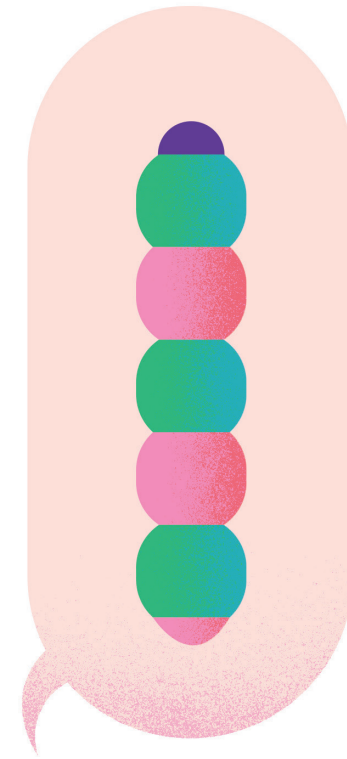
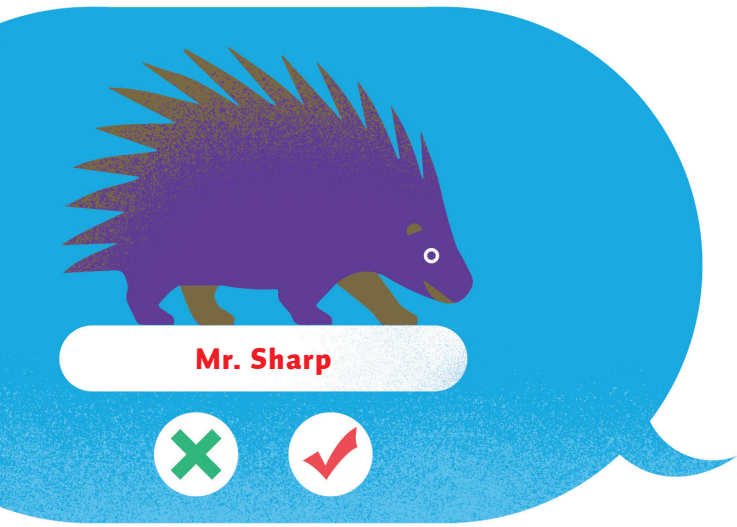




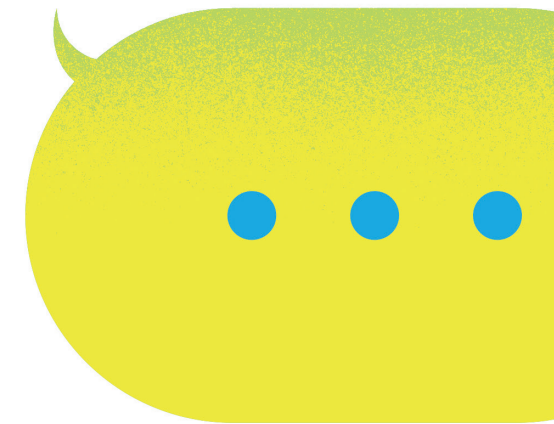
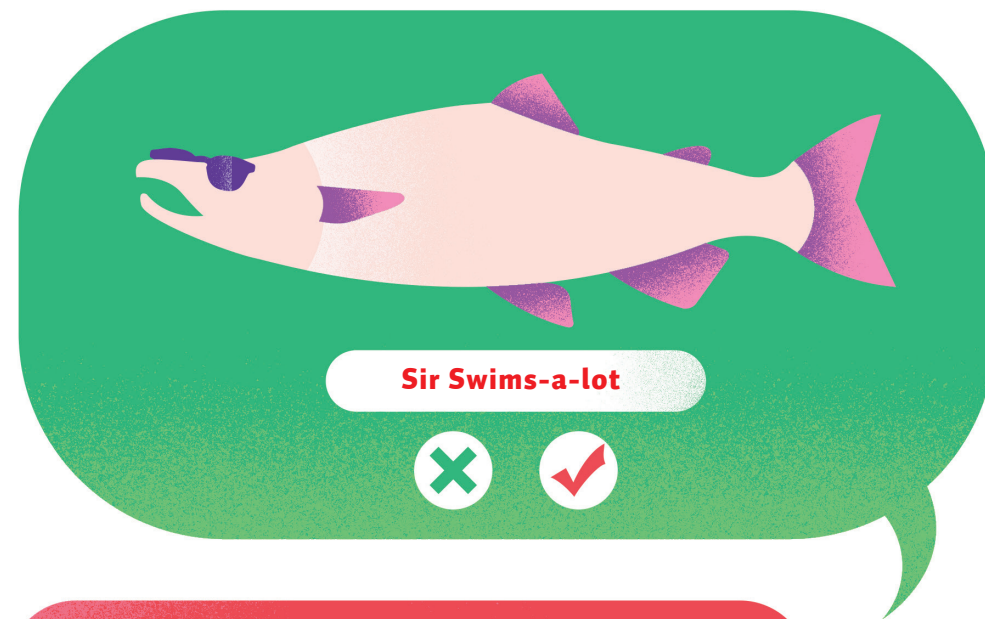
The cottage critter dating scene puts the wild in wildlife. You'd be surprised at what passes for romance in the animal world



