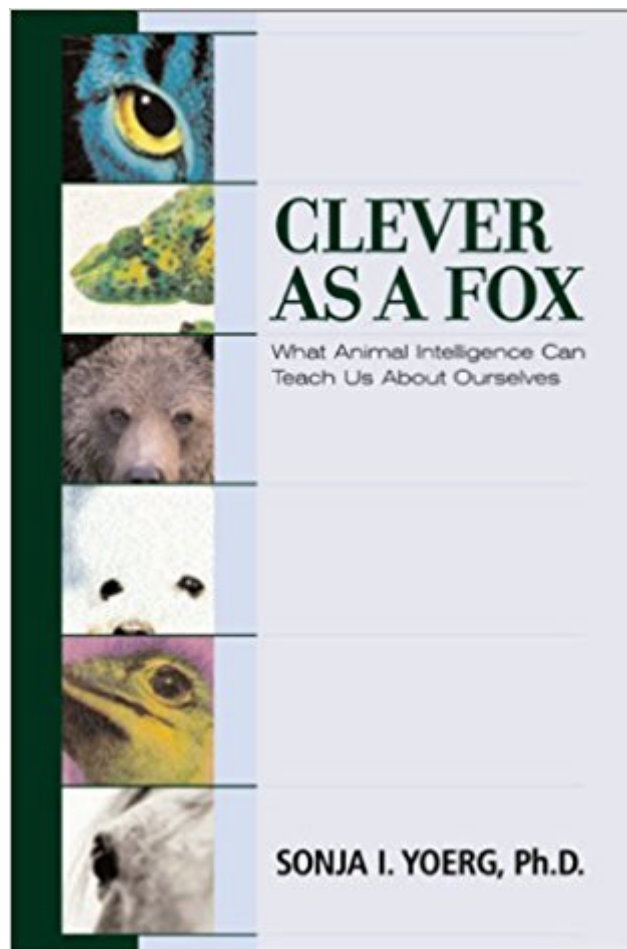




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# Clever As A Fox : Animal Intelligence And What It Can Teach Us About Ourselves



## Synopsis

A lively, insightful look at the world of animal intelligence. Recent evidence has dismissed the belief that animals are simply reflex machines, acting without thought or real consciousness. In response, there has been a rush to examine animal intelligence. Yet what, precisely, is intelligence? Is it the ability to learn, the ability to remember, or the ability to survive? What delineates instinct from intelligence? Why are dolphins smarter than eagles and bees smarter than worms? Are cats smarter than dogs? *Clever as a Fox* explores the often-misconstrued world of animal intelligence. From B.F. Skinner's behaviorism to evolutionary biology, Dr. Sonja Yoerg examines the ways we have come to view motivation and intelligence in animals. By evaluating our complex relationships to animals-why we eat some animals while pampering others is often predicated on a commensurate belief in intelligence-Dr. Sonja Yoerg offers us a better understanding of our own way of thinking. Entertaining, and scrupulously researched, *Clever as a Fox* will challenge your previously held notions about animals and the measure of intelligence, both theirs and ours.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A lively, literate book...a fast-paced read, studded with insightful perspectives." -*Publisher's Weekly* "Leavened with humor...clear, logical and well-written." -*Booklist* "What animal intelligence teaches us about ourselves is that we're not as smart as we thought we were...[R]igorous and careful." -*The New York Times* "Yoerg brilliantly dissects the dense literature...The book is notable for its readability, erudition and use of metaphor." -*American*

## Scientist

Sonja Yoerg earned her Ph.D. in biopsychology from the University of California at Berkeley. Her research focused on the study of learning and foraging in blue jays, pigeons, kangaroo rats, and spotted hyenas, both in the lab and the field. Yoerg is also the author of the three novels published by Penguin/Berkley and spends much of her time gardening and cooking in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

I just gave a copy of Sonja Yoerg's wonderful book, *Clever As a Fox*, to a dear friend visiting the USA from Switzerland. She said, "I had a little time to sit down and started to read.....It is an amazing book, very nicely written and so interesting. To have the skills to observe Mother Nature in such detail and then being able to write it down without being scientifically too stiff or tedious, to observe, describe and understand Nature in its endless resources in creativity was just marvelous for me. I am again and again fascinated and love to read such books or watch documentaries on TV.....thank you so much for this beautiful gift." Sonja Yoerg, a scientist, is a phenomenal communicator and to reach the core of someone, to touch their heart through writing is a rare and precious gift.

The author challenges a number of traditional assumptions about the nature of intelligence and about our ability to 'rate' the intelligence of various animals based on our preconceived notions of either 'great chain of being' thinking or on a Darwinian evolutionary model. Why, she asks, do we rate behaviors that appear equally sophisticated as indicative of different degrees of intelligence (or non-intelligent instinctual reactions) based not on the behaviors themselves but on the 'type' of animals that exhibit them. We are far more likely to give a primate credit for exhibiting problem solving ability than we are to a scrub jay even though both routinely perform very similar actions. In addition the author offers a wide variety of anecdotal evidence for intelligence among species that normally are not regarded as being among the sharpest knives in the drawer. She also questions the various definitions of 'intelligence' concluding that although we use the word and think we can understand it, none of us can really offer an adequate definition. And it is herein that my frustration lies. Our author raises a lot of questions and debunks a lot of myths. But I am left, after reading the book, asking myself exactly what MORE do I know now about animal intelligence than I did before. Perhaps I should, like Socrates, be happy just to become more knowledgeable of my own ignorance, but, to be honest, I want to know more about what THIS author thinks are some answers

to the very questions she's raised.

