

## ZOOLOGY

# Man Outlives Animals

Despite legends to the contrary, only giant tortoises live longer than man. Elephants have a life expectancy of 45 and the oldest parrot on record died at 54.

By DR. FRANK THONE

See Front Cover

► EXCEPT for a few species of giant tortoise—and who wants to be a tortoise?—man lives the longest life of any animal on the face of the earth.

Threescore years and ten was the lifetime assigned to man by the Psalmist, and that is still counted a fair old age after 30 centuries. And just as David and other Old Testament writers lamented the brevity of human life, people today feel that 70 years is not enough, and envy animals reputed to reach extreme ages of 300 or 400 years.

If there is any consolation in living longer than other creatures, we have it. Our seven decades, short though they seem, really represent a longer life-span than that of all except some species of giant tortoise.

Among his nearest animal kin, the warm-blooded mammals, man is easily the patriarch.

Old legends die hard, and the idea that man is the longest-lived of warm-blooded creatures will be disputed by many. Nevertheless, this view is supported by a careful examination of all really verifiable records, made by many zoologists and collated by R. Marlin Perkins, director of the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. A considerable share of his figures come from Maj. Stanley Smyth Flower of the Zoological Society of London, the rest from American zoological parks.

## Represent Extreme Ages

All figures represent extreme ages reached by animals in captivity. There are no reliable figures for the life-spans of wild animals, but it is probable that most of them are shorter than the limits attainable in captivity. The relentless law of the jungle, that killers eat the old and the weak first, would seem to take care of that.

Three animals that are often reputed to outlive man by many years, even to fantastic limits, are elephants, parrots and the giant tortoises of the Galapagos islands. Actually, the greatest surely

known age for an elephant is 60 years, with an average life expectancy of 45. The oldest parrot on record died at 54; other parrots have lived to be nearly 50. Cockatoos, closely related to parrots, reach ages between 30 and 40 years.

Only the tortoises outlive man, though the claims of 300 years and more cannot be authenticated. The Galapagos tortoise is known to live more than 100 years; another species, Marion's tortoise, holds the record at 152 years. Size does not have any necessary correlation with age: the little Carolina box turtle has been known to live as much as 123 years, whereas the big, mean-tempered alligator snapping-turtle can claim only 42. Also, the loggerhead, a sea turtle that rivals or surpasses the Galapagos tortoises for size, doesn't quite make the 40-year mark.

## Reptiles Don't Live Long

Other reptiles do not live as long as the oldest tortoises. There is an acceptable record of more than 56 years for an American alligator, 50 years for its Chinese cousin. Snakes are even shorter-lived: the anaconda age record is 29 years, but two other huge constrictor snakes, Indian python and Madagascar boa, have only 20 years to their credit. The cotton-mouth moccasin, menace of our own Southern swamps, beats that score a little with 21 years. Most lizards die before they are 20, but one strange and little-known species, the legless European slow-worm, has been known to survive as long as 32 years.

Next to man's 70 to 100 or more years, and the elephant's 45 to 60, greatest longevity among mammals is claimed for the rhinoceros, with 36 to 50 years. Horses are fairly long-lived, reaching 15 quite often, with an extreme of 35. The lion, long hailed as King of Beasts, has a short reign of only eight to 15 years—less than many an old dog and no more than some tough tomcats. The industrious beaver outlives the sly fox, with an extreme age limit of 15 years against 12. And only the immortal reindeer of Santa Claus live more than 15 years.

Why have elephants and parrots been picked out for longevity honors that prove to be fictitious? And why are tortoises credited with being three or four times as old as they actually are?

