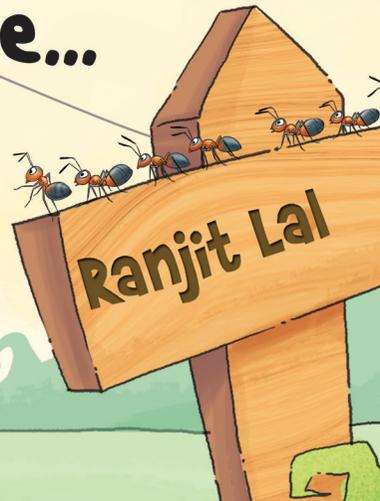


HOW Weird is That



Nature's Bizarre...



From the Desk of Dr Ajay Mathur

Our planet is home to a variety of creatures existing in a range of habitats, from the tropical regions to mountains, deserts, rainforests, and the depths of the oceans. Each of these eight million, seven hundred and four thousand eukaryote species on Earth has fabulous as well as astonishing qualities to their credit. What makes it all the more interesting is that 86 per cent of all land-dwelling species and 91 per cent of those in the water have to be yet discovered and cataloged by Science!

Their realm is fascinating and self-sufficient that keeps the ebb and flow of life on track. And their unusual existential behavior and adaptation techniques certainly leave us startled. But we often take for granted or choose to ignore the world of common insects, birds, and animals that live in our immediate environment.

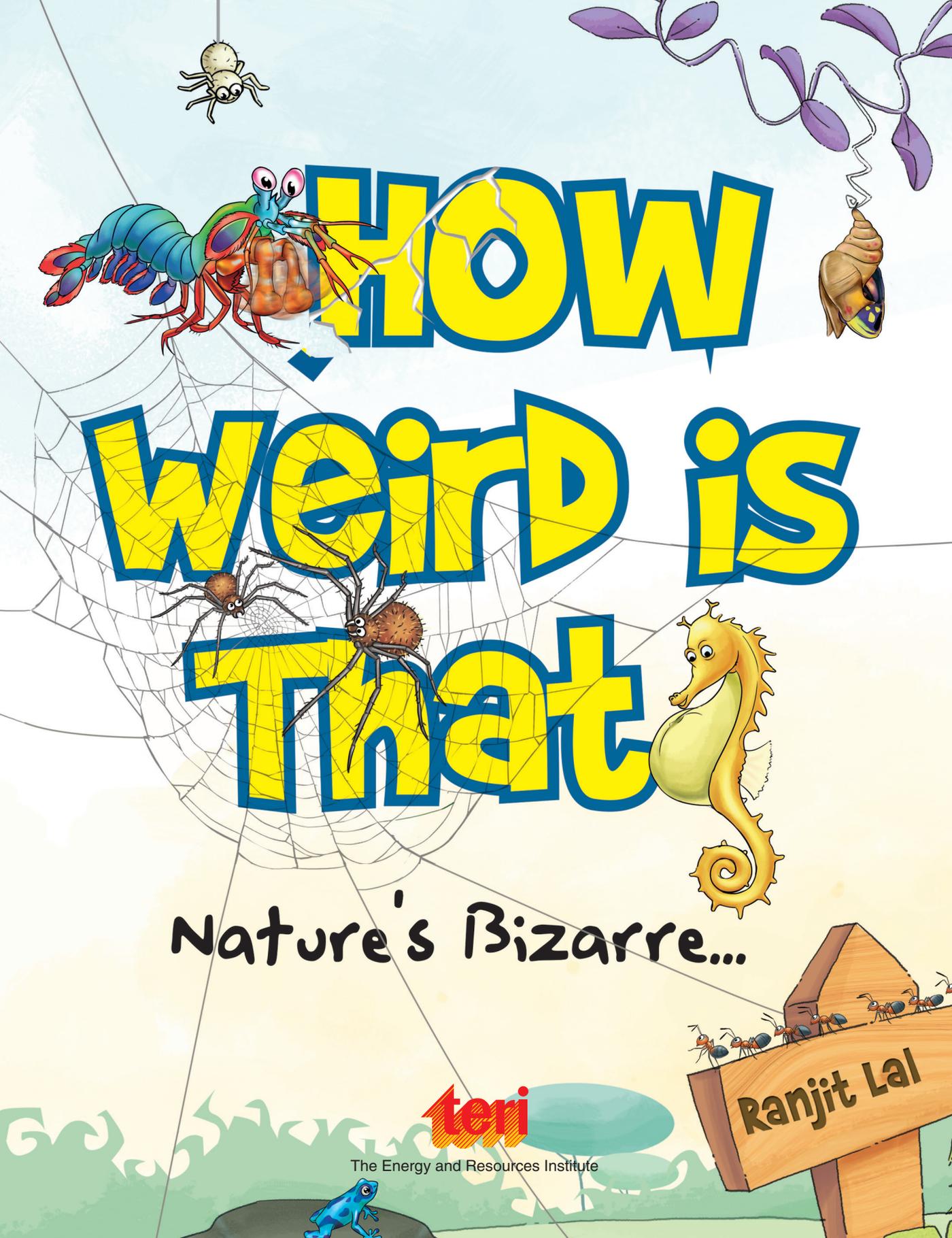
These creatures have a way of life too, and their intelligence cannot be undermined. Ants communicate very effectively by touching each other with their antennae. They use chemicals, called pheromones, to leave scent trails for other ants to follow. The silk that spiders create is the strongest material in the world. Even with the technology available today, scientists haven't been able to recreate this design. Similarly, the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly is marvelous as well as remarkable.