When Nature

Swipes Right

By Catherine Collins Illustrations Giacomo Bagnara



“Single male, handsome and hormonal,

seeks hot female for sex and babies. Am a real animal. Are U?” If cottage-country critters could write a “want” ad in mating season, this would be their come-on line. But wild dudes, from birds and mammals to insects and fish, have their own evocative ways of communicating their desire to get it on and pass their genes along. They must prove their superiority as a reproductive partner through courtship ploys that are amazingly varied, creative, and sometimes familiar in the universal game of persuading the girl to fall for the guy...

Dress to Impress

Many male birds gussy up their plumage during breeding season, but few as dramatically as the commonly seen blackpoll warbler, says Christian Artuso, the Manitoba program manager for Bird Studies Canada. A drab greenish dweeb in fall and winter, the blackpoll becomes a chick magnet in spring, moulting into new tuxedo-like black and white feathers, accessorized with bright yellow legs. His customary drive to remain hidden for safety is overridden by his need “to appear fit and showy to females,” says Artuso, while intimidating the competition with his good looks.

The same sexual strategy is behind the stunning transformation of the male sockeye salmon, who begins his marathon spawning run up B.C. rivers as a piscine Clark Kent in dull silver scales. “Over the journey, his body turns a brilliant red, his head a bright green, his jaws enlarge, and his snout becomes hooked,” says Eric Taylor, a professor of zoology at the University of British Columbia. By the time Supersalmon arrives at the spawning grounds, he is ready to thrash his rivals and save the damsel, and her eggs, for himself.

Spritz Some Eau de Toilet

Growing antlers and fighting with the boys to prove his physical prowess is just the first step in a bull moose’s bid to breed with a female. As she lingers nearby, “he digs a hollow in the ground, urinates in it, and rolls around in this bath of musky hormonal pee,” says biologist Franco Mariotti, who worked for 32 years at Science North in Sudbury, Ont. Enchanted, the cow moose swoons for his signature scent, lies down in the bath, and the rest is none of your business. The chemical cues in pee also play a big part in porcine sexual attraction, Mariotti

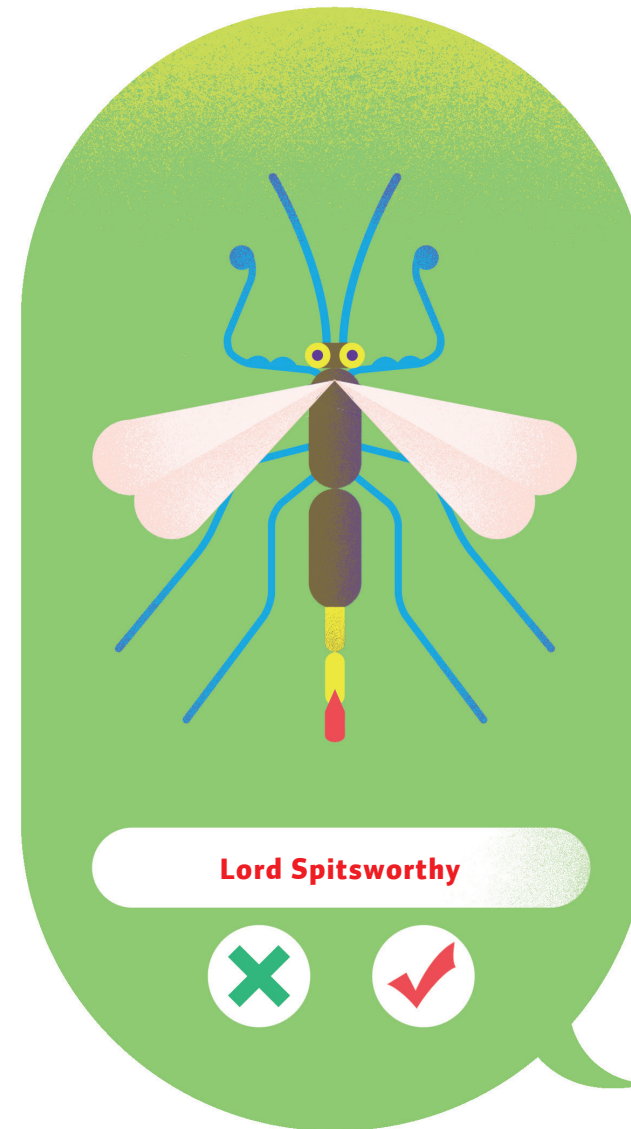
adds. When a female becomes receptive to mating, her urine telegraphs the news to male porkies in the forest. As one arrives at her tree, she wants proof that “this guy is up to it,” so he climbs to the branch above her and pisses prolifically over her. If she’s happy with the quality of his urine, says Mariotti, she’ll lift her tail, and they’ll copulate. If not, she shakes off the pee—and her suitor.

