

arte DISTRIBUTION
presents

UGLY BEAUTIES



A 2x52' documentary
Directed by Jean-Baptiste Erreca
Produced by ARTE G.E.I.E and Cocottes Minute Productions



Pitch

Just as threatened as pandas or giraffes, animals widely considered ugly are the ones left out of rescue and preservation plans. They are ugly, yet their off-putting attributes allow them to survive and thrive. Their appearance conceals an often incredible body and a vital role in the ecosystem...

Discover the lamprey, the wolf spider, the bald ibis and many others; it's time to celebrate ugliness!



Producer's note

While wildlife films do convey the need to protect species, unbeknownst to them, they also promote unfair standards among animals: they only represent the whole of the living world through its beauty and aesthetics. Pandas, lions, giraffes, etc. all these majestic and beautiful animals have a plethora of movies made about them. Their looks have made them the spearhead of worldwide campaigns to raise public awareness of wildlife preservation.

Meanwhile, the more unsightly species suffer from a clear lack of representation. They are the most numerous, and yet, they disappear in silence. They are neglected by wildlife protection associations, by NGOs, by the public opinion, and even by some scientists who prefer to focus on the species most likely to bring financial support. Most of them will be extinct before the general public even becomes aware of their existence.

With ecocides becoming more prevalent, it seems like humans are building a new Noah's Ark where big eyes, soft features and fur would be the entrance tickets.

However, some passionate researchers are fighting to bring ugly species back to the forefront. They are essential for the environment, such as the wolf spider which helps regulate insect and pest populations. Their biology and evolutionary adaptations to their environment are also fascinating.

No matter how ugly they may seem, their appearances actually reveal secrets of ingenuity like the scrotum frog which, thanks to its numerous skin folds, manages to survive at high altitudes; or like the saiga antelope, whose long nose allows it to regulate the air temperature of the Mongolian steppes.

But this very subjective ugliness is undoubtedly a pretext to talk about biodiversity and the urgency of preserving it. With our first mini-series for Arte, "Animal Democracy", we endeavored to study the animal kingdom from a surprising angle. With these new documentaries, we do the same in order to give the audience the opportunity to think about the stakes of biodiversity without making them feel guilty.

Everything starts with our fears, that is why we divided this theme into two episodes: the first one, "The Assets of Unsightliness", introduces the subject and shakes up our prejudices; the second one, "Guilty of Being Ugly", is a more in-depth and scientific approach of these species.

Jérôme Duc-Maugé



Director's note

How can we change our outlook on these species, which are discriminated against just for having an ugly mug? This series, which challenges preconceived ideas, participates in the debate on the preservation of endangered species and questions how we feel about our perception of the aesthetics and the stranger aspects of nature.

The aim here is to explain the value of these animals for biodiversity and scientific research by explaining the essential functions of their "ugliness" to survive in their environment. Ugly does not mean that we do not have the right to live, ugly does not mean useless!

My intention in these films is to allow the viewer to discover some little-known species that fall into this category of "ugly animals" and to give them some keys to understand the origin of our prejudices.

The fear of these animals is transmitted socially, culturally and within families. As a matter of fact, cinema and the representation of inaesthetic animals in the rest of the media uphold stigma. The same goes for insects: creating empathy for them remains a challenging feat.

These rejection mechanisms, linked to our psychology and evolution, call upon reactions deeply anchored instinctively in our immune systems, alerting us to possible pathogenic risks. The earlier the animal appears in the evolution of the species, the greater our reaction of disgust!

By creating "empathy" for these animals through discovery and science, we will arouse in the viewer a rich palette of contradictory emotions and reflexes of attraction-repulsion; we will provoke both laughter and apprehension. We invite viewers to discover these creatures in beautiful scenes of animal behavior at the heart of their natural environment. We will also film exclusive animal sequences: some behaviors will be documented for the first time, such as those of the wolf spider.

At the same time, we follow the work of researchers who have dedicated their work to these animals despite the limited funding available to them. Staged in action sequences in the field, they arouse the viewer's curiosity through the experiments conducted to further their knowledge.

From the wolf spider to the forked-tailed caterpillar, from the bat to the sea lamprey, we will discover many repulsive species that will exacerbate the viewers' phobias. The offbeat tone of the commentary arouses our curiosity and gradually marvels at the incredible biology that lies behind the strange attributes of these animals. It puts our view into perspective and invites us, in the light of science, to take an interest in these strange beasts.

Jean-Baptiste Erreca



Anecdotes

"They are ugly, yet their off-putting attributes allow them to survive and thrive. Their appearance conceals an often incredible body and a vital role in the ecosystem."

"Repulsive species are less studied than other species, making it more difficult to protect them."

"One study thus shows that the less visibility a species has, the less chance it has of being saved."

