

Deep humour? The fox didn't mean to be funny, it was just after its dinner.

WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT?

MOST OF US WILL PROBABLY CHUCKLE AT THIS PHOTO, BUT WHAT'S FUNNY ABOUT IT – AND AT A TIME WHEN THE STATE OF THE NATURAL WORLD IS HARDLY A LAUGHING MATTER, IS IT OK TO FIND HUMOUR IN WILDLIFE, ASKS JAMES FAIR?

Some of the biggest talking points from *Planet Earth II* were about story lines that veered unsettlingly towards tragedy – the marine iguanas running for their lives from the racer snakes in *Islands* or the hawksbill turtle hatchlings crawling heart-breakingly towards artificial light sources on Barbados in *Cities*.

But arguably it was the moments of comedy that left audiences coming back for more – especially the 16–34-year-olds who, the BBC announced triumphantly, tuned in to the series in greater numbers than they did to ITV's *The X Factor*. Think of the back-scratching bears and synchronised flamingos in *Mountains* and the fruit-and-veg stealing macaques in *Cities*. My two children – aged eight and five – couldn't stop laughing at these sequences.

Mountains producer Justin Anderson says he's been itching to film the bear footage for many years, so was delighted to finally nail it for this series. "I have two kids aged four and six, and I know as a dad that I can

get their attention if I can make them laugh," he says. "For me, humour is more universally appealing than a dramatic chase or action sequence."

COMIC RELIEF

If that's true, it does make you wonder why wildlife films, photography and even writing – and magazines – don't include more humour. In fact, this was part of the thinking of wildlife photographer Paul Joynson-Hicks when he set up the Comedy Wildlife Photography Awards (CWPA) in 2015.

Co-organiser and fellow photographer Tom Sullam says the thinking was to have a

“THEY HAD NO IDEA WHETHER THE IMAGES THEY RECEIVED FOR THE CONTEST WOULD BE ANY GOOD.”

competition that wasn't serious and provided less of a barrier to amateur photographers. Joynson-Hicks and Sullam knew from their own experience of taking pictures of wildlife – mainly in Tanzania where they both live – that they frequently snapped funny moments that would never find an outlet, but they had no idea whether the images they received for the competition would be any good or if it would strike a chord with the public.

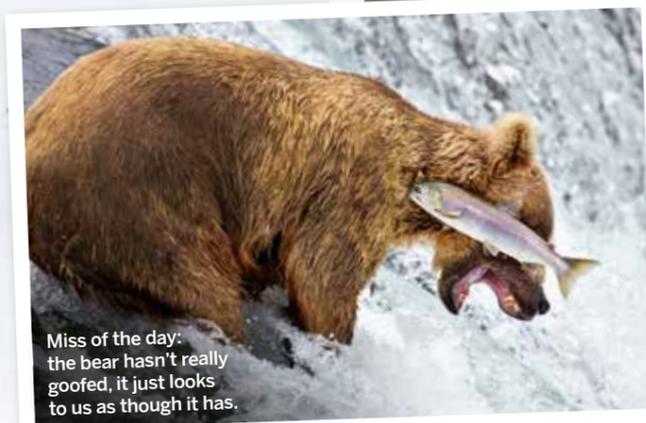
"But after we got massive press coverage in 2015, we realised people do like this," Sullam says. Most of the winning or shortlisted images rely either on animals doing something that looks human, such as appearing to laugh or wave at the camera, or in them appearing to have goofed in some way – the brown bear

that's missed a leaping salmon (*right*) is a good example.

"It's very anthropomorphic," Sullam admits. "We recognise human behaviour in the animals, but it removes any cultural barriers. It's not Asian humour or North American humour, it's cross-cultural."

To emphasise this point, Sullam says that newspapers and websites from every country in the world apart from North Korea have used the photos. The 2016 awards had 2,200 entries from people in 75 different countries.

Mark Carwardine, a noted wildlife photographer who chaired the judging panel of Wildlife Photographer of the Year for many years, says there's no problem in finding human characteristics in animal behaviour, as long the animal hasn't been manipulated



Miss of the day: the bear hasn't really goofed, it just looks to us as though it has.



It's a steal: monkey thieves were a hit with audiences of *Planet Earth II*.

FUNNY BUNNIES: COMEDY IN NATURAL HISTORY PROGRAMMING

ANIMAL MAGIC

For millions of children growing up from the 1960s to the early 1980s, their first taste of wildlife on TV was Johnny Morris' humorous voiceovers on *Animal Magic*. The programme unashamedly made the zoo animals talk, and, perhaps because such anthropomorphism is much rarer these days, looking again at the few episodes still freely available, it's almost impossible not to smile.

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

In 2009, the BBC effectively updated *Animal Magic* with *Walk On The Wild Side*, a series of 30-minute programmes featuring wildlife footage with

voiceovers by well-known comedians. If you can't locate your inner child then you probably won't find a marmot saying, "Alan, Alan, Alan – Oh, no, it's Steve!" or a puffin putting on a Mexican accent the slightest bit rib-tickling. I'm afraid I did.

SPRINGWATCH UNSPRUNG

In 2010, *Springwatch* gained *Unsprung*, an informal, eccentric and often humorous accompaniment to the main event. It has featured interviews with guests ranging from the celebrity academic Germaine Greer to the comedian Ed Byrne, quirky quizzes and host Chris Packham's occasionally acerbic critiques of viewers' wildlife photographs.

to achieve this. "You can't help but anthropomorphise, and if it helps to make a connection with wildlife, that's a good thing," he says. "If kids love watching a bear scratching its back, what's wrong with that?"