Bring Wine, Roses, and Dead Things

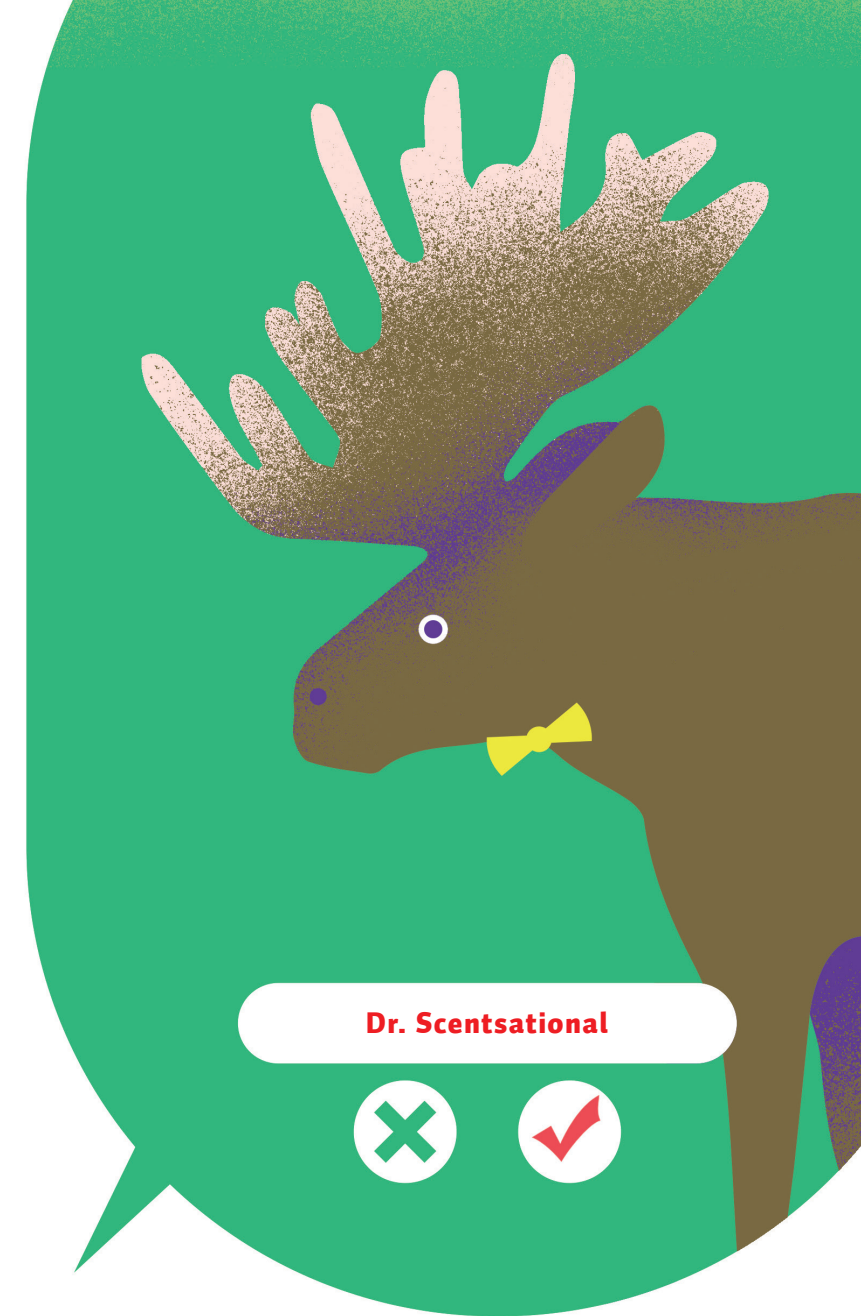
We all know guys who endear their lady love with a gift in hope of getting lucky later. The scorpion fly, a common cottage buzzer east of the Rockies, is a real charmer: he musters up a spitball packed with hormones and tasty nutrients and presents it to his intended, “who bases her decision to accept him on the size and quality of his ‘nuptial gift,’” explains Bob Anderson, an entomologist at the Canadian Museum of Nature. However, if he’s unfit and therefore lacking spit, he substitutes another snack—a dead insect—that she can munch on while they mate. Leftovers don’t go to waste, as this sly flyboy will steal back a partly eaten bug and regift it to the next babe on his list.

