

## **Making Ripples**

### **Animals in Love Part I: Monogamy Myths**

by Amanda Bancroft

If we could talk with animals, we could ask them if they loved that special valentine of theirs, commonly referred to as a mate. Science generally takes the stance that we can't know what they're experiencing, however, so it really is a secret who their admirer might be. But their mating behavior is often observable, and while many species do mate for life, modern science is unraveling our love affair with the idea of monogamy in the animal kingdom.

We're approaching nesting season, and birds are pretty monogamous creatures at least for one breeding season: over ninety-five percent of species remain with their mate, according to Audubon. For those people who love to build or install nest boxes, the love of bluebirds occasionally knows no bounds. Neither does bluebird love, apparently: even though they're mostly monogamous, family dynamics may vary considerably. One male was seen with two females each using their own nest cavity. A nest may be incubated by two females mated with the same male, or two males with one female and a single nest. What matters to bluebirds most seems to be survival of the young: earlier clutches and even offspring from the past year may help their parents feed newly hatched or fledged chicks and gain valuable experience in the process. Resident roadrunners, however, will mate for life.

Mammals as a worldwide group are pretty promiscuous: according to research from many different sources, only about five percent of mammals are monogamous. It was once thought that for the red fox, mating was about finding that perfect mate, and it's true that some foxes mate for life. Recently we've discovered that in some areas foxes are monogamous, but in many instances, the males will mate with more than one female while still providing for pups. Rarely, two litters of pups are raised in a communal den protected by multiple parents. It's the female that chooses the male, although she may copulate with multiple partners. She picks just one male to help her raise the family – an example of social monogamy.

Another canid, the coyote, which some love to hate, shows almost total loyalty to their mate. Long-term genetic studies have come up with zero infidelity. It turns out that randomly killing nuisance coyotes (that are expanding their range) overturns family and group dynamics so that non-dominant females come into estrus and their populations actually increase.

The new idea that's emerging, thanks to better testing and technology for parenting research, is that social monogamy is still powerful and somewhat common, but sexual monogamy is not. Species that are known to be socially monogamous may not be sexually monogamous too. Regardless, our native species have artistic and wondrous ways of expressing their desire to mate

– whether for life or for two hours. Read the next Making Ripples column on some of these cool courtship displays!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).