

Animal flatulence: Scientists use Twitter to pass on information

By Jason Bittel, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff 1.16.17



The bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*). Alfred Schauhuber/McPhoto/ullstein bild via Getty Images

Have you ever wondered if baboons pass gas? If so, you're not alone.

It sounds like the sort of question Bart Simpson might have asked to derail science class. But real-life scientists are now taking to Twitter to provide answers. So far, they've created a hashtag, "#DoesItFart," and a Google spreadsheet that details the flatulence habits of more than 60 animals.

So, which animals cut the cheese? Tons, it turns out. Bats do, according to David Bennett, a researcher at Queen Mary University of London. And the bigger they are, the harder they honk.

Rats, zebras and bearded dragons are also among those creatures that pass gas. Birds, on the other hand, do not seem to have a biological need to do so, but they could let one rip, theoretically. Marine life forms such as oysters, mussels and crabs? Alas, they are whoopee-impaired.

The science of flatulence is not just about potty humor. Cattle gas, for example, is a significant contributor to atmospheric methane that contributes to climate change. And fauna flatulence is also a hot topic among certain crowds — one scientists want to engage.

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Favorite Question Of The Preteen Crowd

"Does it fart?" is one of most frequent questions zoologists receive from kids, said Dani Rabaiotti of the Zoological Society of London. The whole "#DoesItFart" adventure started when her teenage brother asked if snakes fart. Rabaiotti knew from her own work that the wild dogs of Africa definitely pass gas, as do the extremely gassy seals that reside on the Atlantic island of South Georgia. But she wasn't sure about snakes, so she consulted snake expert David Steen.

The short answer is yes, says Steen, a wildlife ecologist at Auburn University. Snakes sometimes release feces and musk in defense, and this is often accompanied by fart noises, he said.

Steen said this is far from the first time he's fielded this question, as it seems to be a favorite of the preteen crowd.

"It is always fun to see what captures people's attention," he said. "It is at least an opportunity to engage with a larger audience and bring new folks into the conversation."

And if engagement is the goal, or at least a byproduct, does it really matter what the topic is? "Just because it's flatulence doesn't mean it's inherently silly," said Adriana Lowe, a researcher at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. "The diets and digestive systems of animals are an important and fascinating field of study, and gas is just a part of that."

Some Animals Pass Flammable Gas

Lowe studies chimpanzees in Uganda's Budongo forest, animals whose gas appears to vary with their diet. "Fruit is tootier than leaves, and figs seem to be the worst offenders," she said. On occasion, these bodily emissions have even aided in her research. "Several times I have been with one or two chimps and not been aware others are nearby until the farts start," says Lowe. "Some of them have that very long, air-being-released-from-a-balloon quality, which is handy because it gives you a bit longer to pinpoint where it's coming from."

Whereas most animals that pass gas have soft, fleshy behinds, millipedes have hard valves. They probably act as silencers for their toots, said Angie Macias. She is a graduate student studying forest pathology at West Virginia University. Research has shown that the arthropods create quite a bit of methane in their intestines, and that gas has only one place to go — out the back.

"Put it all together, and I would say that millipede toots are probably very smelly, and definitely flammable," says Macias.

Silent, in other words. But potentially deadly.

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"#DoesItFart" is only the latest in a series of hashtags created by scientists and snickered at by the public. Some are longer-running, single-scientist efforts, like the snake recognition Steen provides by way of the hashtags "#NotACopperhead" and "#NotACottonmouth." Similarly, Michelle LaRue, a research ecologist at the University of Minnesota, hosts a game in which she posts pictures of cats big and small and asks followers to guess whether the animal is a "#CougarOrNot." And Kaeli Swift, a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington, orchestrates a game called "#CrowOrNo." Both games are far more difficult than they might sound.

Hashtags Provide Scientists With An Outlet To Share Information

At this point, I should probably tell you that I also have a hashtag. It's called "#ButtOfWhat," and its premise is simple: Educate and entertain while talking about animal backsides. Is it a bit of a childish gimmick? Sure. But I guarantee you'll learn a thing or two by following along.

This is also why I follow hashtag games like "#DoesItFart." Every one is an opportunity to learn weird and wonderful facts about animals, and they can also provide a glimpse into the lives of scientists.

"When scientists can present these seemingly silly facts, it invites people to be part of what we know and to find out what we don't, which enables us to show how science works," said Cassandra Raby. She is a researcher with the Zoological Society of London, who confirms that baboons can drop some bombs. Females can be the worst, by the way.

You could also make the argument that conversations like these provide scientists with an outlet to share more information.

Scientists spend a lot of time with their study creatures and see some interesting or weird behaviors, said Nick Caruso. He is a researcher of salamanders, which do not pass gas, at the University of Alabama and creator of the "#DoesItFart" spreadsheet. "This type of info, unless directly relevant to the study, may not make it into our publications and we don't always get a chance to talk about it."

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