



## Living on Animal Planet

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There has never been “a dull moment!” That’s how wildlife writer Janaki Lenin likes to describe her marriage to renowned herpetologist and wildlife conservationist Rom Whitaker. Introduced to the wilderness by Whitaker, Lenin took to it like a “fish to water; and there’s been no looking back”. My Husband and Other Animals (Westland, Rs. 250; 282 pages) is steeped in delightful encounters with wildlife of all sizes, shapes and species. Living on a farm south of Chennai, with four dogs, a pair of emus, a flock of geese and a pig, Lenin has made her peace with the many wild creatures who occasionally stake claim to her house, “treating it as their own”. Right from battling pesky tree-frogs that insist on colonizing her house to befriending Gila monsters, Lenin’s book provides an amusing and rare insight into the animal kingdom. Would you say that animals are far more intelligent than we give them credit for? Most definitely. Japanese primatologists have recently established the incredible memory for symbols that chimpanzees possess. If a human being was to perform those feats, we’d call the person a genius.

*Tell us some little known traits of commonly known species.*

Almost every animal except human beings, from elephants down to the humble bumble bee, is capable of returning to its home after being moved far away. They are able to navigate through unfamiliar terrain, land or sea, with precision whereas we humans would be lost without the aid of GPS devices and maps.



*Are we in a conflict situation with the wild today?*  
Depends on who is the 'we'. City people have the least tolerance for anything wild. For instance, two elephants who strayed from neighbouring jungles to Mysore a couple of years back were treated in an almost inhuman manner; they were pelted with stones before being injected with tranquilisers. There are routine incidents of leopards being beaten up in Nashik and Mumbai. More common, monkeys found within city limits are translocated to the rural countryside. Agriculturalists have always had conflicts with some animal or the other throughout history. It's understandable because elephants, nilgai and wild pig also want a part of the delicious irrigated crops that humans like. And then, there are insects of all kinds that are the bane of all farmers. Tribals seem to have least problems with the wild. As long as other creatures, large and small, covet the same things that we do and we refuse to share, there is bound to be conflict.

*If you were to name a few species rapidly facing extinction in India, which would they be?*  
Gharial, because we dam rivers and throw filth in the undammed ones, and dugongs and river terrapins, because people eat them. In my lifetime, I'll probably see the extinction of at least gharials and dugongs. River terrapins may cling on for longer.

Your husband has been at the forefront of nature conservation. For a 69-year-old, he leads an active lifestyle. Where does he draw his energy from? He doesn't see his work as a chore. He does what he does because he's having fun and enjoys it. For as long as I've known him, his day begins early every morning and goes on till late into the evening. The only concession he has made in recent years is taking Sundays off.



But, when we are out in the forests, just the sheer excitement of the unexpected overrides any fatigue. The one job he dreads, however, is answering letters and emails. I used to do that for him for more than 10 years, masquerading as Rom, using his lingo. Then I got tired of handling the volume of emails he gets; so now the poor chap works valiantly at it.

*An age gap of 27 years, a man wedded to the wild – what was the clincher for you as far as the marriage was concerned?*

Being in love! When we got to know each other, Rom was a single-minded reptile freak who loved the company of wild animals more than people. I was a city girl who had never been in a forest or seen a wild animal before I met Rom. My perverse mind took it as a challenge to see if I couldn't twist his head a little bit in my direction. On a serious note, both of us work at the relationship, and I'd like to say we don't take each other for granted. We trust each other enough to be able to bare our deepest worries, concerns and anxieties. That is the bedrock of the relationship and everything else is superfluous.