"Their physical appearance conceals their incredible biology and prevents us from seeing that they need our help. It is time to celebrate ugly animals."

"Ugly does not mean we do not have the right to live, ugly does not mean useless."

"The point here is to make their value in biodiversity and scientific research explicit by explaining the indispensable functions of their ugliness to survive in their environment."

"A cast of animals that are guilty of being ugly allows us to take a trip to the four corners of the earth."

"We film exclusive animal footage: some behaviors will be documented for the first time like those of the wolf spider."



Episodes

Episode 1 : The Assets of Unsightliness

Ugly species have strange monstrous physical peculiarities such as menacing spikes, slimy skins, hairy legs, or intimidating eyes that fuel our fears and disgust. But looking past our fears, these repulsive attributes are the result of biological survival mechanisms that are essential to hunt, breathe, or reproduce.

Episode 2 : Guilty of Being Ugly

These repulsive species may have a hideous nose, a frightening sucker, an alarming appendix, a hooked beak, etc. These features that disgust us are all the manifestation of a unique evolutionary path that has been captivating the scientists who went to study them in the field. What needs do they meet?

Episode 1



Wolf spider - France - The mother's back

The wolf spider is a hunter who never weaves a web. Always on the move, she carries her eggs in a cocoon woven from silk threads. At the end of the embryos' development, she frees them and carries them on her back until they are completely mature – not hesitating to stop to allow them to catch up to her. Her singular maternal behavior is all the more interesting as it goes against all the cannibalistic behaviors observed in spiders. Marie Trabalon is a professor at the University of Rennes. She studies the care given by these species to their young as well as the chemical composition of their cocoon.

Scrotum frog - Peru - The lung of the Andes

The scrotum frog lives at an altitude of more than 3800 meters in Lake Titicaca in South America. It has many skin folds that allow it to better capture oxygen thanks to the mucus that covers it. This singular appearance allows it to replace the function of its failing lungs in an environment poor in oxygen. Roberto Elias Piperis of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia and his colleagues are counting how many frogs are left in different areas of the lake. In 2016, 10,000 specimens died mysteriously. An investigation was opened to understand how this massacre happened.



Fork-tailed caterpillar / Cerura Vinula - Europe - Alpine mascaron

The fork-tailed caterpillar inflates the front of its body to turn it into an aggressive red mask. Its appearance is a ruse of intimidation to scare away predators, and if that is not enough it erects two retractable red filaments that emit a repulsive smell. It feeds exclusively on poplar leaves, a surprising habit given their toxicity. Felix Feistel of the Max Planck Institute in Germany is researching how this caterpillar is able to neutralize the plant's toxicity during digestion in order to obtain a resource unexploited by its competitors.





Proteus anguinus - Slovenia - The immobile predator

The olm is nicknamed the baby dragon. It is characterized by a pink skin, a serpentine appearance, external gills and underdeveloped eyes. It is the largest predator in cave environments, capable of going 10 years without eating and living up to 100 years. Rok Kostanjšek from the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia is studying its unique sensory system and its non-dynamic mode of movement. Indeed, this singular species can remain motionless for years, strongly impacting its diet. It is also believed to hold the genetic secrets of tissue regeneration and anti-aging.

Physalia Physalis - Europe - The Portuguese man o' war

The "floating terror" or "blue bottle jellyfish" floats on the surface of the ocean thanks to an air pocket and a ridge that serves as a wind sail. Underwater, its tentacles hang over several meters, trapping and paralyzing nearby fish before digesting them. It is a unique organism composed of thousands of polyps that cooperate. It has the particularity of being bioluminescent, which allows it to attract its preys to it.



Uakari - Peru - The scarlet seducer

The Uakari is a monkey that is characterized by an entirely hairless scarlet face. It lives in the Amazon basin on the border between Peru, Brazil and Colombia. Under its skin, thousands of blood capillaries turn red to a greater or lesser extent depending on its state of health. Its appearance is also a means of seduction, because it shows its acceptability as a sexual partner.

Episode 2



Hipposideros Griffini - Vietnam - A laser-focused predator

Griffin's leaf-nosed bat has a very characteristic nose composed of protuberances that serve to echolocate its prey with great precision. This bat is a brand new species that had eluded researchers for years, as it shares its habitat with a physically similar species. Vu Dinh Thong of the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources in Hanoi is investigating the species to characterize it and understand how it was able to share the same environment as the great Himalayan leaf-nosed bat while retaining its own genetic heritage.

Sea lamprey - France - The vampire of the seas

The sea lamprey is a marine vampire. With a serpentine appearance, it has a jawless mouth surrounded by a circular lip outlining a buccal disk where rows of teeth are adapted to suction. It parasitizes fish in the ocean until the time comes to reproduce, then it goes up the rivers to lay eggs in fresh water. Thomas Trancart, a researcher at the Laboratory of Biology of Aquatic Organisms and Ecosystems of the National Museum of Natural History in France, investigates the causes of the disappearance of the sea lamprey – particularly that due to predation by catfish.



