

**Strange But True...**

# Animal Stories

*Read some of the most amazing strange-but-true stories of animals on land, sea and in the air, including a 12-foot sea lion that mistook a photographer for her pup, a polar bear that swam almost 500 miles without resting on land, birds that fly non-stop 4,000 miles, geese that soar over the Himalayas, drowned spiders dead for 40 hours that come back to life, jellyfish that become diapers, sharks that fly and birds with such mysterious built-in wisdom that their abilities surpass the best human technology and defy scientific explanation.*

**- Yaakov Astor**

## Leopard Seal Mothers Human Photographer

Photographer Paul Nicklen was on assignment for *National Geographic* in Antarctica where he was getting footage of leopard seals. What happened that day is something he will never forget.

During the assignment, he spent time photographing leopard seals. Sea lions, as they are also called, are one of the largest seals in the ocean. In 2003, a biologist was attacked by a massive sea lion and drowned while she was snorkeling. On the first day of the assignment, Nicklen encountered a massive 12-foot 1,000-pound female leopard seal. He and his team watched as she tore into a penguin and ripped it apart to eat the meat.

Doing his job, he slid into the water in his scuba gear, but was scared. In fact, he later admitted that he was terrified. His legs were shaking; his mouth went completely dry. Seals look cute in photographs but this was one of the Antarctic's top predators. Their only fear was killer whales. Nicklen felt completely unsure and vulnerable and he slipped into the icy waters.

His goal was to photograph the seal grabbing and devouring penguins. He expected—and hoped—that the female would let him take his pictures and ignore him. However, as soon as he entered the water, the seal dropped the penguin she was carrying, came up to his camera and opened her mouth.

"Her head was twice the size of a grizzly bear's," Nicklen later said. "It was huge."

Then the monstrous animal took the camera *and the photographer's head* inside her mouth, as if to engulf them all in one gulp!

She quickly released Nicklen, however. Then the most incredible thing happened. Not only did the leopard seal set him free, but she began to take care of him, as if he were her baby seal! She swam off and came back to him with a penguin and tried to feed it to him. When he didn't eat it, she started grabbing more penguins and pushing them into his camera.

Nicklen later remarked that



Photographer Paul Nicklen comes face-to-face with the potentially dangerous but friendly 12-foot leopard seal as the animal swims up to the camera.



Initially the sea lion came right up to the camera and took it inside its mouth... along with Nicklen's head! Right: Surprisingly, the seal seemed to think he was in distress. So, she brought him penguins to eat—like mom serving chicken for dinner—which he politely declined.



he believes she thought his camera was his mouth (which, other than the danger, is every photographer's dream).

Over the next few days, she began bringing him live penguins, one after the other. She appeared frustrated that he would not eat them. When that did not work, she played with the penguins for a while to tire them out before offering them to Nicklen. She even ripped off pieces and tried to feed them to him. At times, she presented the penguins in an entertaining way, twirling around with them before offering them to him. Eventually, she ended up tossing them on his head.

Not only did the leopard seal try to feed him, but she also protected him and scared off another leopard seal when it approached. She stole its penguin and gave that to Nicklen, as well.

Though he never learned to eat penguin, Nicklen lived to photograph and tell the world about it, adding, "This was the most satisfying assignment of my career."

## Bear Just Chillin' in a Backyard Hammock

In Florida, some black bears have gotten into the spirit of the state's laid-back reputation.

Bears are known for hibernating throughout the winter, but even in the clement Florida weather, a black bear needed a nap after an exhausting afternoon spent ransacking trash

cans, raiding bird feeders and frightening residents of a Daytona Beach neighborhood. Instead of heading home for a snooze, the enormous bear chose to clamber into homeowner Vincent James' backyard hammock for a little siesta.

"He got in the hammock like he was a tourist or something," James said of the bear. Usually, James is the one lounging on his back in the white rope mesh hanging between two trees.

The bear enjoyed the respite enough to stay in the hammock for about 20 minutes, said photographer Rafael Torres, who snapped pictures of the bear from 60 feet away. Torres' presence did not seem to disturb the wild animal's repose.

Residents say the bear had been scrounging for food in the neighborhood, ripping through garbage cans and knocking down bird feeders before taking his nap. After 20 minutes, the bear rolled out of the hammock and headed to parts unknown... for about a half hour. Apparently the hammock was so comfortable, the bear returned half an hour later for another go in it. (No word on whether the bear brought snacks with him.)

Torres and James may have enjoyed the visit by the large, furry character lumbering among the ranks of chirping birds and foraging squirrels on their lawns, but other Floridians didn't share their glee. A few months earlier, a black bear had attacked a woman in her garage and dragged her out onto the driveway.

Wildlife officials discourage the warm, fuzzy feeling some residents have for the black bears, pointing to the dangers they pose. Wildlife law enforcement officers arrested an 81-year-old Floridian woman for feeding loads of dog food to bears on her property. She dished out up to 18 bowls at a time to furry bunches gathered in her yard. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission warned her multiple times to stop, but she would not, for fear the animals would starve without her. Officers were afraid the bears would get dangerously close to humans, and they killed one bear that was frequenting her feedings.

Once a bear feels too at home among people, relocating it doesn't help, the FWC said. It will keep coming back.



After knocking over trash cans and scaring the residents of a Daytona Beach neighborhood, this black bear needed a rest... in a hammock.