

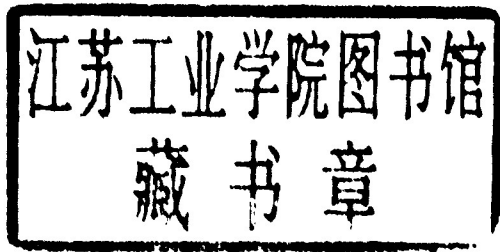
COLLINS

NATURE'S BABIES

MIKE DILGER



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Collins

To the Browns – an amazing family of naturalists...
and come to think of it, an amazing family as well.

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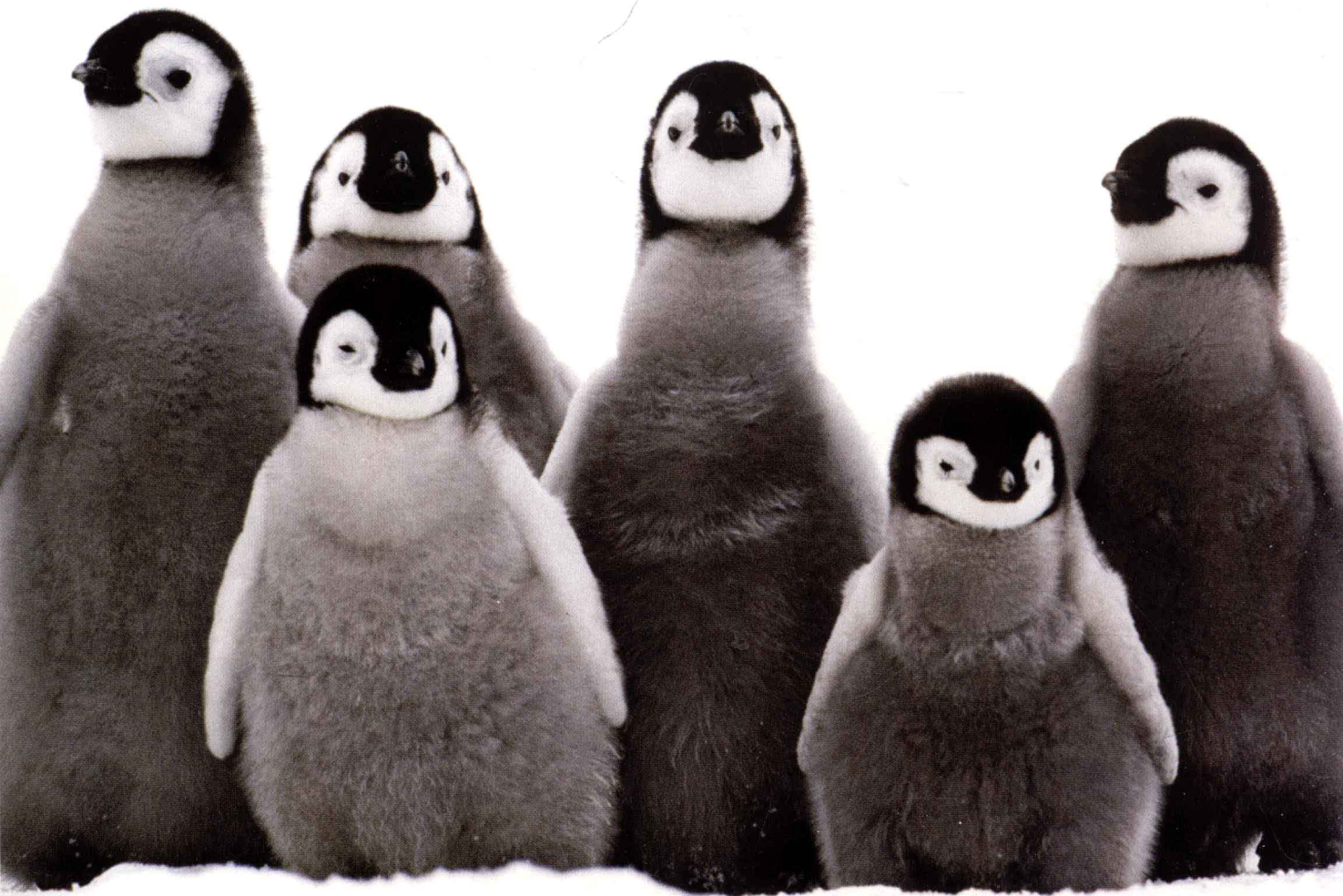
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INTRODUCTION

