

Attenborough at 90: A look at the weird and wonderful

The work of David Attenborough is wide ranging and varied, [Rebecca Hall](#) explores his contributions

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National treasure, David Attenborough, turned ninety this month! As a tribute, we take a look at a selection of the wonderfully bizarre creatures he has spent his career bringing to us.



Image: Wikimedia

1. Venus' flower basket - *Euplectella*

A sea sponge found near the Philippine Islands, the Venus' flower basket has a unique skeleton made entirely of silica. This structure is immensely strong, allowing it to withstand the high pressure under the ocean. They feed on microbes found within the sea and are commonly regarded in Japan as a symbol of love, as they often house one male and one female shrimp.

2. Corpse flower - *Rafflesia*

A less endearing organism, *Rafflesia* is a type of parasitic plant with no roots or leaves, living predominantly inside another plant. It emits an odour of rotting meat to attract pollinating insects. The largest individual flower ever recorded came from a species of *Rafflesia* and it can weigh over 10 kg!



Image: Wiki

3. Olm- *Proteus anguinus*

The olm is a blind salamander inhabiting aquatic caves near Italy. It is reported to live to 100 years old and has adapted to its life underground by developing acutely sensitive hearing and smell. Its

reproductive strategy is highly unusual; it can either lay eggs or give birth to live young depending on the temperature.

4. Bowerbird – *Ptilonorhynchidae*

The name ‘bowerbird’ covers approximately 20 species, all of which are characterised by their eye-catching method of securing a mate. The male builds an impressive structure called a bower which could be made of anything from twigs and moss to brightly coloured flowers and berries. Once ready, the male sings to the females from its bower to attract their attention.

5. Praying mantis – Mantodea

You would not want to get on the wrong side of a female praying mantis. These insects, similar in appearance to stick insects, are adapted for their method of predation – snatching their prey during an ambush attack. It is the unfortunate side effect of reproduction that makes these creatures interesting though; the female sometimes cannibalises its mate after copulation and have even been known to decapitate the unfortunate male during the act.

6. Zombie fungus – *Ophiocordyceps*

Zombie fungi are particularly gruesome parasites. They manipulate their infected ant by releasing a chemical cocktail, resulting in the ant leaving its nest in search of the ideal fungal habitat. Here the ant grips onto a leaf with its mandibles as the fungus grows within its head, eventually bursting out to release its spores.



Image: Encyclopedia Britannica.

8. Okapi – *Okapia johnstoni*

It is the patterns on this mammal that make it a unique organism. Found in the Congo region, the okapi is a member of the giraffe family but that might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you see one. Built more like a horse, it has black and white stripes on its legs that would not be out of place on a zebra.

7. Pacu fish – *Serrasalminae*

Speaking of unusual appearances, you need look no further than the South American pacu fish. A relative of the piranha, the pacu have square, straight teeth that are unnervingly similar to that of humans.

9. Cuckoo – *Cuculidae*

Be grateful your foster brother isn't a cuckoo. The adult cuckoos lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, who then rear the chicks as their own. The sly cuckoo has developed techniques to avoid rejection by its foster parents, including tipping the other eggs or chicks out of the nest!

10. Flashlight fish – *Anomalopidae*

Finally, an ingenious way to dazzle your predators. Flashlight fish use bioluminescence (light emission by living organisms) to avoid being eaten. Underneath their eyes sits a small organ that contains light-

producing bacteria which gets 'blinked' off when the fish changes direction, disorientating whatever is trying to eat them. The flashlight fish also use the light as a torch for scanning for food on the seafloor.



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