

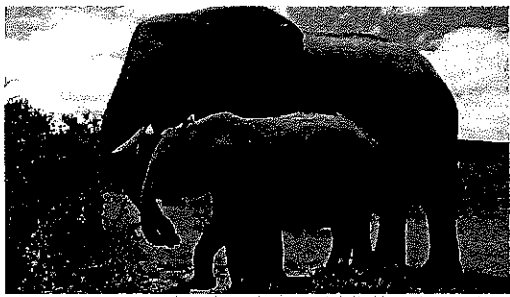
Conversations happen all around... even animals

long pause

There's a time to talk, a time to listen — and not just for humans

By Smithsonian.com, adapted by Newsela staff

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A good conversation should proceed like a tennis match. People each take turns responding, knowing instinctively when to speak and when to listen. This kind of lively banter is often considered uniquely human, a trait that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. However, it turns out that sophisticated, back-and-forth conversations happen all around us.

back and forth

lively talk

They might occur in a low, barely audible rumble felt through the pads of giant elephants' feet, or the song-like chatter of skylarks. They might involve the delicate hand gestures of chimpanzees, or whale songs that travel thousands of miles through lonely oceans. In some cases they exist only in the brief bioluminescent flashes between frisky fireflies in the dark.

examples of animals that communicate back & forth.

According to a recent scientific review, a common theme runs through many of these verbal or non-verbal dialogues. Animals, too, seem to know when to speak and when to listen. The review, published last month in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, looked at more than 300 studies of animals including birds, mammals, insects, frogs and toads who practice turn-taking behavior.

the idea of turn taking in conversation

is seen throughout the animal kingdom

A great number of animals alternate their call and response in a similar way that humans communicate. For example, marmosets, which are a type of small monkey, often exchange calls to locate each other in the wild and figure out whether they know one another. Dolphins chatter back and forth while coordinating attacks on prey. Many male birds call out proposals to prospective mates and only proceed if females respond with interest.

Communicate similar to humans

While many of these forms of communication are sound-based — from frog croaks to the crackling noises made by some insects — some species have more creative methods of communication. Infant bonobos, a type of great ape, let their parents know they want to be carried with arm gestures. Birds, insects and frogs can get their messages across through colorful displays. Elephants can literally feel the vibrations that move through the earth when they emit low rumbles to find each other in the wild.

Vibrations

Sound based, gestures displays (peacock)

Getting Ready To Rumble

Many of these less traditional modes of communication also resemble the turn-taking common in human conversation. For instance, elephants wait their turn before responding to rumbles.

turn-taking in elephants similar to humans

Since conversations cannot be studied like fossils, it is difficult to understand how conversations evolved over time. Yet Kobin Kendrick, a language professor and co-author of the review, says making comparisons among animals taking turns when communicating helps us better understand how this trait evolved in humans and our ancestors. "The biggest goal when we're doing the comparisons is to reconstruct the evolution of these turn-taking behaviors," he says.

No way of knowing the historical implications but it is necessary to find out

