The world of animals is a fascinating one. There is a lot to be learnt and so much of interesting and exciting information to be imbibed. But how well do you know the most common wild animals around you?

Why cannot Polar bears hunt penguins?
Simple answer: While Polar bears are found in the Arctic Zones, penguins live in Antarctica.

The distribution of animals is governed by the climatic conditions, availability of food, physical features of the region and so on. So, we do not find Polar bears in tropical regions and elephants in Antarctica.

It is fascinating to learn about the wild animals that inhabit our country and also various regions of the earth and learn about their habits, habitats and distribution. But how well do you know about some of the most common wild animals? We often make mistakes while referring to certain species of common wild life.

For example, take the cat family. The common examples of wild cats are Lions, Tigers, Cheetahs, Leopards, Panthers, Cougars, Jaguars, etc. The distribution of these animals is varied. Excepting in India, Lions and Tigers are not found in the same region. In Africa, there are no tigers. Even in the Gir forest where Asian lions live there are no tigers.

The Bengal tigers found in the tropical regions of Asia belong to a different species other than the Siberian tigers that are found in the colder regions of Asia. The Siberian tiger (Panthera tigris altaica) is found in eastern Siberia. It is the largest subspecies of tiger. It is much bigger than its cousin, the Bengal tiger. Its skin is thicker and paler with a golden tinge and fewer stripes. The Bengal tiger (Panthera tigris tigris) is smaller than the Siberian tiger and is more ferocious. Its yellow coat is darker and the stripes are dark, bright and well marked.

Wild lions currently exist in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia with an endangered remnant population in the Gir Forest National Park in India. Lions, which existed in North Africa and Southwest Asia in historic times, have become totally extinct.

There are differences between the Asian and African lions. The Asiatic lion (Panthera leo persica) or Indian lion is a subspecies of the lion that survives today only in the Gir Forest of Gujarat in India. A report published by the Gujarat government in 2010, says that there are 411 Asiatic lions in the Gir forest. A rise of 52 in the number of lions over the last census of 2005 is also reported.

Asiatic lions are smaller and lighter in colour than the African lions, but are equally aggressive. African lions are bigger, more ferocious and are better hunters. Probably due to habitat loss and interbreeding, the Gir forest lions are less ferocious and are smaller in built.

Similarly, people often get confused between a leopard and a cheetah. Both cheetahs and leopards are spotted. In cheetah the spots are like dots, two dark lines are seen on a cheetah's face and they are smaller than leopards and are the swiftest of all animals.

Leopards are bigger, slower than the cheetahs and the marks on a leopard are more of circles, called rosettes. Leopards are found in Asia and Africa.

Jaguars are found in the South American forests. They are also spotted but are different from leopards. The jaguars are quite ferocious and good hunters. But they are more elusive and solitary dwellers.
The cougar, a native of both south and North America, is also known as puma, mountain lion, mountain cat, catamount or panther, depending on the region, where it is found. In appearance and colouration, it slightly resembles a lioness, but is not as aggressive as the African lion. It is solitary in nature and hunts in rocky, bushy areas. Although big, it is not dominating and avoids people. Attacks on humans are rare.

Next, let us take a look at the sloth. Sloth is a medium-sized arboreal mammal of Central and South American rain forests. Sloths lead an extraordinary life by not getting down from their tree habitat for long periods of time. They are very slow in their movements.

Sloths are classified as folivores since the buds, tender shoots, and leaves, mainly of Cecropia trees, form the major part of its diet. Sloths have large, specialized, slow-acting stomachs with many compartments in which symbiotic bacteria break down the tough leaves.

But a sloth has nothing to do whatsoever with a sloth bear. Sloth bears are common bears found in many Asian countries. People also tend to get confused between rabbits and hares. Hares are the wild forms and rabbits are domesticated and different varieties are produced through hybridization.

Though hares and rabbits belong to the same group there are several differences in...
Belonging to the Canidae family, foxes are identifying Foxes, Wolves, Jackals, Coyotes, hairless. The hare babies are generally born babies, called kittens, are born blind and hairless. The hare babies are generally born with hair and are able to see.

There is often a big confusion in identifying Foxes, Wolves, Jackals, Coyotes, etc. Fox is an omnivorous mammal belonging to the Canidae family. Foxes are small to medium sized; they are smaller than the domestic dogs. A fox has a long narrow snout and a bushy tail.

