



STAYING ALIVE IN THE WILD

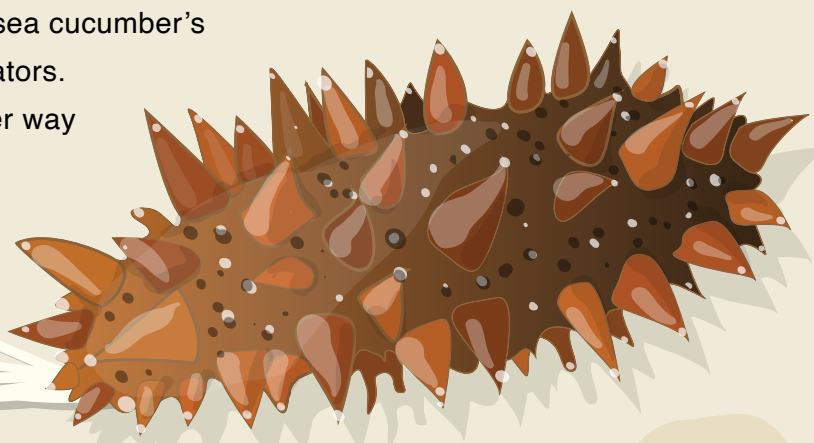
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How do animals manage to stay alive in the wild, wild world?

Arch back and stand tall. Blend in with the surroundings. Run.

These are just some of the ways that animals protect themselves in the wild. Some of these means of protecting themselves are well known and evident — you have probably watched a scene of a cheetah chasing a gazelle on television. Others are more ¹subtle, and some are downright bizarre.

For example, some species of ants in Borneo will self-explode to protect their colony. This protective action kills the ant, but it can save the colony from danger. The Texas horned lizard will squirt blood from its eyes at a predator to keep itself safe. A sea cucumber expels its digestive organs from its anus to protect itself. In some cases, the sea cucumber's intestines can be poisonous to predators. Other times, though, it is just a clever way of convincing a predator it is dead.

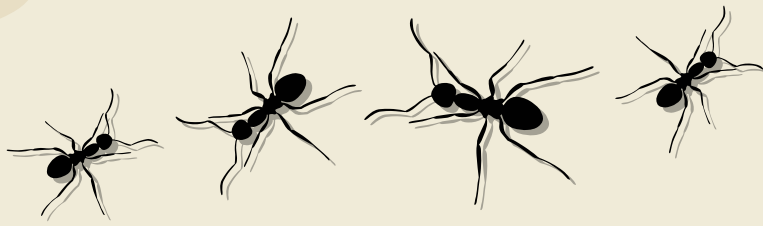


These defence ²mechanisms may seem wild, but they are crucial in ensuring the survival of animals and their own kind. The natural world is not always as pleasant a place as you might see in cartoons. It can be cutthroat, painful, and at times, difficult for animals to survive. For animals to live long enough to reproduce and continue their species, they often need clever strategies.

‘Survival of the fittest’, a term made famous by British ³naturalist Charles Darwin, suggests that organisms best adjusted to their environment are the most successful in surviving and reproducing. This means that animals which have survival skills best adapted to their environment will be higher in number. These survival skills include everything from finding food, protecting territories and using camouflage to sharing resources, and avoiding danger by fleeing or intimidating enemies.

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There are many different ways in which animals protect themselves from predators. However, no one defence mechanism is always effective as predators occasionally find new ways to defeat it. Hence, many animals use more than one defence mechanism at a time. For example, the hognose snake has camouflaged colours that helps it avoid detection by predators, but if an owl or some other predator finds it, the hognose snake will often inflate its neck to trick the predator and appear larger than it is. If even that does not work, the hognose snake will play dead.

The natural world is a dangerous place and it is necessary for animals to adapt to the changing natural environment. Adaptation is but a finale in the ⁴perpetual series that is evolution – it is how Earth has continued to enjoy unbelievable ⁵biodiversity since the dawn of life nearly four billion years ago. Creatures lower on the food chain do not live their lives completely at the mercy of the appetites of the top-end predators. Every species has its own bag of survival tricks — adaptations that empower at least some members of each species to live long enough to reproduce before ending up in the bellies of predators in the real-life game of staying alive.

Word Bank:

- 1 subtle:** achieved in a quiet way that does not attract attention to itself and is therefore good or clever
- 2 mechanisms:** ways of doing something that are planned or part of a system
- 3 naturalist:** a person who studies and knows a lot about plants and animals
- 4 perpetual:** continuing forever in the same way
- 5 biodiversity:** the number and types of plants and animals that exist in a particular area or in the world generally