This book makes you stop and think about intelligence. I have a new appreciation for animal smarts. Great information presented with lots of laugh out loud humor. I really enjoyed this book.

"Clever As A Fox," Sonja Yoerg, VA, Bloomsbury, 2001 ISBN 1-58234-115-X, HC, 208 pg. plus 14 pg. Bibio., 6 pg. Index. 9 1/2" x 6 1/4" Dr. Yoerg (PhD in bio-psych., Berkeley) has researched, written & lectured on behavioral dynamics of animals. The book's title is apropos to its contents as she discourses in well-executed prose -- the "Chain of Being" relative to the 'scala naturae' of Man's perceived cognitive abilities of animals in great depth -- covering species we've come to know and love the best: dogs, cats, birds, pigs, but also frogs, fish, foxes, finches, and the mammal "Flipper" to mention a few. The author has wonderful command of writing, using those splendid explanatives, idioms and speech idiosyncrasies which can make mundane observations exciting & memorable, and it is testimony to the insight she has into the instinct, intelligence & learning patterns of animals both within their clan, species and between species, & the treatise is sprinkled with worthy commentaries on anthropomorphism & historical perspectives on the ever-changing study of the domain of animal behavior & cognition as it may apply to humans. It is a pleasant read.

In this accessible and smart book, Sonja Yoerg writes that as a child in Vermont she "spent a lot of time lying on the rooty ground under shady trees, looking up through the overlapping layers of impossible green," observing bugs and plants, watching and waiting with an eagle eye, preoccupied during summers by the thrilling specifics of the natural world, until fall, when "all would flame out in red, yellow, orange, take the dive of Newton's apple, and contribute to the leaf pile goal line for touch football." Even as a kid she had the instincts of a scientist - and likely played touch football, too. She brings this brainy, sturdy, and playful approach to this book, too. She is self-aware but not self-absorbed. It's a pleasure. This is not a polemic either in support of or against animal rights. It is a serious conversation regarding the yardsticks used to define and then assess animal intelligence. Dr. Yoerg is especially interested in the origins and the meaning of the persistent human urge to order the animal world. What is animal intelligence?, she asks, and then, even more importantly, Why has it been so important to our society to measure it? She asserts that the ancient (and contemporary) urge to design a hierarchy of intelligence (usually God first, man next, then apes, and so on) says more about us than about the animals that behavioral and biological research has (often foolishly) refused to observe in context, but instead has sent through mazes, tested in

boxes, and hypothesized in a variety of ways over time - for a variety of reasons. Sometimes deeply-held beliefs are turned on their ear. For example it is widely assumed that sheep flocks respond to herding dogs, who in turn are responding to the rancher's whistle. But Gujarti shepherds in India "whistle just like their British counterparts" while the dogs often sleep. The sheep respond to the shepherd's whistle. The dogs protect the flocks from predators - but the sheep "herd" themselves. Dr. Yoerg supplies the reader with some surprising tidbits. "During the Middle Ages, all sorts of creatures were convicted of criminal behavior and tried by the courts," and later, "In 1386 a sow was convicted of the murder of a child and was led to the public execution dressed in man's clothes." (pp. 71-2) Her point is that human opinions regarding the animal world have been a highly mutable thing - subject to religion, politics, economics, and emotion. Dr. Yoerg offers a reasonably detailed historic overview of this contentious field - from Aristotle to the middle ages to Darwin, the behaviorists, the Germans and Gestalt theory as advanced by Wolfgang Kohler, cognitive psychology, and many more. In addition, rather than being a collection of 'things you might not have known about animals,' it is an orderly and thoughtful discussion. There is sly humor (why doesn't a dog use a mirror to right an inside-out ear?) and wealth of interesting information here - why some animals (the rat, the crow, the coyote and the fox for example) are comparatively unpopular in the US - and are reputed to be 'cunning,' 'wily,' 'crafty,' and 'sneaky,' whereas others (dogs, cats, squirrels) are more often described as 'clever,' 'smart,' or 'cute.' (Disney and Warner Brothers and TV have a lot to do with it, Dr. Yoerg asserts.) Animal research - and the fact that our pets kill other animals. (Quoting another writer, A.H. Herzog: "If each pet cat in the US ate only two mice, chipmunks, or baby birds each year, the number of animals slaughtered by pets would greatly exceed the number of animals used for research.") Neoteny - the existence of juvenile features (big eyes, round head - the cuteness factor) in the adult of the species - is a contributor, too, in human opinions about the species. The dicey matter of different cultures' treatment of the dog is discussed. Notions of love and attachment - and a convincing send up of behaviorism - are included. Dr. Yoerg has taken a wide array of material and organized it and presented it in an accessible and lively way. She ranges widely and well. The bibliography names over a hundred books and articles, and the index is excellent. She comes to no sweeping conclusions. Instead she has begun a variety of thoughtful and thought-provoking conversations. She's a terrific teacher. A great read.

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