

# New Scientist

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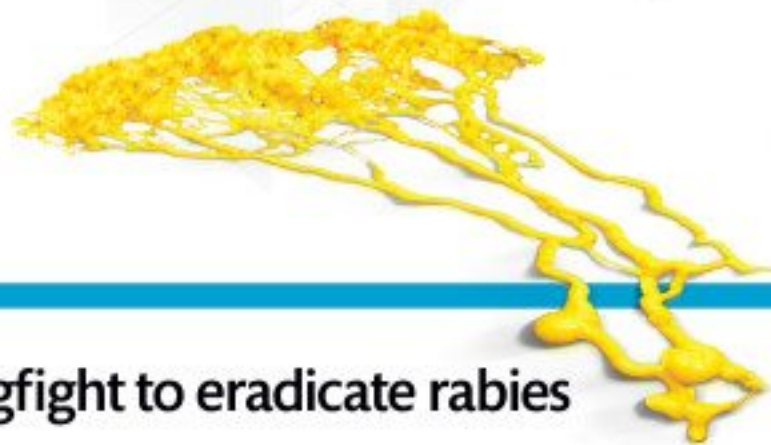
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**BITING BACK** The dogfight to eradicate rabies

# Animal magnetism

**Matthew Cobb** is seduced by the latest natural history books

STUDENTS of animal behaviour are taught to resist thinking about animals as though they were human. In *Carnivore Minds: Who these fearsome animals really are* (Yale University Press), trans-species psychologist Gay Bradshaw deliberately ignores this advice to get under the skin of seven vertebrate predators.

Bradshaw blends behavioural, psychological and neurobiological knowledge with insights from a wide range of sources, from experienced naturalists to indigenous peoples. The results might raise eyebrows, such as her use of John Bowlby's infant attachment theory to explain the behaviour of grizzly bears, or the observation that white sharks are "individuals who are conventional with narrow interests". But Bradshaw's moving description of the effects of captivity on the physiology, behaviour and psychology of orca shows the value of this approach.

A different mixture of the subjective and the scientific shapes Simon Cooper's *The Otters' Tale* (William Collins). It combines a description of otter biology and the history of their persecution and recent recovery with the artistic recreation of a year in the life of a female otter, Kuschtsa, who lives by Cooper's watermill near Salisbury, UK.

As Cooper imagines himself into the lives of Kuschtsa, her mate Mion, and her pups Willow, Wisp and Lutran, he sometimes gives away which descriptions are imagined, which intuited and which observed. More often than not, he beguiles the reader into

**Otterly enchanting:** Simon Cooper weaves tales of riparian family life

suspending disbelief. There are shocking moments, a surprisingly intimate description of Kuschtsa and Mion's repeated couplings, and a rich portrayal of the natural world. Comparisons will be made with Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* and Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*, but *The Otters' Tale* offers something new, and ultimately optimistic.

In *The Way of the Hare* (Bloomsbury), self-styled "wildlife-watcher" Marianne Taylor avoids subjective interpretations, concentrating on the biology, ecology and evolution of my favourite wild mammal. Nevertheless, she begins with a brief survey of hares' mythology and their place in culture (1970s TV character Hartley Hare pops up repeatedly). She broadens out to cover lagomorphs around the world, including both hare species (brown and mountain) and their many subspecies, as well as rabbits and the ultra-cute pika.

Her most fascinating sections

explore the ecological history of hares in the British Isles. Shooting and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) seem to have been responsible for the hare's decline in much of the region; the current, more environmentally friendly CAP may change things for the better. But as Taylor points out, it is impossible to predict what will happen after Brexit.

**"Everything has changed now the horse no longer has a key role in transport, warfare, food and sport"**

Getting into the mind of a mussel would be difficult, and Alabama vet Abbie Gascho Landis doesn't try. Instead, *Immersion: The science and mystery of freshwater mussels* (Island Press) focuses on the fight to preserve a creek near Landis's home, and reveals the vital role of molluscs as both indicators and preservers of water quality. Landis gets under the skin of not so much a single

animal, but a whole ecosystem. Part scientist, part observer and part campaigner against water pollution, she puts herself and her family at the centre of the story. This is neither cloying nor vain, and her growing fascination with her subject is infectious. *Immersion* is science writing at its best: rich, accurate and moving.

Ulrich Raulff's magisterial *Farewell to the Horse: The final century of our relationship* (Allen Lane) looks at the place of the horse in European history, culture and ecology. With the horse no longer playing an essential role in transport, warfare, food and sport, everything has changed: the city, the countryside, the horse, and ourselves. A bestseller in Raulff's native Germany, *Farewell to the Horse* is a moving epitaph to a one-sided and often brutal animal-human relationship that shaped the modern world. ■

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