US environmentalist and entrepreneur Paul Hawken has said, "THE BALANCE goes to the leaves, into the soil, into the water, into all forms of wildlife, into ourselves. What is good for the balance sheet is wasteful of resources and harmful to life". It is imperative that the younger generation is made aware that the balance in nature must prevail, for which the Earth, its ecosystems, and all its creatures should live in harmony and stay deeply connected.

How Weird is That? unravels and recreates the apparently surreal, yet awe-inspiring oddities in the world of – usual and distinct – animals through interesting and fun stories. I hope this book will stir appreciation in the minds of young readers towards these sublime creatures, who are as much worthy of respect and protection as we are.



Ajay Mathur
Director-General, TERI



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The Energy and Resources Institute



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Cat amongst the pigeons

On a safari at the Sariska National Park, Sachin and Shaila gazed hopefully at the waterhole nearby as their driver and the Forest Officer accompanying them began changing their jeep's flat tyre, hoping to see some wildlife. Suddenly, a family of grey partridges stepped out, in single file, from behind a large boulder and approached the water. 'Wow! Look, they've come out to drink!' Sachin said, studying the birds through his binoculars.

But something else had caught Shaila's attention. 'Sachin, look there's something funny moving above the grass, just behind them. It...it looks like a pair of very long black eyelashes dancing, like they're doing Bharatnatyam!' she said incredulously with a sudden giggle.

'Don't be nuts!' But Sachin too suddenly took in his breath. 'You're right!' he exclaimed, 'and those birds have seen it too!'

The high golden grass behind the waterhole was quite still, but just above them, and to the left, what seemed to be a pair of very long, curving black eyelashes, swirled and curled, weaving this way and that, exactly as if they were dancing with each other.

'Sachin...there's some animal there!' Shaila whispered, clutching his arm. 'It's got huge grey eyes and its coat is exactly the same colour as the grass. Looks like a wildcat of some kind.' Sachin too had riveted his binoculars to the spot.

'Yes,' he whispered, 'and what we're seeing are tufts of hair on the top of its ears which look like samosas. Just look at them – they're moving independently of each other, like satellite dishes and making those tufts wiggle.'

The Forest Officer too turned to look and suddenly he took in his breath. 'Baap re! My God, caracal!' he whispered. 'It's very rare in India, only 200 or so left. But there are a lot still in Africa...'

