

Animal Behaviours

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After the worm has undergone its transformation, it towers over its prey at a staggering height of seven metres, though the rest of its body, which remains on the ground, adds another three to its total length. The worm boasts a diameter of 68 centimetres, which most often is enough to swallow its prey whole. As such, the worm uses its teeth not to break down its food, but to capture its prey and disable its vital organs before consumption. Like its mellow counterparts, the tunnelling worm has only smell, light receptors, and an ability to sense vibrations to guide its movement, however, it makes up for this in that each of these senses are multiplied one hundredfold: once a tunnelling worm locks onto its target, it is all but impossible to escape.

“Oh, put the book down, Vince,” Wayne called from the other side of the fire. Behind him, the bare Mont Charleau reared into the sky, accompanied only by the other pale mountains that surrounded it. The magnificent spires twisted away from the earth, their faces cloaked by dark shadows that contrasted harshly with their stark white slopes. Through them the wind moved in unnatural patterns, wailing as the sky grew dark.

“He’s right,” agreed Roy, “we’ve all worked hard enough today.”

Vincent sighed. Reluctantly, he marked his page and set down the book.

“That’s it,” grinned Wayne. “Why don’t you have a drink with me, now?” He took a swig from his flask and offered it to Vincent.

“Not too much,” Peter fretted between them.

“Yes,” agreed Charlie. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow, remember? With any luck, we’ll finish our observations and be able to start back home.”

Vincent looked solemnly into the woods that enveloped them. Back in his home country, the climate was genial, the towns were lively, and his family would be waiting for him to tell them all about his adventures in a foreign land. But here there was nothing but rugged wilderness, the villages few and far between. Here Vincent and his colleagues were isolated.

“You fellas worry too much,” Wayne replied, taking another gulp from his flask. “Well, Vince?”

“No thank you,” Vincent declined.

“Suit yourself,” Wayne shrugged. “Anyone else?”

Roy took a couple of drinks, much to Peter’s dismay, and even Charlie eventually took a swig. Vincent continued to stare into the woods, only half listening to the conversation, when he noticed Peter eyeing the book he had set down.

“What were you reading about, Vincent?” he asked with interest.

Vincent turned his gaze to the recent graduate, whose eyes were wide with curiosity. He hesitated.

After a few moments, he replied, “The tunnelling worm.”

Peter’s eyebrows knitted in confusion. “What is that?” he asked.

Roy and Charlie, who had been having a conversation, fell silent. The two brothers turned their heads and stared at Peter.

“You’ve never heard of the tunnelling worm?” Roy asked.

Peter fidgeted with his overcoat self-consciously.

“And you call yourself a biologist, man!” Wayne laughed.

“Don’t be rude,” Vincent frowned. He turned back to Peter. “A tunnelling worm is a type of parasite,” he explained. “It’s related to regular earthworms, but it’s predatory.”

“Was,” Roy corrected. “It’s extinct.”

Vincent didn’t meet his gaze.

“Beast of a parasite when it was alive, though,” said Wayne. He leaned forward, staring Peter down ominously. “See, it’s tiny when it starts out. If you weren’t paying attention, you’d probably think it was a normal earthworm. But when you look closer, that’s when you notice it has teeth. Little razors lining its head. And of course you think to yourself, ‘What is that? Why does an earthworm have teeth?’ but it’s gone back into the earth before you can look at it too long, and soon enough you dismiss it as something you mistook. But it did have teeth, and I’ll tell you why.” He paused for dramatic effect.

“It uses those teeth to burrow into your skin, just like a tick. That’s why it’s called a tunnelling worm, see. Only, the worm goes deeper. Before you know it, it starts to take control of you. It’s nocturnal, though,” he gestured to the night sky, “so you’re really yourself until nighttime. But even then the worm’s clever. It learns from your behaviour, your memories. And it does its best to act just like you. That is, until it’s ready to feed.” Wayne smiled darkly.

“When does it feed?” Peter asked breathlessly. He was hanging off of Wayne’s every word.

“It waits until you’re with a good group of people, about four or five. And these people, the worm fools them all. It’s learned to mimic you so well they don’t notice anything different. And as the night goes on, the worm wakes more and more. The moon reaches its peak in the sky and that’s when it’s the most active, that’s when it’ll strike. Suddenly it transforms into an enormous beast, and you, the host, you’re destroyed. And then it feeds,” He ended finally.

Peter had gone pale. All was quiet except for the crackling of the fire and the continued wailing of the wind in the mountains. In the navy sky, the moon had begun its climb.

“But they’re extinct,” Roy repeated firmly. “They have been since the eighteenth century.”

Vincent shifted in his seat. Warily, he cast a sideways glance at Roy.

“What?” Roy demanded.