Alligator snapping turtle - Southern United States - The appendage of death

The alligator snapping turtle certainly looks prehistoric, what with its carapace comprising three rows of large and pointed scales. It also has a worm-like appendage in its mouth that it uses to lure its prey and devour them with its extremely powerful jaw. Luke Pearson, a researcher in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Southern Mississippi, is studying the population variation of these turtles. The species is listed as endangered in the United States, and Mississippi is the state where its core range is located. If it is endangered in this region, then it is endangered everywhere.





Northern Bald Ibis - Germany / Austria - A beak only a mother could love

The bald ibis is a bird with a long, curved beak which it uses not only for hunting, but also as a virile attribute for seduction. Its hairless skin is a temperature regulator and could also be a reproductive signal. The species is extinct in Europe, but in recent years, researchers are trying to reintroduce it in order to save it. Johannes Fritz is a biologist and head of the Waldrappteam research team and the manager of the "Reason for Hope" project. He breeds bald ibises and together with his team, guides them on their winter migration route in order to teach them their forgotten ancestral ways.

Saiga - Mongolia - The air filter of the steppes

The saiga is an antelope that lives in the steppes of the hilly regions of Mongolia. It has a long arched snout descending on its mouth and giving it the appearance of a short trunk. This atypical organ serves as an air filter in summer when dust is omnipresent and warms the air that penetrates its lungs in winter. Critically endangered, they are the targets of a strange disease that decimates entire herds.



Star-nosed mole - Southeastern Canada - The 6th Sense

The star-nosed mole lives in the St. Lawrence Lowlands, Canada. It has twenty-two symmetrical tentacles on its snout. Half of them are used as a means to find its way around, while the other half allows it to locate its preys, to catch them and to direct them. This species being practically blind, this animal uses its tentacles as an ultra-specialized visual system, making it a formidable predator.

Speakers

Interviews with philosophers of science will provide commentary for both episodes.

Christoph Klebl is a researcher at the University of Melbourne in Australia. He conducts research in social psychology on the function of aesthetic judgments and their role in morality as well as the link between ugliness judgments and the disease-avoidance system. He has published a series of papers showing that appearance matters as it is a behavioral immune response constructed to alert us to things that might contain disease – whether it be a human, an animal or even a building. It is primarily an instinctive reaction, and may explain why species considered ugly receive less interest and protection.

Emily Brady is a professor of philosophy at Texas A&M University in the United States. Her research explores the interplay between aesthetics and ethics, particularly through how we consider the natural world. She is philosophically interested in our emotions and our perception of ugliness: How do we define ugliness? Why do we find certain animals ugly? Why should we care about ugliness?

Christoph Randler is a professor at the University of Tübingen in Germany. He conducts research in behavioral biology, focusing on predator-prey relationships, communication, chronobiology and hybridization. He questions our aesthetic preferences of animals in terms of their dangerousness. He analyzes our tendencies to favor a form of disgust for harmful and ugly animals with the evolutionary goal of reducing the risk of contamination.

Roberto Elias Piperis is a researcher at the Faculty of Veterinary and Zootechnical Medicine of the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Peru. He is interested in the survival of the giant frog of Lake Titicaca.

Felix Feistel is a researcher in the Biomedical NMR group at the Max Planck Institute. He is working on the fork-tailed caterpillar and is particularly interested in how they metabolize the poisonous salicortin produced by poplar species.

Vu Dinh Thong is a researcher at the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources in Hanoi, Vietnam. He is specialized in the study of bats. He is responsible for the discovery of a new species: *Hipposideros Griffini*.

Johannes Fritz is a biologist from the University of Innsbruck in Vienna, Austria. He leads a European research team on the bald ibis and plans for the reintroduction of the species in Europe.

arte DISTRIBUTION

Florence Sala

Head of International Distribution

Italy & USA

f-sala@arteFrance.fr

Audrey Kamga

Sales Manager

**South-America, Canada, Spain,
Ireland, MENA region, Portugal & UK**

Worldwide Inflight

a-kamga@arteFrance.fr

Sophie Soghomonian

Sales Manager

**Eastern Europe, Israel, Russia
Worldwide Non-Theatrical Rights**

s-soghomonian@arteFrance.fr

Isabelle Monteil

Sales Manager

Asia, Oceania, Greece, Africa

Language versions

i-monteil@arteFrance.fr

Franka Schwabe

Sales Manager

**Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium,
France, Netherlands,
Scandinavia, Iceland.**

f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

Whitney Marin

Sales Assistant

w-marin@arteFrance.fr