

# Kangaroo playing air guitar wins top prize

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**Guitar hero:** Perth's Jason Moore captured a would-be Jimi Hendrix of the kangaroo world.

**Are animals happier than humans? Science suggests that they feel similar emotions to us. But thinkers are divided on whether their feelings are stronger, weaker or the same.**

Roll up, roll up. The most joyful picture show on Earth is here: the Comedy Wildlife Photo prize.<sup>1</sup>

This year's deserved winner comes from Australia. It features a kangaroo appearing to **shred** an air guitar without a care in the world.

Humans often find humour in animals. We particularly enjoy animals exhibiting human-like behaviour. Ancient Greeks learnt morals through **Aesop's Fables**, which encourage us to laugh at characters like the arrogant hare<sup>2</sup> and the foolish frogs.<sup>3</sup>

Cartoonists from Walt Disney to the makers of *Peppa Pig* have put human-like animals on the screen.

We laugh at animals all the time. But do animals laugh at themselves? Recent studies have revealed that many animals do appear to have a sense of humour.

One pair of researchers found 65 species able to laugh, including foxes, dogs, cows, seals, mongooses and **parakeets**, as well as our ape and monkey relatives. Another experiment saw rats laugh after being tickled.

If animals have a sense of humour, then surely they can experience happiness. Biology supports it. Mammals, writes science journalist Anna Brooks, "have similar emotional processing centres in the brain as humans so... they would experience basic emotions like fear, anger, grief and joy."

The lower intelligence of animals might make them happier than us. Their needs and thoughts are simpler. They do not need to think about wearing the right clothes or completing homework on time. Their horizons are smaller too. They do not spend time worrying about climate change or nuclear **annihilation**.

On the other hand, animals might not be able to reach peak happiness. The philosopher John Stuart Mill believed in higher pleasures and lower pleasures.<sup>4</sup> Only humans can access the first category, which brings more meaningful happiness.

## Are animals happier than humans?

### Furry happy people

1. Past winners include a lion cub falling off a tree, a golden silk monkey in a compromising position and a turtle appearing to make a rude gesture.
2. In the famous fable The Hare and the Tortoise, a slow Tortoise challenges the vain Hare to a race. The Hare gets so far ahead he decides to have a rest — and the Tortoise manages to catch him up and win.
3. In The Frogs Who Wanted a King, a group of frogs ask for a king to rule over them. The gods eventually send them a stork, who eats them up.
4. Higher pleasures might include reading a book or appreciating a symphony; lower pleasures could include chasing a ball or basking in the sun.

### Some people say

*“Animals are such agreeable friends – they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms.”*

**George Eliot (1819 – 1880), English novelist**

*“Now and then it’s good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.”*

**Guillaume Apollinaire (1880 – 1918), French Surrealist poet**

*What do you think?*

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**Yes:** The Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote: “There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will.” Animals can do this. Most humans cannot.

**No:** We have become used to seeing animals as furry, scaly and feathered semi-humans. In reality, we are just projecting our own thoughts and emotions onto creatures whose minds are alien to us.

**Or...** It depends. Just as some people are happier than others, the happiness of an animal depends on its relative intelligence and the life it leads. A wild boar might be happy. A captive pig might not.

### Six steps to discovery

#### 1. Connect

**How do you feel about this story?** - Has an animal ever made you laugh? What was the occasion?

#### 2. Express

**What do others believe?** - In pairs, discuss which animals are the most intelligent.

#### 3. Reflect

**What might happen next?** - Write a letter to a newspaper from the perspective of a zoo or farm animal.

### Glossary

**Shred** - To play a very fast, difficult style of rock lead guitar. Also means to cut or tear into small pieces.

**Aesop** - Ancient Greek writer (c.620 – 564BC) credited with hundreds of fables: short stories telling a moral lesson, often featuring animals.

**Parakeets** - A small parrot with green plumage.

**Annihilation** - Complete destruction.