“I’m not so sure,” Vincent confessed. “They’ve only ever lived on the outskirts of the world. Places like this, not a soul in sight. It’s natural our records aren’t as reliable for creatures of that kind.” He took a deep breath and continued. “And every so often, you get things that just don’t make sense. Unnatural autopsies. Group disappearances.” Shakily, Vincent pointed to the barren spire that stood to the north. “Locals have reported... sightings. At Charleau.”

Peter looked ready to faint. He stared at the others in horror.

“That’s ridiculous,” Wayne dismissed. “The tunnelling worm was declared extinct. Do you know how little evidence there has to be of a species for that to happen?”

“The coelacanth was declared extinct,” Vincent challenged, “then one was fished up off the coast of South Africa.”

“A Lazarus species,” Charlie murmured. He looked slowly to Vincent. “It’s possible.”

Wayne snorted. “You, my friends, have to learn the difference between theory and realism.” With that, he leaned back and took to observing the stars.

Charlie held Vincent's gaze for a moment longer, then looked away. The researchers once again fell silent. Meanwhile, the wind wailed all the louder.

Still leaning against the fir behind him, Wayne suddenly shifted his gaze back to his colleagues. A wry smile crept onto his face. "If they weren't extinct, though, I bet Peter would be one. A host, I mean."

"What? Why?" Peter asked seriously.

"Well, pretending to know nothing about a tunnelling worm, that's exactly the kind of thing a tunnelling worm would do. And it's night, now, of course, so it'd be starting to control you."

Beside Wayne, Roy gave a small chuckle.

"I wasn't pretending," Peter frowned. Embarrassed, he began again to fiddle with his overcoat.

Wayne seemed not to notice. "Actually, now that I think about it, that would be the perfect strategy. Everyone would have to spend so much time explaining the whole concept they'd never stop to think they might be talking to the parasite itself." He turned his head to Peter, suddenly intent. "And I suppose Peter himself is so new he wouldn't have known to avoid the worm when he saw it in its smaller form, so it would've been able to latch on easily."

Peter said nothing, but seemed to shrink beneath his own shadow. Wayne's eyes grew yet more focused as he continued. "But that's not the only thing—we also hardly know the kid. He's, what, four months, five months out?" Though Wayne's gaze was fixed on Peter, he seemed not to see him at all. "Wouldn't be hard for the worm to be very convincing."

Peter looked as though he were being backed into a corner by a wild animal. His hands began to shake. "I think you're taking this a little too seriously," he said meekly. "The tunnelling worm is extinct, you said so yourself."

Vincent disengaged himself from Wayne's theories and brought himself to speak up for Peter. "Yes, drop it," he said flatly. "You've had too much to drink."

"I'm only joking," Wayne retorted. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"Joke about something else," Vincent told him.

Wayne grumbled something in response, but it was inaudible over the keening wind. The researchers returned to silence, but there was a tension in the air that hadn't been there before.

Though he tried to forget them, Wayne's drunken ramblings churned in Vincent's mind. He could see it in Roy and Charlie, too: such an idea—that one of the researchers could be, in actuality, an officially extinct parasite—was implausible and frankly ridiculous, but in the otherworldliness of Charleau and the other barren peaks that twisted desperately from the earth, and of the continuous howls the wind produced as it rapped the cliffs, nearly anything seemed possible.

A few minutes passed in the same silence, while the researchers kept to themselves except to exchange wary glances. Occasionally they would look to the moon, which had risen to nearly a quarter of its full arc, before bringing their attention back to the clearing.

Eventually, Charlie hesitantly said, "If someone *had* been bitten by a worm, though... what would we do?" He looked around to the other researchers. For a moment no one responded.

"I suppose we'd have to tie them to a tree and run," Roy said. His tone was light-hearted, but there was a darkness in his eyes.

"No, no," Wayne said without taking his eyes off of the sky. He still had the same serious, albeit detached, expression on his face. "They'd break the ropes as soon as they transformed."

"Well, then what?" Roy asked.

Wayne put his finger to his chin. "S'pose we'd have to kill them."

Charlie bristled. "You'd be killing one of your campmates!"

"Either they'd die or the rest of us would," Wayne frowned. Vincent tensed at the hostility in their voices.

"But it doesn't matter," Peter said uncertainly, "because the worm is extinct."

The others swivelled their heads toward him. They stared at him blankly.

"Charlie," Roy began slowly, "why are you here?"

Charlie's eyes widened. "What?"

"Why are you here?" Roy repeated firmly. He stood up and balled his fists.

"I don't know what you mean," Charlie said, a bit unsteadily.

"YOU KNOW JUST WHAT I MEAN!" Roy bellowed. "You're no ecologist! You don't care about any of this!"

Charlie stood up too. "I don't know what you're saying!" he exclaimed, exasperated. "I have two degrees, same as you! I studied for six years, for heaven's sake."