Nature's Babies is an unashamed celebration of the fully technicoloured glory of the natural world itself. The seemingly infinite variety of different baby shapes and sizes is of course down to the cleverest and most powerful beast of them all: evolution. What else would have created babies that at one end of the spectrum are impossibly cute, yet at the other end would not look out of place in the most off-the-wall science fiction novels?

Parenting skills can vary enormously from the non-existent to the lavish. For some animals being born is a rude awakening into a harsh, unforgiving world with no parental care whatsoever – just ask leatherback turtle hatchlings as they have to run the gauntlet to sea!

This book showcases some of the weirdest and wonderful stories of the babies' development, too. Who would have thought, for example, that a grey kangaroo's baby is born no larger than a kidney bean, and from the moment it enters the world has the most daunting journey to complete even before it will be able to feed for the first time? And exactly why do Galápagos tortoises take an astonishingly long 25 years to reach maturity?

Whilst focusing on the babies, this book will hopefully also test our own notions of how we humans fit into the natural world. We think of our birth, babyhood and adolescence as normal, but how 'normal' compared to other animals are we? Whilst we perhaps arrogantly think of the human race as producing model babies and parental skills that are unsurpassed, do we in fact have something to learn from our wild cousins? After reading *Nature's Babies*, you decide!

LITTLE GRIZZLIES

Found right across North America, Europe and Russia, with smaller pockets in Asia, the brown bear is both the most common and widespread of all eight bear species. The famed grizzly is the race of brown bear most commonly found in Alaska and Canada, so-called because its hair is lighter at the tip than at the base which gives this bear a 'grizzled' appearance.

The larger grizzlies can reach an impressive 700 kg (1,500 lb) in weight, and with their massive shoulders, huge forearms and plate-sized paws, they must be one of the strongest animals in the world; their only predator is, of course, man and his gun. Ironically for an animal with such size and strength, the main diet of grizzlies tends to be roots and fungi, supplemented by fish and small mammals if and when available. Their incredible bulk is often used to drive wolves and cougars away from kills.

During times of plenty in the summer months, the female grizzly puts down huge reserves of fat which she relies on to get her through the winter. The breeding season also occurs in the summer, but the fertilized egg will not be implanted and begin to grow until the winter, when the female is tucked away asleep in her den, hidden away from the worst of the weather. The most common litter size is two; the blind, toothless and hairless cubs are born in the winter den and grow quickly on their mother's milk, only emerging with their mother into the big, wide world when spring finally breaks.

Little grizzlies remain with their mother for two to four years, learning the 'tricks of the trade' which will prove essential if they are to grow up as big and strong as their parents.





LIKE A DUCK TO WATER

Unlike seals and dolphins, our smallest marine mammal has no blubber. This means that adult sea otters have to spend up to three hours a day grooming their fur meticulously to ensure that it stays in top condition and remains able to trap the vital insulating layer of air which keeps them warm.

When they are not busy grooming themselves, sea otters spend a large part of the day hunting for food. From depths of up to 40 m (131 ft) they retrieve clams and sea urchins from among the rich kelp forests on the sea floor and bring these up to the surface. The sea otter is an animal which likes to spend a large part of its life belly up, even when feeding. Lying on its back, it uses its underside as a table to crack open these tough shells with the help of a special stone which it retrieves from a 'waistcoat pocket' situated under its armpit.

Although the birth of the single pup takes place on shore, the mother immediately guides it straight into the water. Despite being born with its eyes open, and with a full set of milk-teeth and baby fur, the sea otter pup is initially very vulnerable to the cold, and so it spends the first four weeks of its life being groomed and fed on its mother's belly. When the mother does have to leave her pup on the surface whilst diving for food, she often wraps her youngster up in kelp to prevent it drifting off. As the pup's fur traps so much air, it bobs on the surface like a cork until its mother comes back to retrieve it!

