

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **COMFORT**

THE place where the environment comes into direct contact with an animal-its body surface-receives a great deal of rough treatment during the course of its life. It is astonishing that it survives the wear and tear and lasts so well. It manages to do so because of its wonderful system of tissue replacement and also because animals have evolved a variety of special comfort movements that help to keep it clean. We tend to think of these cleaning actions as comparatively trivial when considered alongside such patterns as feeding, fighting, fleeing and mating, but without them the body could not function efficiently. For some creatures, such as small birds, plumage maintenance is a matter of life and death. If the feathers are allowed to become bedraggled, the bird will be unable to take off fast enough to avoid its predators and will be unable to keep up its high body temperature if conditions become cold. Birds spend many hours bathing, preening, oiling and scratching themselves and carry out this performance in a long and complicated sequence. Mammals are slightly less complex in their comfort patterns, but nevertheless indulge in a great deal of grooming, licking, nibbling, scratching and rubbing. Like feathers, the hair has to be maintained in good order if it is to keep its owner warm. If it becomes clogged and dirty, it will also increase the risk of disease. Skin parasites have to be attacked and reduced in numbers as far as possible. Primates are no exception to this rule.

In the wild state, monkeys and apes can frequently be seen to groom themselves, systematically working through the fur, picking out small pieces of dried skin or foreign bodies. These are usually popped into the mouth and eaten, or at least tasted. These grooming actions may go on for many minutes, the animal 174