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WHO, HIM? HE'S MY DAD!

For kids: Some fathers in the animal kingdom are extra-devoted to their young.

By Debbie Swanson

from the June 10, 2008 edition

Father's Day is right around the corner! Why not spark up your dad's greeting card by comparing him to a dad in the wild? How about this: "Happy Father's Day, Dad! We sure appreciate all the back-breaking work you do. You are just like a giant water bug."

Why would Dad appreciate this comparison? Well, it's true that many dads in the wild aren't involved with parenting, but there are some – like the giant water bug – that work pretty hard to get their little ones off to a good start. Take a peek at what some devoted animal fathers do to help raise their young. Maybe you'll find one that reminds you of your dad!

Giant water bug – This father might feel like he's got a lot on his back, but he doesn't seem to mind. The female sticks eggs to the back of the male, then leaves. "Roughly 100 to 150 eggs can be carried by the male, for one to two weeks until they hatch," says Laura Jesse of the Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic at Iowa State University.

Dad's egg duties include jumping around to circulate air on the growing eggs and making sure they get water. All this time Dad can't fly, due to the weight of the rapidly growing eggs. Now that's one bogged-down but dedicated dad.

Stickleback fish – The male of this species puts a little bit of himself into building a home for his young. At mating time, he uses his mouth to build a nest using bits of plants and glues it together with a sticky material that he creates from his kidneys, says Chris Leahy, a naturalist at the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

During this time he also takes on more vivid colors to attract a female and to scare away other males that enter his territory. One or more females will stop to lay eggs in his nest, but then continue on their way; it's up to the male to watch the eggs and care for the young. Sometimes up to 100 sticklebacks are born at a time, and Dad looks out for them all until they're ready for life on their own.

Emperor penguin – You won't find many female emperor penguins bugging their mates to lose weight. In fact, the plumper the male, the better. He goes without food while caring for a single egg laid by the female.

"The male incubates this egg on top of his feet, for about 62 to 67 days. In the Antarctic winter, temperatures drop to –76 degrees F. [with] wind chill," says Heather Urquhart, the penguin exhibit and collection manager of the New England Aquarium in Boston. This dad may lose up to 50 percent of his body weight while waiting for his penguin chick to be born!

During this time, the female is at sea finding food. If she doesn't return before the egg hatches, Dad won't let his penguin chick down. "The male can feed the chick a liquid sometimes referred to as 'penguin milk' – which is really broken-down cells from his own esophagus," Ms. Urquhart says. "When the female returns, the male heads out to sea to regain his lost body weight. Then both parents care for the chicks for about four months."

Fox – If your dad is always making sure you're well prepared for life, he's got something in common with most male foxes. The father fox's goal is to sharpen his pups' survival skills. "Coyotes, wolves, and other foxes share this trait, too," says Mr. Leahy. "The males tend to hang out with the family and with this comes the role of teaching the pups survival skills, socialization, feeding habits."

When the pups are young, father fox brings mice and other food to the den. Once they're bigger, he's ready to teach

them how to hunt for their own food. He'll bury food nearby, then take his pups on an adventure to teach them how to sniff it out. He'll even stage an ambush to sharpen their defensive skills.

Sea horse – The most unique animal dad might be the father sea horse. Instead of the female giving birth to the babies, the male does. "They develop in a pouch on the male sea horse for two to four weeks," Ms. Urquhart says. After this role-reversal, the job of both male and female sea horses is done. "The fry [young sea horses] are born self-sufficient and need no further parental care."

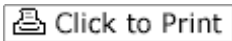
More caring dads – The male of some types of microhylid frogs in Papua New Guinea guards the eggs of his young until they hatch under leaves on the forest floor. Then father frog loads the froglets on his back and transports them, school-bus style, to different locations where a few hop off at each stop to start life on their own.

The female spotted sandpiper chooses a territory, lays her eggs, and then takes off, leaving the male to care for the eggs and tend to the young.

The male hip-pocket frog has built-in pouches on either side of him. Once tadpoles hatch, Dad carries around up to six in each pouch until they've turned into grown-up frogs.

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