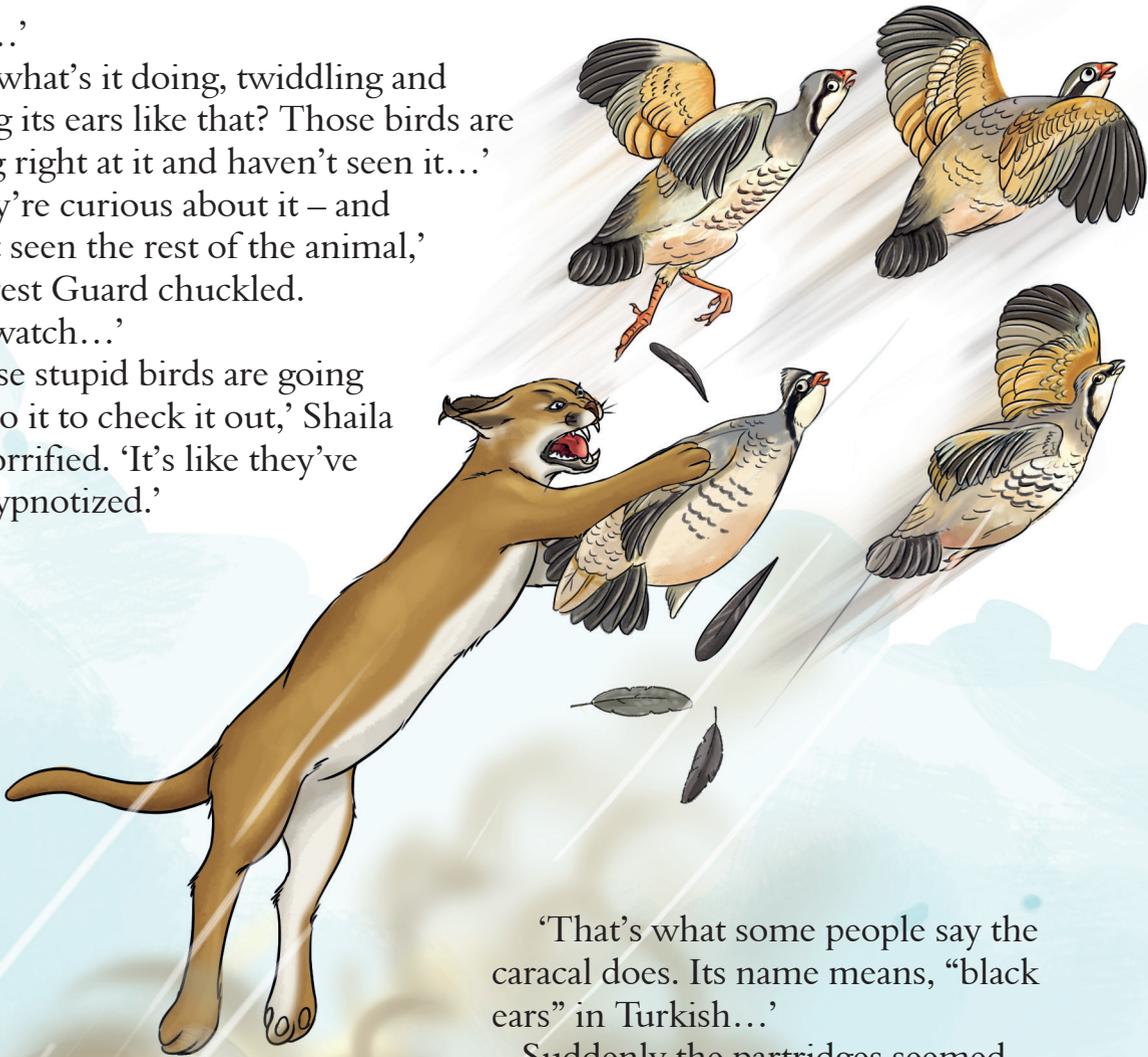
‘Oh...’

‘But what’s it doing, twiddling and twisting its ears like that? Those birds are looking right at it and haven’t seen it...’

‘They’re curious about it – and haven’t seen the rest of the animal,’ the Forest Guard chuckled.

‘Now watch...’

