

Why Zebras Have Stripes

What is the reason that zebras have stripes? This is a question scientists have asked themselves for years. It may be that horse flies have given them a possible answer. A horse fly might think before landing on a zebra. 'Oh that looks good, I think I'll land there and bite that animal. I'm nearly there, coming in to land. Hey, everything looks strange. Where am I? Abort! Oh no, I'm going to crash.'

Possible explanations

Zebras, a species of horse, are known for their black and white stripes. Every zebra has different stripes. But why? Scientists have thought of three different reasons why zebras have stripes. First, the stripes could control the zebra's body temperature. Or, the stripes help the zebras recognise each other. A third reason could be that the stripes confuse predators, like lions, with a sort of optical illusion when they run as a group.



Experiment

A fourth explanation was tested by scientists from the UK and America at a farm in England. The scientists filmed how horse flies acted around zebras and horses. At first, the horse flies circled around both the zebras and the horses. However, when the horse flies got closer to the zebras they could not slow down and crashed into them. On the other hand, the flies landed on the horses without crashing.

Dressing up horses

Of the horse flies, 75% landed on the horses, and only 25% on the zebras. To see if that was because of the zebra's stripes, the scientists dressed up the horses in coats: black, white or black-and-white striped coats. The results showed that the stripes are the reason why: fewer horse flies landed on the horses wearing stripes than those with just the black or white coloured coats.

Results

So, there is another explanation why zebras have stripes: to keep them from being bitten by disease carrying horse flies. One of the scientists, who is an expert on animal vision, says this is exciting. It helps understand 'what's happening in the mind of a fly.' Flies have low-resolution eye sight. They see things far away as grey. When a fly gets closer and sees stripes, it gets confused.

Sources: www.forbes.com; www.apnews.com; www.sciencealert.com

Words to help you

to crash = to hit something hard

the explanation = a reason given for something

the optical illusion = something that tricks your eyes so you are not sure what you are seeing