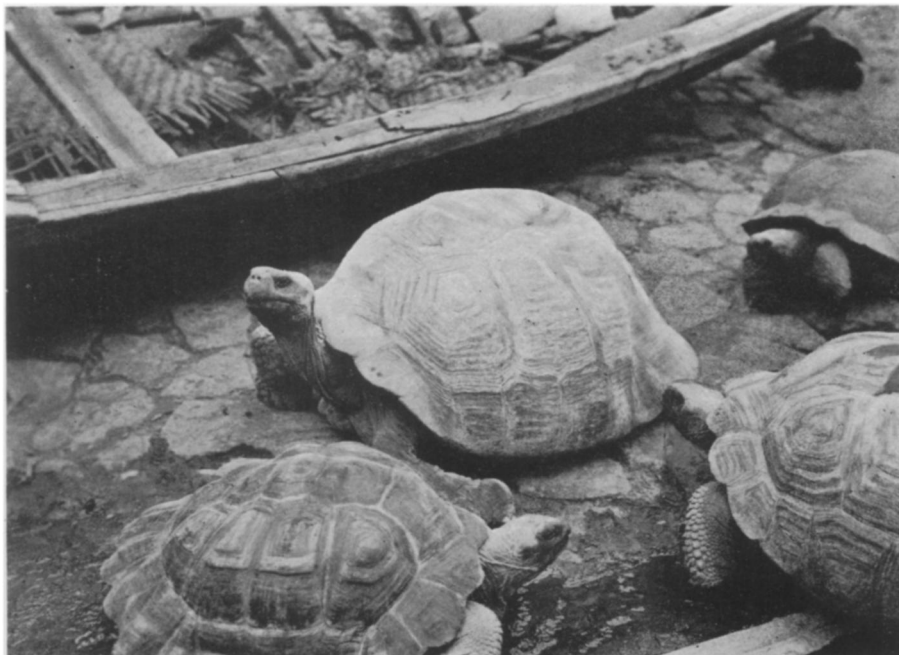
The answer may be in a curious quirk of "anthropomorphizing"—the tendency to read human meanings into non-human lives because of chance resemblances. Parrots have wrinkles in the bare skin around their eyes; tortoises have wrinkles on their legs and necks; elephants are wrinkled all over. All three animals are slow-moving. Old men are wrinkled and move slowly. That is enough to create a myth in sufficiently uncritical minds.

## Antiquity of Pets

There are a few histories of apparent vast age in certain animals—usually mascots or pets. It is relatively easy for such records to be manufactured, and with no intentional deception, either. An animal will be adopted into a family or a regiment, live to a respectable age, and die. Another of the same species will be taken up as a replacement, given the same name, and because there is no carefully kept written record will eventually be remembered by a great-grand-



**NOT AS OLD AS YOU THINK—**  
*Legend has it that parrots are able to outlive man by many years. Actually, the oldest parrot on record died at 54 while others have been known to live to be nearly 50.*



**OUTLIVE MAN**—Tortoises consistently top the century mark but no one has been able to prove the fantastic claim that they live to be 300 and more years old.

sire or an old retired sergeant as the same animal.

That sort of thing is known to have happened among human beings, where, for example, a John Smith is in a parish record as having been born in 1800, and a very old John Smith is equally well recorded as having died in the same place in 1940. But that does not prove that John Smith was 140 years old when he died. The John Smith who died in 1940 was perhaps the son or even the grandnephew of the John Smith who was born in 1800. If one death went unrecorded and one birth was similarly neglected, such a confusion could easily arise.

One quite understandable human trait helps to account for the easy acceptance of such fantastic claims, whether for old men or old animals. We all like to claim association with the biggest, the strongest, the oldest, even the loudest and funniest; there is some kind of nourishment for our self-esteem in this reflected glory, no matter how thin. So there is a temptation, usually unresisted because unrealized, to take your neighbor's word for it if he says his parrot was handed down in the family from his seafaring great-grandfather and is undoubtedly 200 years old.

There is a definite cash value, of course, in the claims to antiquity advanced by circuses on behalf of their

animals, especially elephants. Every circus elephant becomes a centenarian as soon as she has her full growth, and remains that way until she dies of old age at 60. This reversal of the glamorization process employed on female entertainers of our own species is one of the conventions of circus life; it is frankly fictional and nobody is expected to believe it. Ironically, too, although the people of the big top always refer to elephants as "bulls," all circus elephants are females—for the quite practical reason that they are much more docile and manageable. They don't even object to having their ages falsified upwards.

*Science News Letter, January 24, 1948*

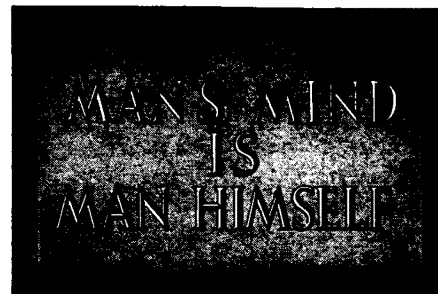
#### ZOOLOGY

### Protozoa Researchers Form New Scientific Society

➤ RESEARCHERS on the smallest and simplest of animals, the myriad microscopic life-forms known as protozoa, have founded a new scientific organization, the American Society of Protozoologists.

First president of the new group is Dr. Ross F. Nigrelli of the New York Aquarium. Prof. Theodore L. Jahn of the State University of Iowa is secretary-treasurer.

*Science News Letter, January 24, 1948*



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