CHAPTER 1

Baby, It's You

Making babies: It's a top priority of every creature on Earth. We already know that having human babies can involve some pretty hard labor. Animal parents have war stories of their own to relate when it comes to birthing babies. So breathe deep, count to ten—and prepare to read ten of the most extreme baby stories in the animal world.

#10 Cuckoo

Life is sweet for a parasitic cuckoo mom. She stakes out the nest of a host bird, lays her egg, and leaves. The host bird incubates the cuckoo egg along with her own, but the cuckoo chick hatches first and pushes the other eggs out of the nest. That means more food for the cuckoo—who will grow to be ten times the size of its foster parents. What happens when the host removes a cuckoo egg from its nest? The mother cuckoo apparently keeps tabs on its eggs and destroys the nests of hosts that don't cooperate!

Many cuckoos have evolved to match the pattern and color of their eggs to that of their host bird.

THAT'S WILD!

#9 Kiwi

This flightless bird from New Zealand has it tough in the baby department. After the female produces a whopper of an egg—up to one-fourth of her own body weight—she goes off for a well-deserved break, and dad takes over, keeping the egg safe and warm for nearly three months—and losing nearly 20 percent of his body weight in the process. Once the kiwi chick is hatched, it can look after itself within just a few days.

#8 Right Whale

A female right whale swims 4,000 miles to find waters warm enough to have her baby. And what a baby it is! A right whale calf weighs in at just over a ton—however, it's born without heat-retaining blubber. Mom has to help the baby build up blubber by stuffing it with extremely rich, high-fat milk. She produces so much milk that one day's supply equals the amount of milk a human baby will consume in a whole year.

#7 Nine-banded Armadillo

Wouldn't it be great to plan to have your baby at exactly the right time? That's what the nine-banded armadillo can do. If food is scarce, the female can delay implantation of her fertilized egg for up to three years. Once implantation occurs, the egg splits into four separate individuals, resulting in the birth of identical quadruplets of the same sex.

#6 Rabbit

A female rabbit, or doe, is ready to have babies at six months of age, and when that happens, she can make a brand-new family of six babies every month for the next ten years. That works out to nearly 700 babies over her lifetime. How does a rabbit mom manage? She doesn't put much energy into tending her babies once they are born, visiting and nursing them for only about ten minutes per day.

#5 Naked Mole Rat

Although they are mammals, these 3-inch-long rodents live in colonies that are similar to those of termites. Only one female—the queen—breeds for the colony, and she's a true specialist. She can have 27 pups in a single litter! But since she has to stay slim and trim in order to squeeze through narrow underground tunnels, she makes her body longer instead of fatter. Hormones trigger an extra growth spurt, lengthening the distance between the bones in her back by an extra 30 percent. The queen also uses hormones to suppress the fertility of the colony's other females.

A naked mole rat's jaws are so powerful they can chew through steel!

THAT'S WILD!

#4 Aphid

"Who needs men?" is an idea that the aphid, a tiny plant-feeding insect, has taken to extremes. For most of a female aphid's life, she reproduces asexually, without help from a partner. She gives birth to one live young and that offspring is usually a female—who is born already pregnant with the next generation! As the season progresses and the weather turns cooler, breeding females start having male babies. When this happens, the males and females mate to produce eggs, which can last through the cold of winter.

Ants often "farm" aphids for their honeydew, a sweet liquid they secrete. In return for the honeydew, the ants protect the aphids from predators such as ladybugs.

THAT'S WILD!

Get off my back!

#3 Surinam Toad

Surinam toad moms raise an entire brood of about 100 babies—from egg to fully formed toadlet—on their backs, quite literally! It starts with a mating dance. When the female is ready, the male grabs her around the waist. Together, the pair swims in a circle. At the top of the circle, the female releases her eggs and the male releases his sperm. The couple swims back to the bottom of the circle, and the female is now ready to catch the fertilized eggs on her back, while the male taps them into place. They repeat the process a few times for a total of about 100 eggs. Special hormones kick in to make the skin on the female's back swell up and harden around the eggs to protect them while the babies develop. When the babies are ready to emerge, the mother helps by molting, or shedding her skin. She can even exert pressure to help them out.

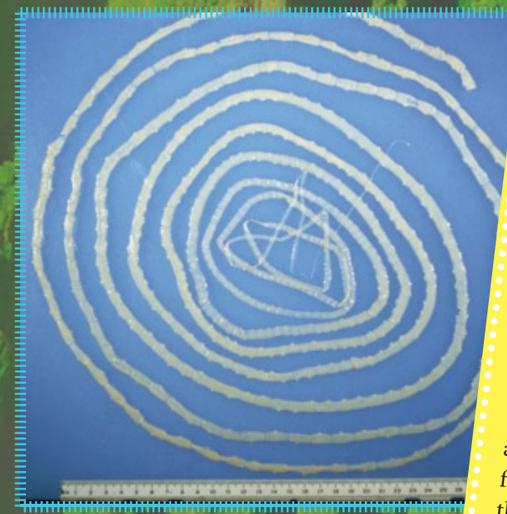
Surinam toads have no tongues! They use their sensitive fingertips to forage for food on the bottoms of ponds and rivers.

THAT'S WILD!

#2 Seahorse

If your father gives birth to you, does that make him your mother? For the answer to this confusing question, look no further than the seahorse. This tiny fish has a fairly normal courtship. It's how the eggs are fertilized that makes the seahorse's approach to giving birth so unique. The female makes so many eggs that she has little energy left to watch over them, so she turns the job over to her mate. Using a long egg tube, she deposits her eggs in a brood pouch on the male's belly. He then fertilizes them and keeps them safe until they are ready to hatch. The male even regulates the amount of salt in the brood pouch, slowly increasing it to match the outside water, so the babies won't experience too much shock when they emerge. The developing eggs get some nutrients from the lining of the brood pouch. When the babies are ready to be born, the male even has contractions to push them out. The babies, like most fish, are ready to take care of themselves right away.

#1 Tapeworm



A tapeworm can have as many as one million babies a day, and it has more sexual organs that any other creature on Earth. Basically, this parasite is one long chain of identical body segments that contain both male and female parts, each dedicated almost entirely to egg production. In fact, some scientists consider the segments as individuals in their own right and suggest that a tapeworm is really a colony! Each segment can make up to 40,000 eggs. Why so many?

Consider the life of a typical beef tapeworm: The eggs pass out through the host's feces (that's right: poop). Some of that fecal matter ends up in food for livestock like pigs or cows. It doesn't happen all the time (hence the need for so many eggs), but it happens enough. An animal eats the eggs, which hatch inside its gut. Then the larvae drill through the intestine into the bloodstream, which carries them to muscle tissue, where they form protective capsules and develop into a stage called bladder worm. When the animal is slaughtered for meat and served in raw or undercooked food, the bladder worm survives being eaten and attaches itself to the new host's intestine. There it develops into an adult tapeworm. So who is the new and final host? In this case, a person!

SPECIAL REPORT:
Love and Parasites

All life begins when boy meets girl, right? Not always. Many single-celled organisms simply divide to reproduce. Other organisms clone themselves. Clones are genetically identical offspring of the parent, whereas offspring of sexual parents have a variety of different genes. With each new individual, the deck is shuffled and new genes are dealt. This shuffling enables some individuals to fight off parasites that clones cannot. Scientists point to freshwater snails in Nigeria as evidence of this. These snails make clones except in cool weather, when they make males and females. The sexuals mature in the spring—just in time to fight off an annual parasite invasion. Coincidence? You decide.