"Six years! Six years!" Roy ran his hand through his hair. "Christ, Charles, why'd you waste so much time? I don't know why you feel compelled to follow me in everything, I really don't." The tone in his voice sounded almost pitiful for a moment, but he turned his head back sharply to Charlie and began to shake with anger.

"You hate ecology, Charles! You have no reason to be here. You're a worm! You're a tunnelling worm! You're only staying to eat us. You're going to eat us." Roy's eyes were wild.

Vincent felt sick. "Enough! You're his brother!" he exclaimed to Roy. He rose from his seat. "How could you say that to your brother?"

"Sit back down!" Roy shrieked. "You don't know anything!"

"Good grief, you grew up together," Vincent cried, "does that mean nothing to you?"

In response, Roy came over and pushed Vincent's shoulders, shoving him back into his seat. Vincent was too shocked to protest. Dizzy, he could only watch as Roy turned back to Charlie.

"We're running out of time, then," Wayne said, looking up at the moon. It was approaching the half of its highest point.

Charlie backed away, his eyes wide. "You can't mean..." Even Roy looked a little startled.

"Him or us," Wayne grunted. "If he really is a worm."

"No. No," Vincent muttered, distraught. Yet, despite his attempts to shut out Roy's accusations, he found them tumbling through his mind. In his frazzled state he could only hear slurred speech and the growing roars from the mountains beyond. He was dimly aware of the fire glowing in the centre of the clearing.

Vincent came back to the present when an irate "SHUT UP!" sounded beside him. He turned to see, to his disbelief, that Peter had risen from his seat and was staring hard at Roy. Everyone goggled at him.

"Don't kill Charlie," Peter said evenly. "He's not a worm." Slowly, he turned and pointed to Wayne. "He is."

For a moment Wayne didn't say anything at all. He stared at Peter as though he'd forgotten he could speak. Then, confounded, he said, "What? What are you on about?"

Peter didn't waver. "You seem on board to abandon every other person here," he said. "Have you forgotten the detailed narrative you constructed of me? And you seem quite all right with letting Charlie die just because Roy thinks he's a parasite."

"You can't be serious," Wayne laughed half-heartedly.

Peter stood up straighter. It suddenly occurred to Vincent that they were the same height.

"I think you're trying to cover up your own identity," Peter went on. "How do you know so much about an extinct species, anyway? One that lives in virtually uninhabited areas. One that hasn't been alive since the seventeen hundreds."

"Of course I know about different species," Wayne growled, "I'm a biologist." With a slight tremor in his voice, he added, "Don't be stupid."

Peter looked up at the moon. "You're right," he said, "we are running out of time." He scanned the clearing until his eyes rested on a smooth, round stone. Without a word, he picked it up and turned to Wayne.

"Now wait a minute—" Wayne began, his eyes widening.

Peter stared back at him. There was nothing in his gaze but cold calculation.

"Hey now," Roy started from the other side of the fire, "don't do anything to Wayne. It's *him* we should be worried about." He glared at Charlie.

"Stop talking about me as if I'm some pet you can just get rid of! Try anything and I'll kill *you*, you idiot." Charlie bared his teeth. There was hurt behind his eyes.

Peter glared at them both. "Be quiet and let me do this," he snapped. He turned back to Wayne.

Vincent jumped out of his seat. "Wait," he interjected, "If—if we're really doing this, we need to at least agree on who's a parasite and who's not."

Peter turned to him. "Just let me deal with Wayne," he said. "I'm not hurting you."

"No, Vincent has a point," Roy said thoughtfully. "If one of us really is a tunnelling worm, it'll try to kill all of us. We need to make sure we've got the right person."

"We'll take a vote," Vincent said logically. He felt a part of himself slipping away.

"Fine," Peter replied. Reluctantly, he dropped his stone on the ground and returned to his seat.

The others hesitantly followed suit. Vincent sat down and looked at the cloudless sky. Between the stars, the moon shone dully, having surpassed the half of its climb while the researchers were arguing. Vincent felt a sense of dread pour over him as he beheld its ancient glow.

"Oh my god," Charlie whispered. He was rocking back and forth anxiously.

Vincent looked around at the other researchers. Wayne, despite an effort to appear composed, was sweating nervously. Roy had his head in his hands. Peter was still strangely removed.

"Well," Peter said eventually, "we've discussed myself, Charlie, and Wayne. It's time for Roy and Vincent."

Vincent fixed his gaze on Roy. The ecologist felt suddenly like a stranger to him.

"Roy," he began coldly. "I have to admit, before tonight I could have never suspected you of anything, let alone something so horrific as intending to slaughter your colleagues. I haven't known you for an exceptionally long time, but from the time we spent working together I had the impression that you were a kind, genuine person.

So you have to understand why it disturbed me to see you turn so quickly on your own brother.” He straightened his overcoat and rose from his seat.

