

Sabre-toothed predators were just caring pussycats

Kaya Burgess Science Reporter

Sabre-toothed cats were among the fiercest predators of the Stone Age but behind all the violence they also had a caring side, scientists have found.

As evidenced by Fred Flintstone's fights with his sabre-toothed cat during the credits of the prehistoric cartoon series, the fearsome hunters are unlikely to have made affectionate pets but the animals did care for each other when they were injured, research shows.

A fossilised paw was found in the Linxia Basin in the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau that belonged to an amphimachairodus, an extinct genus of cat with upper canine teeth longer than modern cats but not as long as those that hung far below the jaw in the typical image of sabre-toothed tigers.

Close examination of the front paw, which is similar in size to that of a small tiger or lion, showed researchers that its owner had suffered serious fractures. The paw showed signs that two of its carpal bones, the third and fourth, had become "fused during healing". That

would have "restricted" their movement and reduced their running speed. The study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, noted: "Such an injury would severely influence the hunting success of the animal."

A predator reliant on hunting for food would be likely to starve to death soon after such a debilitating injury, but the healed bones show signs that the animal went on to develop a chronic condition "suggesting that the individual continued to survive after injury for quite a long time".

The study concludes: "The healed fractures support the existence of partner care, pointing to social behaviour."

It suggests that the injured cat was able to rely on other members of its species for food and support.

Sabre-toothed cats overlapped with humans for many millennia, going extinct about 11,000 years ago. However, the animal with the injured paw lived long before the earliest humans emerged, between 8.7 and 9.8 million years ago.

Evidence gathered by researchers from institutions including Peking Uni-

versity in China shows that, at around that time, the sabre-toothed species was showing the earliest signs of "co-operative hunting" in more open surroundings, such as those found on the Tibetan Plateau.

A skull belonging to an amphimachairodus showed that the beasts had long snouts and eyes located further back on their



skulls. That would have given the animals a wider field of vision to look for prey in open plains rather than the "stereo" vision created by two forward-facing eyes, commonly seen in predators. The study notes: "In open environments, prey are more conspicuous and thus precise

Amphimachairodus looked after their own

targeting by stereo vision becomes less necessary." Such a configuration of eyes also helps animals to locate "other companions during co-operative hunting, a trait more correlated with social behaviour".

It adds that the evolutionary changes "point to an adaptation to the open environment [and] social behaviour".

These changes are likely to have arisen as the Tibetan Plateau became more arid over millions of years as the land was pushed up by the collision of the Indian subcontinent with the continent of Eurasia and also because of "competition from abundant large carnivores in the area", the study notes.

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Brand flaunts her sharp edge

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but you can't beat a literary prize as a weapon. Jo Brand was pleased to win the Comedy Women in Print's game changer award at the Groucho Club, especially as it came with a very pointy trophy, below. "I parked in a dodgy car park, so this will be good for stabbing," Brand said. "Laughter is the best medicine," the former psychiatric nurse added. "It could cure all of the NHS's ills. Except for impotence." Brand was given her weapon by Kathy Lette, queen of the cliterati, who told my elf that women here were lucky they could mock authority. "A few years ago the Turkish deputy prime minister said women should not laugh in public as it erodes their 'chastity'," Lette said. "In other words, women shouldn't tell jokes, just vote for them."

Another award was presented by the actress Denise Welch, a proud northerner who said her native Whitley Bay should be twinned with Las Vegas, explaining: "They are the two places in the world where you can buy sex with chips."

CUE THE PURITANS OF SALEM

There hasn't been a cloud like it over a snooker table since Alex Higgins's 80-a-day habit. The desecration of the World Championship baize with paint dust by protesters on Monday led the comedian Simon Evans to reflect that as well as being a snooker venue *The Crucible* is a play by Arthur Miller. "It is about the damage wrought on a community by treating tiresome, attention-seeking adolescents with more patience and credulity than they



PATRICK KIDD

deserved," he said. It is unclear what Just Stop Oil hoped to achieve. Since snooker balls are made from phenolic resin, derived from petroleum, perhaps they want the sport to return to using ivory.

CAMPER VAN CREDENTIALS
Nicola Sturgeon must regret that she can't just get away from all her troubles in the £110,000 camper van that was seized as part of the investigation into goings-on in the SNP. The model in question is a Niesmann+Bischoff iSmove, which Matt Forde, host of *The Political Party*, points out is advertised on the company website with the slogan "Breaking all the rules".

Chris Bryant emailed after my item about the reorganisation of West Country local government in 1995 that created *Cuba*, or *Counties that Used to Be Avon*, and said that many felt the new area should be called *Bath And Surrounding Towns And Rural Districts*, an acronym to reflect their view. David Simpson, on the other hand, says part of the area was known as *Bosnia*, standing for *Bits Of Somerset Never In Avon*.

TS ELIOT'S RHYMING CUTLETS

As a butcher's son, Alan Bennett had little contact with the literary world save for a customer whose daughter worked at a publishing company and married its director. "The firm was Faber & Faber and the director was TS Eliot," Bennett told an evening at the BFI. "There was a time when I thought my only connection with literature would be that I delivered chops to TS Eliot's mother-in-law." Bennett's mother once came home and said Mrs

Fletcher had brought the "very refined" poet to the shop. "He won the Nobel prize for literature," her son told her. "Well, I'm not surprised," she replied. "It was a beautiful overcoat."

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