Baby sea otters spend much of their first year of life on their mother's belly, where they are groomed, fed and kept warm.

A LEAP OF FAITH

With its torpedo-shaped body, long, narrow wings and its dagger-like bill, the gannet is a very lean and very mean fishing machine. It is also an incredibly sociable bird during the breeding season and nests in densely packed colonies on steep cliffs and raised slopes around the coasts and islands surrounding Britain, northern Europe and northeast America.

Gannets are usually faithful to both their partner and to their breeding location, and pairs of birds will often return to exactly the same tiny territory of guano-stained rock each year. This special area will be stoutly defended against all neighbours and any newcomers by ritualized displays between the pair. If trespassers don't get the earlier, more subtle messages, they will receive a quick jab of the gannet's sharp bill.

Once the single chick is hatched it is initially guarded around the clock by at least one parent to ensure that it is not snatched by any opportunistic gulls eager for an easy meal. As each adult returns from a fishing mission, the black, naked youngster reaches deep down into its parent's mouth to feed on regurgitated fish. The youngster will grow quickly on this rich diet of mackerel or herring which it is brought by its conscientious parents several times a day. But then, at around 90 days, the parents suddenly stop feeding their offspring in an effort to force it to fledge. Egged on by hunger, the still flightless chick has to make a kamikaze-style jump down to the waters below before it can begin paddling south for the winter. Only once it has lost a bit of weight from such energetic paddling will it finally be able to take to the air and hunt for itself.

A gannet chick waiting to decide whether it is mother or father who has to go and catch breakfast.





PRICKLY YOUNGSTERS

So-called for its fondness for hedgerows and because of a snout that resembles a pig, the hedgehog is very aptly named indeed. Setting aside its preferred habitat and nose, the hedgehog's other most distinguishing feature is, of course, its prickly nature.

During the day hedgehogs will seek shelter in a nest of grass and leaves under bushes or logs until they take their cue from dusk to begin roaming through parks, neighbouring gardens and woods in their perennial search for earthworms, slugs and snails. To prevent themselves actually figuring on the menus of other larger predators such as badgers and foxes, they are famously capable of rolling into a thorny, impenetrable ball to protect their vulnerable undersides.

For obvious reasons, a male wishing to mate with a female has to do so very carefully, and not until she is absolutely ready! As hedgehogs hibernate during the winter, their noisy mating takes place during the summer months and just over a month later four to five youngsters are born. Fortunately for the mother, the baby hedgehogs are 'spine-less' at first, but only a few hours after birth the baby's first set of nearly 150 spines will already have pushed up through the skin. By the twelfth day the youngsters have managed the art of curling up when necessary, and after a further month and a couple of sets of new spines later, the young hedgehogs become perfect miniature replicas of their prickly parents.

A hedgehog's prickles, or spines, are actually hollow stiff hairs that can be raised at will if danger threatens.

THE LONGEST DROP

It's quite a boast to declare that one is the tallest of all land-living animals, and one which the giraffe is able to make without fear of contradiction. Over thousands of years giraffes have gradually evolved from their shorter-necked ancestors so that today the largest males can reach the dizzying height of 5 m (16 ft) - to the very tips of their horns! The giraffe's height enables it to browse its favourite food of spiny acacia leaves at levels higher than all the other herbivores are capable of reaching.

In addition to an impressive neck, which incidentally only contains the same number of bones as a human neck (seven), the giraffe possesses long, elegant legs which can produce impressive bursts of speed when necessary and also keep hungry lions at bay with powerful kicks.

Female giraffes associate in small groups whilst the males live either in 'bachelor' herds or on their own. The older and larger males tend to mate most of the females in the herd after seeing off any competition through a series of jousts where necks and heads are frequently swung like a wrecking ball-and-chain to assert dominance. The gestation period of the giraffe is long and can last up to 15 months, and the mother gives birth to the single calf standing up. This means that the newborn calf's entry into the world entails it landing with a terrific thud on the ground below. Within just a few hours the world's tallest baby is capable of following its mother. This is absolutely essential; there are so many predators on the prowl that the youngster really does have to hit the ground running!

**Even the world's tallest baby
has to look up to its mother!**