

Animal Society is Varied, Complex and Mysterious

Most of us are fascinated by watching animal behavior, especially their interactions with their own species. It is these intra-species interactions and associations that we call, anthropomorphically, “animal societies”.

To start with the basics, some animals are loners and some like to be part of a group. Some groups are small and some are huge. Some are temporary and some are life-long. We have special words for groups of animals like flocks, schools, herds, prides, packs, pairs, families, etc.

Even if we limit our discussion to mammal behavior, there is still a wide variation in types of social interaction.

Probably the most common type of association among mammals is a family group including the mother and her offspring. The male may or may not be present during and after the birth. For many species, the male and female come together to mate and thereafter part ways, leaving the female to raise the young by herself. For other species, such as coyotes and foxes, they mate for life and the male usually helps to raise the young.

For most species in which the male is not involved with raising the young, the males are mostly solitary, such as mountain lions and other felines and bears, but also raccoons and skunks. At times, non-breeding adults of some species such as coyotes will form loose associations or temporary packs.

Many of the larger prey species that evolved to have to evade large predators form herds, usually made up of males, females and young. Being only one individual in a large group of your species gives you a much better chance of evading a predator. Our white-tailed deer certainly fall into that category, although our deer do not form the really large herds like some of the African herbivores. I have, however, heard from several folks that have observed herds of feral exotic axis deer in excess of 50 animals.

Our white-tailed deer appear to form rather fluid herds usually made up of mostly does and fawns or yearlings, probably many of which are related. But it doesn't appear that any of these small herds are fixed in numbers, but instead one sees fewer deer at times and more at other times, sometimes bucks are included and sometimes they are not. Sometimes small groups of bucks are seen.

We know that during the rut in the fall bucks will spar with each other for dominance to breed the does in the area and that about that same time the females appear to drive off their male fawns. But because of the loose associations, white-tail bucks don't seem to have the harems that are seen with elk, for instance, in which the dominant buck

continues to drive off all other bucks and mates with all of the females in his “harem”.

And we know from genetic studies that the dominant white-tailed buck is not the one breeding all of the does in his area.

One of the common exotic ungulates in the Hill Country is the blackbuck antelope. They have a different type of social structure. The mature bucks establish a territory which they defend against all other bucks and which they mark with urine and droppings. The does roam around in herds and whenever the doe herd moves into a buck’s territory, mating can occur with any does in season. Immature bucks form “bachelor herds” but try to stay away from dominant bucks’ territories.

In order for a buck to be able to maintain his territory, he has to fight off any other bucks, and will do so until he himself is defeated. Interestingly, I have seen on two different occasions a dominant buck chase an old, crippled buck out of his territory even though the likelihood that the latter would be any competition was very low.

In the bird world, many species of males go to great lengths to attract mates. In some species, both sexes build the nest, in others only one sex does this. In most species, the male helps to feed the young. Quite a few species of birds mate for life such as eagles, geese and swans, even though they may also be part of a larger flock at certain times of the year.

Recently, on the Texas coast, I observed two apparently male turtles in some kind of circling maneuver before they both attempted to mate with a female.

Animal societies are as varied as the animals themselves.

Hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books “Hill Country Ecology,” “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide” and “A Beginner’s Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners.” He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org .