“I find it hard to believe that you could be prepared to kill someone you grew up with, which is why it seems possible that maybe you’re not Roy at all. Maybe you’re a tunnelling worm that’s infiltrated Roy’s mind. A worm wouldn’t understand that type of bond. It would try to mimic your behaviour, but it couldn’t understand the complex motivations behind all of it.” He studied Roy.

Roy stood up to face him. “Don’t pretend you know me and my brother,” he spat. “You and I have worked together for a grand total of five weeks. You can’t analyze me like a lab rat based on something you read in your textbook. You haven’t seen half of Charles’ crap!”

To Vincent’s surprise, Charlie got up and stood beside his brother. “You really haven’t seen us,” he told him, just as coldly as Vincent had addressed Roy. “Roy may be spouting off nonsense, but he’s right that you don’t know us. Nor do we know you.” He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, then spun around to face the other researchers.

“Why has no one questioned Vincent?” he demanded. “He’s the one who’s so interested in these worms anyway. Maybe he thought if he acted all scared that they might still be alive none of us would suspect he was one himself.”

“Hold on—” Vincent began, but Charlie cut him off.

“But he’s obsessed with them!” Charlie went on, making wild gestures to his audience. “He’s been reading autopsy reports, news articles... he was pouring over their section in that book tonight! Not for the first time, I’d presume.” Charlie turned to face Vincent. His hair was matted and he shook violently.

“Maybe it’s *him* we should get rid of,” he said.

“Be reasonable, now,” Vincent replied with a quaver. He suddenly didn’t recognize Charlie. “If I were a worm, why would I suggest in the first place that the species may not actually be extinct? Wouldn’t it be in my best interest to keep that idea out of everyone’s heads—?”

“We’re out of time,” Peter suddenly declared. He was looking up at the moon. The great rock had mounted to nearly the top of the sky. “If we’re going to vote, we need to do it now.”

Vincent looked at Roy and Wayne. There was nothing but primal fear in their eyes.

“I’m not a tunnelling worm!” Vincent cried out desperately, but he realized the people he had been acquainted with were long gone.

Peter picked up a long stick and drew five letters on the ground: P, C, W, R, V. He gathered five rocks, heavy and substantial, and placed them in a pile beside the letters.

“Everyone who votes for me will put their stone in the ‘P’ pile,” he explained. “Everyone who votes for Charlie will put it in the ‘C’ pile, and so on.” He looked to the other researchers, then took a stone from the central pile and dropped it on Wayne’s initial.

Roy went next. He took a stone and dropped it on the “C” pile. Vincent thought he saw Charlie flinch.

Vincent moved stiffly to the central pile and took a stone for himself. He paused for a moment before dropping it on Roy’s initial.

Wayne went after him, taking a stone and making his way to Peter’s pile. After a moment of apparent reconsideration, he turned around and added it to Roy’s instead.

Everyone looked to Charlie. He picked up the remaining rock and glared at Vincent’s initial, where no stones lay. Then he looked to Roy’s pile.

“Hurry up,” Peter told him irritably.

Charlie shook, tightening his grip on the stone. “It’s Vincent,” he insisted. The look in his eyes was enough to drain the blood from Vincent’s face.

“Well, he doesn’t have enough votes to win, so you’d better vote for Roy or Wayne,” Peter returned.

Charlie eyed Vincent. Before he could register what was happening, Vincent was struck with a dull pain and a sickening crunch in his ribcage. His knees buckled beneath him and there was nothing he could do as Charlie pelted a second stone at him.

“I guess we’re going with Vincent now,” Peter said, glancing up at the moon. He picked up a stone and hurled it at Vincent, this time striking his head.

Vincent yowled as blood began to pour into his eyes, blurring his vision.

“But we decided on Roy!” Wayne spluttered.

“There’s no time now,” Peter hissed, reaching for another stone.

Roy joined him.

“No. Please,” Vincent begged. He crumpled as another stone was lobbed at him.

Suddenly the wind broke into a deafening roar. The trees surrounding the clearing thrashed back and forth and the researchers stumbled under the force. All Vincent could do was huddle on the ground, shivering, where he lay on his side.

He was aware that Charlie, Roy, and Wayne had stopped attacking him. He wondered why they had a look of terror in their eyes, why they had frozen where they stood. Then, through the red that clouded his vision, he saw it: a gargantuan pillar of flesh with a gaping hole for a mouth, towering over the researchers at a height of about seven metres, with an additional three that trailed behind it on the ground, and a diameter that approximated to 68 centimetres. At its base lay the misshapen form of Peter.

Vincent watched in horror as the tunnelling worm clicked its teeth hungrily. Though it had no eyes, the creature seemed to stare at the researchers. It watched them, in the way a predator watches its prey.