

Time Out for the Wild Side of Life

Written by Alex Baer

Monday, 10 December 2012 19:45 - Last Updated Monday, 10 December 2012 21:00

We're looking in on some of those ubiquitous, Year-End summaries, letting them out of their cages and urging them to stretch their legs -- to take wing a bit early this December. Call it a seasonal lark.

It's not that we're likely to forget these tales (we have memories like elephants). There's just a good supply of animal tales squirreled-away in our cache: Dogs and deer, whales and flies, ducks, cats, elephants, even a sort-of giraffe.

Take the case of Monty, the giant schnauzer. He's in New Zealand, along with the people teaching him (and other dogs) to drive a car. It's hard work, layering up levels of training and knitting together behaviors until the dogs are ready to slip behind the wheel.

The point is to show how smart these rescued dogs can be, in hopes of getting them adopted out a bit quicker. That level of intensive training would have come in handy a while ago for the owner-guardian of one dog named Fenton, last seen sprinting after deer in a UK park.

There's a bit of video that popped up on You Tube (shot by the man's son) that's gotten more than 7 million views, making Fenton one of the best-known dogs in Great Britain. The unexpected ruckus over the thing spawned parodies and a great deal of light-hearted attention.

People with dogs that have slipped their control will be able to relate and cringe along with the running man -- even cringe along with those rooting for the deer.

Lots of people wound up rooting for another deer, sort of: The hand-cancellation stamp from the Post Office in Rudolph, Ohio. Given the season and the tradition, volunteers have stepped forward to help put the Rudolph stamp on cards and letters headed out in the mails.

Meanwhile, in Raleigh, North Carolina, a 19-year, New Year's Eve tradition is on the ropes. Instead of lowering a ball, residents drop a possum instead. Actually, the animal is lowered to the ground at midnight in a see-through box festooned with holiday decorations and tinsel.

A judge has said no-go to that show, and there's now a bit of a hubbub, considering the event has in the past drawn two or three thousand people to the small town -- and perhaps drawn an uptick in business for the event manager, owner of the Corner Store there.

From a plummeting possum we now transition to a potentially chatty white whale. *Maybe.* Scientists are wondering if beluga whales are capable of mimicking human speech. There have been anecdotal accounts of such things around for some time, but this is the first time anyone's produced evidence the whales are capable of anything like human speech.

Researchers knew they had something interesting on their hands when a diver surfaced at a California facility, asking, "Who told me to get out?" It was apparently the whale. No word on whether what the diver heard was an intended communication or a fluke.

If a whale trying out English seems startling, how about an elephant who's pretty good at speaking Korean? So far, he's up to speaking five words in imitated human speech -- five words more than most of us could speak in Elephantese.

Could give Koko a run for the money, in time; the famous gorilla was able to understand more than 2,000 words of spoken English. She could also understand more than 1,000 signs based on American Sign Language.

Dazed and confused? This appeared to be the state of four ducks in the UK who had been reported stolen from a school, but were later found under a mile away in a ditch, with their state described as "bewildered and confused."

After a warm bath and some food, they settled back in at the school. A police spokesman said in a BBC story, "We are delighted that the ducks have been found safe and well and have been reunited with the school children." This is the level of crime we could all live with quite happily, no doubt.

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And, from four ducks to five thousand now, the number of ducks a Chinese farmer took for a walk on a busy city street, causing an enormous duck traffic jam. The farmer prides himself on getting them all where they're going, once again losing not even one duck pedestrian en route -- a real feather (or 5,000) in his hat.

The year also brought a rarity in the discovery of a new species of African monkey, something that's happened just twice in 28 years. Called a *lesula*, the monkey has a very humanlike face, and was apparently well known to the residents of the Democratic Republic of Congo -- but not scientists.

Being shy, and able to detect people approaching before people could detect them, the *lesulas* stayed out of sight, at least until one was spotted as the pet of a school director's daughter.

And, of discoveries, imagine telling this one to a police officer: "There's a monkey wearing a sheepskin coat down at Ikea." It happened in Toronto. The monkey's in protective custody. No charges to be pressed, if and when the monkey's guardian-owners surface and press their DIY claim.

In Edinburgh, meanwhile, researchers claim it's possible for chimps and great apes to experience a mid-life crisis, like humans. In humans, the late forties are the bugaboo. For chimps, it's about 27 or 28, and around 35 for orangutans.

No word what the crisis age might be for bears -- information that might have come in handy for Wojtek, the soldier bear, and the Polish troops in WWII he worked with, before retiring to the Edinburgh Zoo. Another film could be in the works here.

From there, we fly over to two quick stories of, well, *flies*. The first involves the unlikely tale of fly farming -- raising flies for fish farms. It could be a huge moneymaker, as well as one route of fish food salvation for operators. Sure beats feeding fish to other fish, and trying to find a net gain in the equation.