‘Those stupid birds are going closer to it to check it out,’ Shaila said, horrified. ‘It’s like they’ve been hypnotized.’



‘That’s what some people say the caracal does. Its name means, “black ears” in Turkish...’

Suddenly the partridges seemed to be aware of the danger. With a heart stopping ‘Bhrrrr’ the whole flock took off, raising a cloud of dust. And then from the grass, the caracal too sprang, vertically ten feet high into the air, blazingly fast. Its massive paws, with claws extended batted down one unfortunate partridge (the most curious one) from mid-air.

‘My God, what a catch; it took down a flying bird!’ Sachin breathed. The animal was out in the open now, crouched over the partridge. Its shining fur was tawny gold, the eyes, large and blazing, it was tall as a golden retriever, with black ‘tear’ marks running down from its eyes – and, of course, those astonishing triangular ears.

‘It has more than 20 independent muscles in its ear – we have just six,’ the Forest Officer said. ‘It can move them in any direction it wants. And it can make its ear tufts dance! They also help muffle any rustling it might make while stalking through the grass. And its hind legs are taller than its front legs to help it jump like that.’

‘Wow, and in India it’s rarer than the tiger?’

‘Yes. In the old days it used to be trained for hunting, like cheetahs were. People used to set a caracal in the middle of a flock of pigeons and bet on how many it could get down in a fixed amount of time. That’s where the term ‘cat amongst the pigeons’ came from!’

‘Well,’ Shaila grinned, ‘this sure isn’t one cat that curiosity killed, but one that killed using curiosity! And how crazy is that?’



Daddy cool

Shoma and Shona, 11-year-old twins, were naturally very sad when their mamma died. They missed her like anything. What made it worse was that their papa – who had retired as a Captain from the Navy – didn't seem to care about them very much either. He just employed a series of hatchet-faced maids to look after them and spent most of his time at the club, boasting about his magnificent sea-water aquarium. 'Looking after kids is women's work!' he'd often exclaim.

The aquarium was really magnificent. With schools of gorgeous tropical fish, beautiful corals and sea fans, and even a few precious seahorses and gleaming chocolate cowries, it extended nearly the entire length of the drawing room. People dropped in just to look at it. And while the good Captain was very proud of it (and employed a qualified man to look after it), he really didn't know very much about the fish or shells or corals: for him it was just a showpiece.

And Shoma and Shona hated it. They thought their father paid far more attention to it than to them. 'I wish it would break!' Shona muttered evilly one morning after the Captain had showed it off to one of his Admirals. Shona had brought a model of the Vikrant aircraft carrier that he had made to show to the visitor and his father had casually brushed him aside.

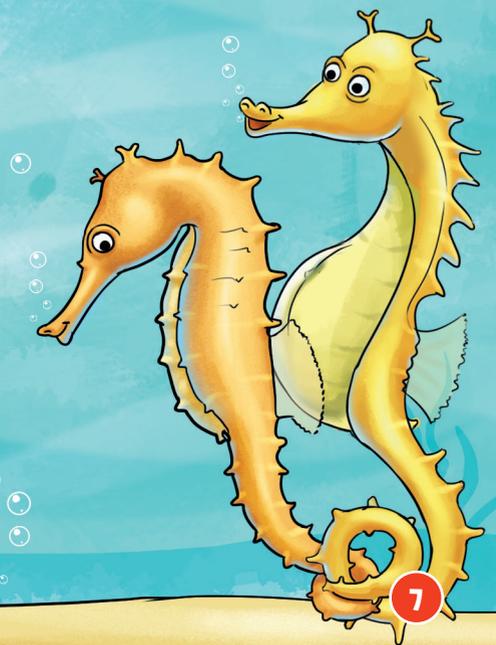
'All he thinks of is how great his fish look – and he doesn't even know their names!' Shoma agreed, tossing her curls angrily. 'I wish they'd all die!'

And then, it seemed that things were about to get worse. One evening, their father returned from the club with a friend. A very pretty lady friend!

'Kids, say hello to Jayanti aunty,' he said as he introduced them. 'Now run away and play!'