Bust a Move

Avian wooers frequently strut their stuff to the ladies in elaborate displays intended to dazzle with their athleticism. The sharp-tailed grouse (performing in the Prairies and northwestern Ontario), gets down on the dancing ground, or “lek,” stomping his feet and shaking his tail in the company of a dozen or more males. The goal is to boogie to the centre of the dance floor and hog the limelight, in a scene straight out of *Saturday Night Feather*. “The females will be looking to see how long he can dance for,” explains Artuso at Bird Studies Canada, “whether he has endurance.”>>

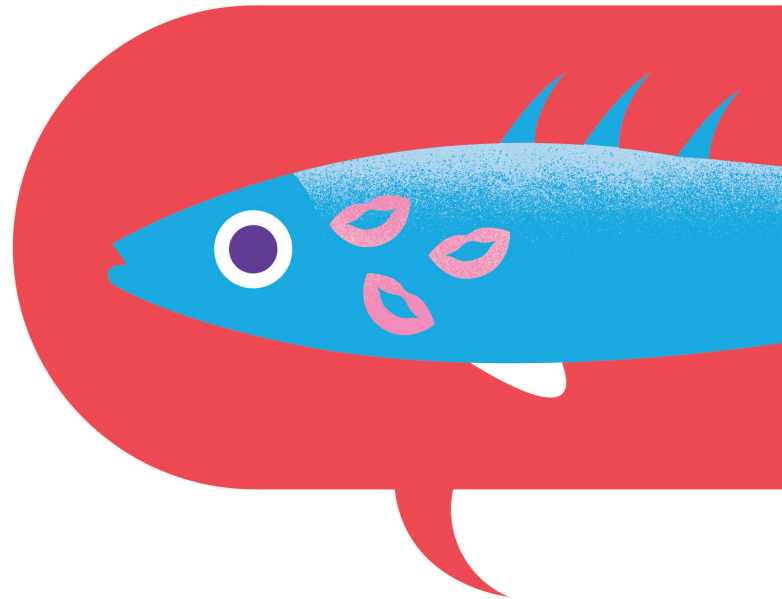
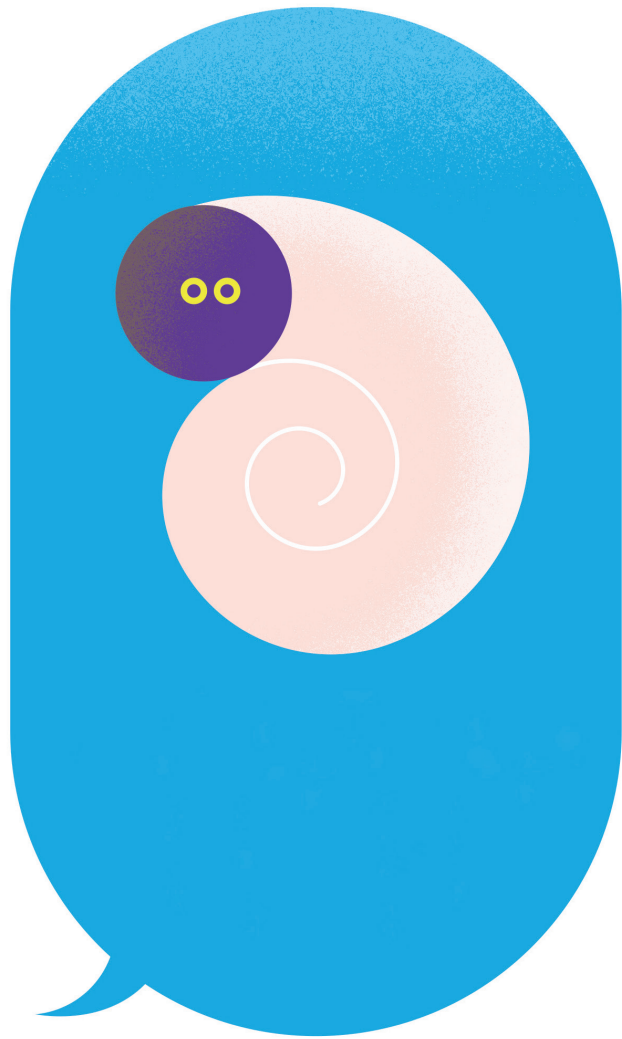


