



Solitary by nature

Take some self-isolation inspiration from the animal world.

WORDS Krysia Bonkowski

We just can't help it – we humans are social creatures. It's why self-isolation is such a challenge for many of us. For some insight into the dynamics of a smaller social circle, look no further than the animal kingdom. From solitary creatures to tight-knit packs, many animals have got social distancing down to an art.

Did you know?

There's power in numbers, helping individual animals spot and defend against predators. The daily tasks of hunting and foraging are easier when shared – through cooperative hunting or information exchange.



The loners

If your beloved house-cat prefers its own company, consider it a legacy of its wild cat ancestors. Aside from lions (which live in large groups called prides) most big cats lead a solo lifestyle. Snow Leopards are one of the world's most solitary mammals, stalking the high mountain ranges of Central Asia. Sumatran Tigers mark their territory with scent and tree scratching to scare off interlopers. If you're an introvert, you too might be content in your own territory.



Pack Habits

The Critically Endangered Lord Howe Island Stick Insect finds safety in numbers, with up to a few dozen nocturnal adults huddling during the day. This offers protection and thermoregulation, says Rohan Cleave, Ectotherms Keeper at Melbourne Zoo. "By huddling together, they reduce their overall surface area of heat loss." African Wild Dogs operate in groups of up to 20, hunting, co-rearing young and caring for old and sick packmates.



Happy families

Serial monogamists, Leadbeater's Possums live in close family groups called colonies. "Essentially it's mum, dad and one or more generations of kids," says Zoos Victoria Threatened Species Biologist Dr Dan Harley. "So, they're similar to humans." Huddled in nests, the family keep warm through the snowy winters in Victoria's Central Highlands. The mountain gorillas of Central Africa also live in family groups with complex social structures.



Loving couples

Although rare in the animal kingdom, monogamy helps some species secure food and raise young. One of the only monogamous primates, gibbon couples will protect their territory as a duo. Otters also form bonded pairs, like Melbourne Zoo's Asian small-clawed otters Paula and Odie – proud parents of four pups. Human pairs trying out cohabitation recently should take note: monogamy in the wild nearly always relies on the sharing of responsibilities.



Pack living helps with family life, with accessible mates and built-in babysitters.



The downside of pack living is that greater numbers make it easier to be spotted by predators. Although finding sustenance is easier in a group, it means more mouths to feed.



The benefit of living solo is not needing to share precious resources. Living apart from others reduces the risk of conflict and competition.



Travelling through life solo makes it easier to escape the notice of predators.



The quest for a mate becomes much more arduous for isolated creatures.