'I wish mamma were here!' Shoma said bitterly. 'I miss her like anything.'

Shona just swallowed the frog in his throat.



To the children's horror, Jayanti aunty became a frequent visitor to their house. And she seemed very enamoured of the aquarium and would spend hours watching the fish, with the Captain by her side. She was friendly with the children, though they were pretty hostile to her and glowered and glared like anything. One morning, she beckoned them.

'Come here children, there's something you have to see!'

At her side, as usual, the Captain boomed. 'On the double, do as Aunty says, and stop scowling like that both of you!'

'What?' Shoma muttered as she stared at the hateful aquarium. 'We've seen all this before!'

'I know, you have sweetheart, but look at that seahorse...' Jayanti Aunty pointed to a lovely golden-yellow seahorse and its partner, lovingly nuzzling each other near a tall strand of seaweed, their tails twined around it.

'Ya, so? It has a fat tummy, so what?' Shoma rolled her eyes.

'Is she going to have a baby?' Shona asked, nudging his twin in the ribs and grinning.

Not she, he! Yes, he's going to have a whole lot of babies very soon! Jayanti Aunty said. 'Look, his tummy's splitting open and my God, there they come!'

And suddenly there were a whole lot of tiny seahorses shimmering near their parent.

You said he's having a baby?' Shoma asked in spite of herself.

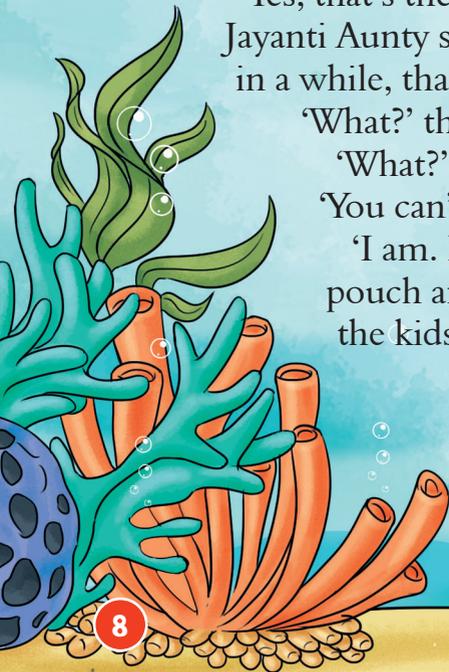
'Yes, that's the father. He gives birth and looks after the babies,' Jayanti Aunty said calmly. 'Their mum will check on them once in a while, that's all.'

'What?' the children chorused.

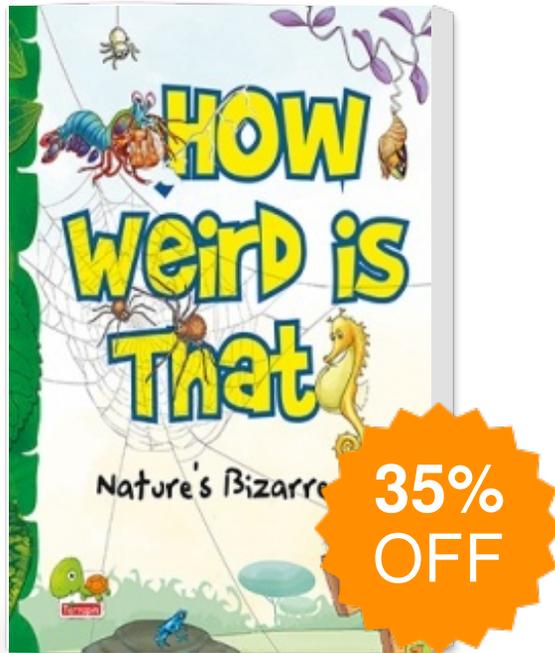
'What?' The Captain exclaimed, taking a step backwards.

'You can't be serious!'

'I am. His wife would have deposited her eggs in his tummy pouch and he fertilizes them and gives birth and looks after the kids.' She grinned at them all. 'I like that! Don't you?'



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