Lord Spitsworthy



Dr. Scentsational





Engage in a Little Foreleg Play

At breeding time, it's pandemonium in the pond as male wood frogs call to females and grab at bodies, even at other males, in their frenzy to hook up. When the right sex approaches him, the wood frog wraps his front legs around her ribcage and, with special soft pads on his feet, hugs her, says Crystal Robertson, the stewardship coordinator of the Toronto Zoo's Adopt-a-Pond program. The gesture, known as "amplexus," causes the female to release eggs into the water, where her main squeeze can fertilize them with spermic urine.

Elsewhere in cottage lakeland, the painted turtle male is playing footsie with his beloved. Facing her, he extends his forelegs with soles turned outward and, using his extra-long claws, gently strokes her face and neck, says Franco Mariotti. If she likes the hormonal buzz she gets from his touch, she dives to the bottom of the pond where they mate. If he's "not doing it quite right," it's goodbye, Mr. Wrong.

Invite Her to Your Love Nest

Creating an attractive, safe spawning site is a tactic used by many male fish to advertise their mate-worthiness. The threespine stickleback, who swims in coastal waters such as B.C.'s Gulf Islands and along the shores of the Great Lakes, outdoes himself constructing a deluxe nest of vegetation, complete with entrance and exit. To lure a female to his love shack, he does a "zigzag dance," says UBC's Eric Taylor, and if that fails to woo her, he'll try to escort her to the door. If she likes what he's done to the place, she deposits her eggs, and he fertilizes them. If not, she cruises through the nest, then out of his life.

Practise Unsafe Sex

A guy is on dangerous ground when his dream girl is a sexual cannibal, as are many female arachnids. The male nursery web spider, abundant at forest edges in Ontario and Quebec, risks being devoured by his larger, omni-voracious partner, either before they mate or after. He cautiously approaches the conflicted female, who wants to eat everything in her path but also needs to breed, and whips out some spider silk, carefully wrapping up her legs so it's safe to copulate, says Catherine Scott, an arachnologist and Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto. "The bondage greatly increases his chances of surviving." Once she starts struggling to get free of the silk, though, Spidey has only a split second to escape his femme fatale.

Play the Field

Having multiple partners works for a lot of male animals wanting to up their odds of siring a next generation. In the case of red squirrels, however, the female is also a floozy (and the most promiscuous of all squirrel species). She's in heat only one day a year, so who's got time to be picky about a quickie? On "oestrus day," says biologist Jeffrey Lane of the University of Saskatchewan, she leads a coterie of lusty lads on a mad dash through the woods from dawn to dusk, having sex with eight or nine and sometimes several more. Courting finesse goes out the window, with males scrambling to catch her on this "aerobically challenging" chase or trying to pull a competitor off her mid-coitus. By day's end, the biological clock stops ticking, and our red-hot squirrelly girlie is a mama-to-be.

Don't Come on Too Strong

Massive male grizzly and black bears could push their weight around when courting, but they are absolute gentlemen instead. Males of both species will follow a female who smells "like a good bet" for several days, says bear biologist Stephen Herrero, a professor emeritus at the University of Calgary. Initially, she might charge at him or sprint off to see if he is up to the chase. As they get more familiar, the male advances his intimacy to a "little mounting, a little playing around, then he lies down beside her and touches her," says Herrero. Taking it slow actually induces ovulation in the female, at which point they mate. "You might think the macho male rules the roost, but she decides if he's up to the job." 🐻

Toronto-based freelance writer Catherine Collins is head over heels for all things wild and wonderful.

