



Why Elephants Have Big Ears: Understanding Patterns of Life on Earth

By Chris Lavers

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Why Elephants Have Big Ears is the result of one man's lifelong quest to understand why the creatures of the earth appear and act as they do. In a wry manner and personal tone, Chris Lavers explores and solves some of nature's most challenging evolutionary mysteries, such as why birds are small and plentiful, why rivers and lakes are dominated by the few remaining large reptiles, why most of the large land-dwellers are mammals, and many more.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1429774 in Books
- Published on: 2001-03-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.62" h x 1.01" w x 7.52" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This book might have been titled *On the Perfection of Crocodiles*. Chris Lavers, a biogeographer at the University of Nottingham, argues that "After 200 million years of hegemonic ecological success, it is time to recognize crocodilians for what they truly are: perhaps the closest approximation to an unsurpassable ecological design in the entire history of tetrapod life." There's a reason, he shows, that "alligators are as tough as old boots": it's not necessarily better to be warm-blooded. "If the warm-blooded condition were inherently superior in the struggle for life, then the world would be crawling with mammal-like and bird-like creatures, whereas in truth it is quite literally crawling with lizards, frogs, snakes, spiders, and beetles." Lavers looks around the animal world and points out that it's full of large warm-blooded creatures and many, many more small cold-blooded ones.

"There is a natural order to tetrapod life on our planet, rooted in the natural ecological talents of different types of animals," Lavers writes. These natural talents come from the fundamental characteristics of different forms and metabolisms: cold-blooded animals like crocodiles can endure starvation far better than warm-blooded creatures, while warm-blooded ones, if properly fueled, can keep going under conditions that stop crocodiles, well, cold. Biologists are used to thinking that energy balances, costs, and benefits are fundamental issues for living creatures, but not of thinking that these issues can be interesting to the general public. Lavers shows that they can be perfectly fascinating: he writes of the peculiarities of elephants, of hot and cold running dinosaurs, of birds on the wing and the ground, with verve and accuracy. This book might be a particularly good choice for dinosaurophiles who are looking to broaden their interests to even larger patterns of life on Earth. --*Mary Ellen Curtin*

From Publishers Weekly

In this encyclopedic study of the animal kingdom, Lavers demonstrates the truth in his book's epigraph, taken from the German writer (and scientist) Goethe's diary: "How delightful and magnificent a living thing is! How exactly matched to its condition, how true, how intensely being!" Lavers, a lecturer in natural history at the University of Nottingham (England) and contributor to the *New Statesman*, shows how form is perfectly matched to function in the animal kingdom. After he explains why elephants have stocky legs and long noses and no hair, it gradually becomes clear why they have such large appendages: with relatively little skin surface in proportion to their volume, they have a hard time releasing body heat; the large ears act as ventilators, providing extra surface for the release of excess heat. Dinosaur enthusiasts will enjoy Lavers's take on the cold-blooded vs. warm-blooded debate, in which the claims of warm-blood champion Robert Bakker and his opponents are evaluated on the basis of a detailed understanding of animal anatomy that many other accounts lack. Lavers also explains the importance of layered jungle ecosystems and inland watersheds for large-scale environmental well-being. The book concludes with a frightening but not alarmist warning about the dangers of global warming, which, Lavers shows, probably caused the monumental extinction of almost all life at the end of the Permian period. The writing tends toward the academic from time to time; a little more whimsical conjecture would have added to the book's already considerable appeal. Why wouldn't we ever see a baby elephant fly? Lavers hydroplanes over the underwater world of fish and marine creatures, but perhaps we can expect a future book devoted to it. The drawings of animals here are outstanding. While it will give teenagers a first-rate introduction to natural history, it holds delights for readers of all ages.

From [Booklist](#)

Lavers analyzes why animals look the way they do, why they live where they live, and why their physiology is either warm- or cold-blooded. As a child Lavers watched nature programs and wondered about things that the commentators didn't discuss: Why are elephants' ears so big? Why are reptiles small, with the exception of a few really large species that live in water? Why are most birds small? Understanding all of these whys becomes easy under the author's tutelage. He first tackles the fundamental concept of scaling, which explains why large animals are built differently from small animals (and leads to the answer of the book's title question). He then examines the evolution of animal life and the corollary evolution of warm-bloodedness. The patterns of animal life on the planet can be explained by understanding how their size and physiology interconnect, and then by how size and physiology relate to where an animal lives. *Nancy Bent*

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Users Review

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Ralph Scott:

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