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# Animal behaviour: a very short introduction

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# **Animal behaviour: a very short introduction**

BOOK REVIEW by MARK BRIFFA

**Animal behaviour: a very short introduction, Tristram D. Wyatt, Oxford University Press, Oxford, U.K. (2017), p. 146, Price £7.99 paperback**

The definitive version is published at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2017.06.023>

Animal behaviour: a very short introduction is number 513 in a vast series of very short introductions covering subjects from Accounting to Zionism. These pocket-sized paperbacks are nicely produced and dangerously collectable for those into that sort of thing. One reviewer has described the series as ‘the thinking person’s Wikipedia’ and the stated aim of the series is to provide ‘stimulating ways into new subjects’. So I am going to review Animal behaviour from this perspective: how effective would it be in stimulating a nonspecialist to delve into our field?

This very short introduction is written in a very clear and engaging way, which should certainly stimulate general readers to explore animal behaviour in some depth. There are a wealth of well-chosen examples, an interesting outline of the history of the subject and even suggestions for little experiments that readers could do (ever tried rattling your keys under a lamp-post on a summer’s night?). More importantly, this book should stimulate further reading because I expect that an average lay reader would struggle to understand everything in it without some further explanation. For example, would a nonbiologist know what action potentials, opsin molecules or Skinner boxes are? This is one difference between a short introduction and a standard text-book. Text-books should give some level of explanation for any idea that is likely to be new to their readers. In the short introduction format this is not possible and instead some further reading is required in order to get the most out of the material. I suspect that this aspect was intentional and, even if it was not, I still approve. The idea that this book is a way into the subject is reinforced by the short reference list of primary literature given for each chapter. This is not a universal feature of the ‘very short introductions’ (some of them only cite a few secondary sources) and in this way it keeps up a tradition of accessible but rigorous introductions to animal behaviour established by Hinde’s (1982) *Ethology*. Usefully, open access sources have been favoured, so that any reader can delve deeper into the science if they wish.

Although the book aims to cover all of animal behaviour, it is inevitable that some areas will receive more attention than others in a book of this size, especially if the intention is to provide enough depth for a thought-provoking read. The first chapter gives an overview of the field, and this is followed by chapters on sensing and responding, development of behaviour, learning and culture (which, incidentally, makes what might be the most thought-provoking point in the book for a lay reader; perhaps the simple mechanisms driving behaviour in other animals might

be sufficient to explain some apparently complex behaviour in humans), communication and then behavioural ecology. The final two chapters deal with collective behaviour and applied animal behaviour. Although each of Tinbergen's four questions permeate the entire book, the overall balance is more towards the proximate than the ultimate, which given the interests of the author is understandable.

I expect that, similar to other titles in the same series, *Animal Behaviour* will appeal primarily to well informed lay readers who want to go beyond the usual natural history TV shows, and perhaps to academics whose main expertise are not in animal behaviour (a psychologist for example) but nevertheless find themselves needing an authoritative way into this subject. While it is not an undergraduate text-book, it would certainly serve as an introduction for students on other courses. I also expect that, even though it will not cover every area of animal behaviour that they need to know about, many students on biology degrees could learn a thing or two from reading it as well. And so did I actually; as summer is just about upon us, I am off to find a lamp-post under which to rattle my keys.