FOSSILISED FUN

But it's not just footage or photos of wildlife looking inadvertently foolish that make people laugh. Film-maker and conservationist Matt Brierley took a show to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2009 in which he aimed to convert audiences to his hypothesis that T rex was a pack-hunter not a scavenger.

It's not the most obvious subject for a stand-up routine, but Brierley was getting 90 people a day at the fringe, and subsequently performed a 12-night sell-out run at a small theatre in Bristol (this

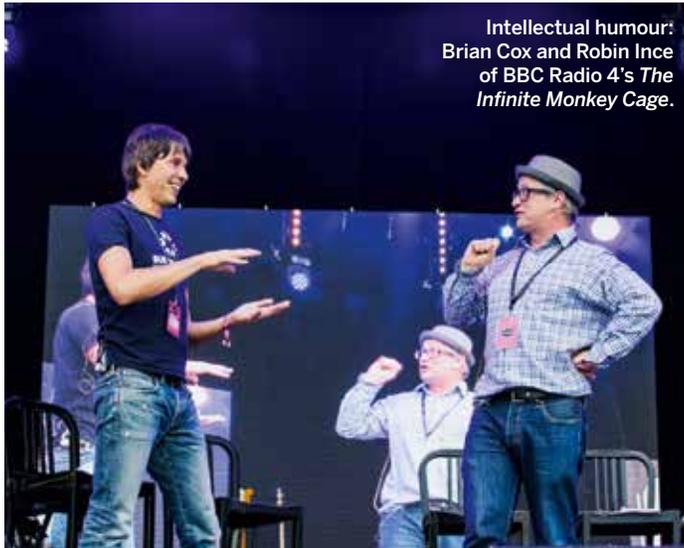
is now available online). The humour is gentle rather than 'laugh-your-head-off' funny, but Brierley takes the audience on an absorbing journey around the world. He travels to Cremona, in Italy, to protest against the notion that T rex scavenged for its supper and later to the town of Dinosaur, in Colorado, to inveigle the mayor to sign a petition supporting his theory.

"I think people liked the fact that it was funny and it's a true," Brierley says. "And they like dinosaurs in general."

With his conservationist's hat on – he's currently making a film about shark-finning – the comedian believes there is good reason to include more humour. "If you give people messages that are all unhappy, they just won't work. There are hundreds of causes I should care



Magic man: the incomparable Johnny Morris.



Intellectual humour: Brian Cox and Robin Ince of BBC Radio 4's *The Infinite Monkey Cage*.

about, but I'm more likely to stop at something that makes me smile."

Helen Pilcher, a science-writer who has also done stand-up, says a similar argument applies to communicating science ideas. "You reach audiences you would not be able to otherwise," she says. "I hope it means they are learning about stuff and being coaxed into your world."

STANDING UP FOR SCIENCE

There's an appetite for more intellectually driven humour, Pilcher points out, citing both Radio 4's *The Infinite Monkey Cage*, hosted by Prof Brian Cox and comedian Robin Ince, and Bright Club. Bright Club is a one-off – a comedy club that features professional stand-ups talking to scientists amusingly about their research.

If that sounds unlikely, then so does Pilcher's book, *Bring Back the King: the New Science of De-extinction*, a humorous look at how technological advances could enable humans to bring long-gone species back from the dead.

In the book, Pilcher writes about attempts to revive all manner of currently

defunct species – the Pyrenean subspecies of the Spanish ibex known as the bucardo, the thylacine or Tasmanian tiger, the northern white rhino and the Christmas Island rat are all put under the microscope.

De-extinction is not an easy subject to write about because both the science and ethics of it are complex; making it funny can entail contriving jokes out of subjects that are not replete with obvious humour.

The story of the bucardo is a good example. Before the last female died in 2000, scientists took samples of her skin cells, and in 2002 cloned a single offspring. Sadly, the kid survived only seven minutes, with an autopsy later revealing its lungs were deformed and it could never have lived.

"The bucardo, so briefly back in the world, went extinct all over again, giving it the honour not just of being the first animal to be brought back from extinction, but the ignominy of being the first animal ever to go extinct twice," Pilcher notes.

Perhaps you don't find that funny or even consider it a subject meriting a joke, but it made me chuckle, as



Never a scavenger: Matt Brierley's fringe view of T rex.

“DON'T TEMPT ME, YOU CAN IMAGINE THE CHEETAH THINKING, BUT IT'S DOING NO SUCH THING.”



If we imagine the cheetah is feeling challenged by the 40mph sign, we are giving it human characteristics, but does that matter?

did much of the writing. More importantly, it tempted me to read on, knowing that on most pages there would be a little gift of a joke or a humorous aside that would lighten the otherwise serious subject matter.

NO LAUGHING MATTER?

So, should conservationists, film-makers and writers try to be funnier? Though Matt Brierley clearly finds humour in much of what he does, he can see why others don't. "If you know what's happening to the planet, it weighs very heavily on your mind, and 2016 has been a very taxing year," he says. "I can see why people have a 'doom and gloom' outlook – it's because they care about what's happening."

Plus, it's not always easy to be funny. Just because you are an expert in why kittiwakes are declining in the North Atlantic

or the socio-economic factors affecting lion conservation in East Africa doesn't mean you have any talent for making people laugh.

Which is, perhaps, where the Comedy Wildlife Photography Awards come in, because there's no need for razorsharp wit to explain what's funny about them. Personally, my favourite's the image of the cheetah gazing down a track at a 40mph sign. "Don't tempt me," you can imagine the cheetah thinking to itself. That the cheetah is, of course, doing no such thing doesn't make the image any less humorous. 🐾

➕ FIND OUT MORE

CWPA www.comedywildlifephotography.com

Matt Brierley's T rex show is online: www.mattbrierley.com/comedian.html