

[Researchers in animal behaviour have asked: 'Do other creatures laugh?' Experiments with rats show that they enjoy being tickled and they respond with a chirping sound. Various sounds made by other creatures may be interpreted as laughter in response to pleasure All this led me to ask; 'Do animals wonder if humans laugh as they do?]

Riverside Laughter



Hazy summer sunshine crept into the heart of every living thing. Nature was at its best.

Laughing waters, running, rippling through rocks, gently tickling stray pebbles, making liquid shadows breathe. Aspen leaves whispered to each other over a soothing breeze accompanied by merry rustling in the oaks, all overshadowed with the dense drooped tresses of silver birch. The last dew-tears dried like fading memories in the shaded grass as creatures of the river bank rested - too content to contemplate devouring each other.

Rat lay chirping in the shallows as water-swept grasses tickled his side. Badger purred and wheezed while Fox growled softly. Sparrows twittered alongside chuckling linnets. Bees buzzed while crickets creaked. Old grandfather rabbit gently drummed his toes in support of yet another family generation tumbling among the daisies, engaged in a fraternal boxing match. Overhead a pigeon cooed and in the long grass Mallard occasionally beaked his inimitable, sophisticated quack. Being the most vocal along the riverbank he was rarely silent for long.

He had retreated to the tall grass where the meadow rested under shady sycamores. There, unannounced, he joined two most unlikely companions - Badger, who was too hot to spend the day asleep in an underground burrow and Fox who was too full from last night's butchery to think of discontent. Mallard himself had taken refuge there because he was too frustrated since his partner had decided to sit on yet another nest of eggs that he wasn't sure were his.

No discord, no danger, no dread, said Badger, who thought himself a master of alliteration. *There aren't many days when we can all rest quietly content,* he mused. *Just listen to all the happy sounds. There's lazy laughter littered everywhere. The wren is trilling tunefully; mosquito's wings are whining; doves are calmly cooing; big brown beetles clicking.... Such happy laughter!* he purred.

Predictably, not a protracted prospect for the future, observed the Mallard, pompously imitating Badger's gift.

You mean it won't last, said the Fox. *I expect Badger can hear happy worms turning beneath us, but they may not be so happy when he digs them out tonight.*

Don't spoil the magic moment, said Badger.

However, the moment was spoiled for a little while. The young rabbits paused their match while just for a moment every contented creature tensed. Humans had appeared on the sandy beach at the other side of the river. Then the natural peace was shattered by the cries and antics of four young people. Fox, Badger and Mallard watched the newcomers from the safety of tall grass on their raised bank.

What are they doing? asked Badger. *My eyes are poor. I can't see that far. I can hear all the noises. They're splashing in the water aren't they?*

There is one of them simulating the customary practices of my species, observed Mallard. *He has made a total reversal of anterior and posterior.*

You mean he's got his head in the water and his tail in the air, muttered Fox disparagingly. *Why do you have to quack so posh and stick your beak in the air like that?*

Because I'm an educated aquatic creature. I'm from the anatidae family. Fox stifled a bark.

That noise, said Badger, Do you think they're laughing. Do you think humans laugh like us?

Surely not, Fox replied. We laugh when we're happy and content. They don't look very restful, splashing around and making all that noise.

Observe! quacked the Mallard. The one in the water has been emboldened to draw another in with him. I think he entered most reluctantly. That's not an adequate reason for such risible behaviour. It's most atypical and nonconformist to act in such an infantile and irresponsible way.

Fox looked at Badger. He means we wouldn't do it that way. But I agree. It can't be laughter. Not to find happiness in someone else's misfortune.

You're getting to talk like Mallard, was all Badger had to say.

Mallard! said Fox. Look closely. They can't be laughing! I think they must be in pain! See that one who went into the water first. His mouth is wide open, his head right back and his face is a red as an un-ripe sloe berry. And that one who's just in his skin. He's got his head twisted round and his teeth poking out like a horse! He's cackling like an old crow!

Observe the duck - er ...the female - on the bank, said Mallard whose sharp eyes could see most clearly. She's shaking all over like a dog out of water. There's lamentation water in her eyes. That is never a euphorically content disposition.

Now look at that, said Fox, ignoring the need to interpret Mallard's intelligence.

What? cried Badger. I can't see.

The little one. I think that's a female. She was eating something. Now she's opened her mouth wide and spattered food everywhere. Now she's cackling like a farmyard hen who's just dropped her egg.

That's bound to be a painful reflux action, said Mallard. I expect her gastric juices must have been activated by her mastication and ingestion and rising up, compelled her to vomit.

Bellyache! growled an exasperated Fox.

The sparrows will think it's a lucky day, purred Badger.

Minutes later the trio under the sycamore trees watched the humans move further downstream and a restful peace returned to the riverbank. The air was filled again with gentle laughter ripples while the calmed river flowed carelessly, burbling nonsense to itself. Young rabbits huddled together sharing playful dreams; bees buzzed while crickets creaked; wrens trilled; mosquitoes whined; doves cooed; beetles clicked; rats chirped; sparrows twittered; linnets chuckled, Badger growled softly; Fox purred and the Mallard raising his beak made a sophisticated quack, before observing ..

I wonder if that IS the human expression of laughter. Hominoids are stridently vociferous capricious and irascible. It's not OUR manifestation of pleasurable humour but it seems to me humans are enigmatic, undecipherable creatures They are so noisy and demonstrative ...

You mean we don't know if humans laugh. Fox had heard enough. He was weary of words. I don't think it really matters. Let's just enjoy this peaceful day. We may not be laughing tomorrow!

A smile wrinkled Badger's striped nose. He had been thinking his own thoughts. *Those hysteric, hapless humans. They make ME laugh!* He purred a little louder and his happy tremor was shared in fur and feathers all around.