

The brightest stars in the carnivore galaxy are, on the one hand, the wild dogs and wolves, and, on the other, the big cats such as the lions, tigers and leopards. They are beautifully equipped with delicately perfected sense organs. Their sense of hearing is acute, and their external ears can twist this way and that to pick up the slightest rustle or snort. Their eyes, although poor on static detail and colour, are incredibly responsive to the tiniest movement. Their sense of smell is so good that it is difficult for us to comprehend it. They must be able to experience a virtual landscape of odours. Not only are they capable of detecting an individual smell with unerring precision, but they are also able to pick out the separate component odours of a complex smell. Experiments carried out with dogs in 1953 indicated that their sense of smell was between a million and a thousand million times as accurate as ours. These astonishing results have since been queried, and later, more careful tests have not been able to confirm them, but even the most cautious estimates put the dog's sense of smell at about a hundred times better than ours.

In addition to this first-rate sensory equipment; the wild dogs and big cats have a wonderfully athletic physique. The cats have specialised as lightning sprinters, the dogs as long-distance runners of great stamina. At the kill they can bring into action powerful jaws, sharp, savage teeth and, in the case of big cats, massively muscular front limbs armed with huge, dagger-pointed claws.

For these animals, the act of killing has become a goal in itself, a consummatory act. It is true that they seldom kill wantonly or wastefully, but if, in captivity, one of these carnivores is given ready-killed food, its urge to hunt is far from satisfied. Every time a domestic dog is taken for a walk by its master, or has a stick thrown for it to chase and catch, it is having its basic need to hunt catered for in a way that no amount of canned dog-food will subdue. Even the most overstuffed domestic cat demands a nocturnal prowling and the chance to leap on an unsuspecting bird.

Their digestive system is geared to accept comparatively long periods of fasting followed by bloating 23