On to pesticides, or perhaps doing without them altogether. That could be one outcome of

research into the remarkable "nose" of the fruit fly. It's committed a lot of its natural resources to catching a whiff of just one scent, one that's toxic to them. If similar abilities can be spotted in crop-eating bugs, it may be possible to find the scent that makes them want to quickly move on and not come back.

The scent of bacon, however, has made many humans stop in their tracks, compelled to track the stuff down. Scientists of the pig genome project have now spelled out the DNA pattern of all the chromosomes of a female domesticated pig. The research could help keep pigs healthier, help farmers avoid expensive illnesses, and may even help make a "tastier" pork -- *hey, is this last one even possible?*

As for the possible, who will win in a battle of archeologists versus cats? We may be getting ready to find out. A cat shelter has been in operation in Rome for two decades and may now be illegal. It is said to be located in the same place where Brutus stabbed Julius Caesar, among other things. Many cat lovers are braced for a fight.

In Brazil, a fight of another sort is brewing -- one to save eight animal species whose populations are under pressure. The plan will test the possibilities of cloning, and will concentrate on jaguars, maned wolves, black lion tamarins, bush dogs, coatis, bison, gray brocket deer, and collared anteaters.

While not as preferred as maintaining wild habitat for the animals, cloning may help create a last-ditch reserve in case wild populations collapse.

That winds up this wrap-up, although you still have a sort-of giraffe coming. Back to Scotland again -- third time's the charm. Meet Armstrong Baillie, 32, who wondered to himself, while in the bathroom, "What would happen if I dressed up as a giraffe and went around doing good deeds?" (In the 'States, that sort of thing will get you darted and taken down by rangers.)

Dressed in a giraffe suit, he does little niceties about town, in Glasgow -- a toy or two to a children's ward in a hospital, buying coffee for students chilled on a cold day...

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Not to look a gift giraffe in the mouth, now, but... a *giraffe* suit? Armstong says it's his favorite animal -- it has its head in the clouds, but its heart's in the right place.

And, for those who are uncomfortable with stories that end with things all warm-and-fuzzy, here's one for you: *Go adopt a gargoyle in Milan*. It's an effort to help fix up the main cathedral, with donations filling in the gap from cuts to the Italian budget.

Oh, hang on: The story's been updated. They're speaking now about adopting church spires instead, not gargoyles, as they did at first. Too bad. Gargoyles could probably do with a hug, too.

Teaching dogs to drive: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-20614593>

Fenton! <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15864761>

and: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbvL7Bctjc>

The original *Fenton!*, complete with the videographer-son's chuckle

Saving Rudolph's stamp: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-20627070>

Possum drop: <http://news.msn.com/staging/nc-judge-no-more-possum-drop-on-new-years-eve>

Talking whale: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-20026938>

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and:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/who-told-me-to-get-out-noc-the-talking-whale-learns-to-imitate-human-speech-in-attempt-to-reach-out-to-human-captors-8221800.html>

Korean for elephants: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-20142858>

Koko: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koko_\(gorilla\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koko_(gorilla))

Duck theft: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-20295924>

Duck traffic jam:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2161005/Taizhou-farmer-stops-traffic-taking-5-000-ducks-walk-local-pond.html>

The lesula:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/09/13/161097374/monkey-new-to-science-found-in-central-africa>

The Toronto Ikea monkey: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-20667481>

Mid-life ape crises: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2012/09/104671000/104671046.stm>

Soldier bear: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojtek_\(soldier_bear\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojtek_(soldier_bear))

and: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-south-scotland-20296953>

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Fly farming: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/10/15/162961073/how-fly-farming-may-help-more-fish-stay-in-the-sea>

Fruit fly nose:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/12/06/166656957/fruitfly-nose-says-steer-clear-of-deadly-food-human-nose-not-so-reliable>

Pig genome project:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/11/16/165269866/pig-genome-project-may-pave-the-way-for-better-bacon>

Cat fight in Rome:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/12/04/166067815/cat-fight-in-rome-beloved-shelter-faces-closure>

Brazil cloning: http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2012/11/12/Brazil-plans-to-clone-endangere-d-species/UPI-22351352772389/?spt=hsv=sn

It's... it's -- Giraffe Man? <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/11/18/165290068/its-a-bird-its-a-plane-its-a-guy-in-a-giraffe-suit>

Adopt a gargoyle... or spire: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20354673>

Dumb Fox:

<http://mediamatters.org/blog/2012/12/07/fox-paints-birthers-climate-change-antics-as-se/191735>

Today's Bonuses:

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Jurassic *Fenton!* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9w7I507D6E>

Star Wars: The *Fenton* Menace: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4asZ6LLO4>

Fenton Gump: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dpmdrm8QHgQ>

Fenton's cameo in Toy Story: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E64PQc4tuM>

Fenton, superdog: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTyd6qxUbLY>

The Wrath of *Fenton*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9y4nQh1LuJM>

(*There may be hundreds of these Fenton! things, if you want to doggedly ferret them out.*)