Jackals also belong to the Canidae family, but they are taller, leaner with a lesser bushy tail than foxes. The coyote is an American jackal or the prairie wolf. Wolves are mainly found in the Northern hemisphere, in the Arctic Tundra, Plains, Savannas and forests with mixed vegetation. They hunt in packs and are vastly different from the foxes.

Here we need to understand about the wild dogs that are different from the foxes and jackals. The Australian Dingo is a free-roaming wild dog unique to the continent of Australia, mainly found in the outback.

Its original ancestors are thought to have arrived with humans from South-east Asia thousands of years ago. At that time dogs were still undomesticated and were much wilder. Dingoes have maintained their ancestral characteristics that unite them, along with other primitive dogs, into a group named after them, Canis lupus dingo that has separated them from the domestic dog, Canis lupus familiaris.

The Dhole (Cuon alpinus) is a species of wild dog native to South and Southeast Asia. It is the only living member of the genus Cuon, which differs from the common genus Canis. The dholes are classed as endangered by the IUCN, due to habitat loss, depletion of its prey animals, competition from other predators, hunting by humans and diseases transferred from domestic dogs.

Now, how do you distinguish an ass from a donkey? Asses are wild, found in places like the Rann of Kutch in India, Somalia in Africa and Mongolia in Asia. Donkeys are the domesticated forms.

Mules are hybrids produced through a cross between a male donkey and a female horse. They are hardy animals but cannot reproduce.

People also get confused over the different types of predator birds like the Kite, Eagle, Vulture and Falcon.

Kites are small predatory birds that hunt small animals and birds and also scavenge. Eagles are bigger, more advanced, can soar very high and hunt larger animals. Vultures, on the other hand, are pure scavengers.

Falkons occupy the top rung in the hierarchy. They are much bigger than all the other birds belonging to this predator group. They have very keen eyesight and can soar very high in air and hunt bigger animals. A falcon can easily hunt down a small deer or a sheep.
The birds that we call parrots are actually different in many respects – in size, colouration, habitat and so on. There are many species, like the multi coloured, large, gorgeous macaws, the smaller but equally colourful lorikeets, the tiny budgerigars, the dainty cockatoos and the common parakeets.

The macaw species are known for their impressive size. The largest parrot in length and wingspan is the Hyacinth Macaw. The heaviest macaw is the Buffon’s.

The Budgerigar also known as Common pet parakeet and informally called the budgie, is a small, long-tailed, seed-eating parrot. Wild budgerigars are found throughout the arid parts of Australia. Naturally, they are green and yellow with black, scalloped markings on the nape, back, and wings. Through hybridization, blue, white, yellow, and grey ones are produced.

Lorikeets are small to medium-sized arboreal parrots characterized by their specialized brush-tipped tongues for feeding on nectar of various blossoms and soft fruits, preferably berries. The heaviest parrot is the flightless parrot, Kakapo found in New Zealand.

Many people also confuse a whale with a shark. Whales are mammals and they are lung breathers while sharks are fishes and breathe with gills.

Sometimes some names also are misleading. For instance, a Black widow is a spider, so named because it eats its male partner after mating. And a Ladybird is a beetle.

Then, a Meerkat is not a cat. It is a small mammal, belonging to the mongoose

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Meerkats live in big family groups in all parts of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana and in South Africa.

A Silverfish is not a fish at all. It is a small wingless insect. Its common name is due to its silvery grey and blue colour and its fish-like appearance and movements.

Similarly, a Jellyfish is a free-swimming invertebrate belonging to the Phylum Cnidaria. Cuttlefish are not fish but molluscs. Cuttlefish is the common name for squids, Octopuses etc. They belong to the class Cephalopoda (limbs present on the head).

Finally, we come to our own kind. Humans shares their ancestry with ape-like creatures. We belong to the group called Primates to which the monkeys and apes also belong. Monkeys are more primitive, have tails and walk on four legs, like the langurs, bonnet, capuchean and hanuman monkeys.

Apes are more intelligent, tailless, can walk erect and are efficient tool users. Gorilla, Chimpanzee, Orangutan and Gibbons are apes. Do you know that in India we have our own ape species! They are the Gibbons found in the Northeast forests of Meghalaya, Assam etc.

Just look around and pore into more literature – many more such confusions about wild animals will get cleared. Only then will you be able to get more deep insight into the wild world.

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