

Friend or Foe

It's common knowledge that birds and cats are enemies. After all, cats chase, kill, and sometimes eat birds. But is there a chance that a bird and cat could be friends? Let's consider the drongo and the meerkat.

The drongo and the meerkat have a symbiotic relationship. In scientific terms, that means they have a partnership. There are three different sorts of symbiotic partnerships. In parasitism, one animal in the relationship benefits but the other is harmed. In commensalism, one animal benefits and the other is neither helped nor harmed. In mutualism, both animals get something positive from the partnership.

The drongo and the meerkat have a relationship of mutualism, at least most of the time. The drongo, a bird, helps the meerkat, a mammal, by giving a warning cry whenever a predator is near. The meerkat then scurries into its burrow, often dropping food on their way. Here's where the drongo benefits. The bird swoops down to get the food while the meerkat huddles in his hole and avoids the predator. Win-win.

Sometimes the drongo is not a great friend. Sometimes the drongo tricks the meerkat with a fake warning cry. Then the drongo can get a free meal. Not every friendship is perfect.

If the drongo does this too often, the meerkats will catch on. They will ignore the warnings of the misbehaving bird. But the drongo has another trick. It will start to mimic the meerkats themselves. Meerkats won't ignore distress calls that sound like other meerkats, so again they drop their food and run. The mischievous drongo gets another free meal, and maybe loses a friend.

So, back to the original question, can birds and cats be friends? Well, perhaps. But the case of the drongo and the meerkat doesn't prove it. Meerkats are mammals, but they are not cats. They are weasel-like creatures that are members of the mongoose family. So even when drongos are being helpful, they are not helping cats. And, if they continue to trick the meerkats, the meerkats just might figure out how to send an actual cat their way.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Which term describes a symbiotic relationship in which one partner is helped and the other is neither helped nor hurt?
 - a. Mutualism
 - b. Parasitism
 - c. Commensalism
 - d. Communism

2. How does the drongo help the meerkat?
 - a. By warning them when a predator is near
 - b. By stealing the food they drop
 - c. By picking fleas off their fur
 - d. By mimicking their distress calls

3. If the drongo only gave fake warnings to the meerkats, how would you describe their relationship?
 - a. Parasitism
 - b. Commensalism
 - c. Mutualism
 - d. Symbiotic

4. When the drongo mimics the meerkat's distress signal, they are acting like
 - a. An enemy
 - b. A best friend
 - c. A popular friend
 - d. A bully

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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