

Meet Ronan, the Rhythmic Sea Lion

VOCABULARY WORDS

1. **Fame** (noun) /feɪm/: The state of being known or recognized by many people for something special.
Example: The singer gained international **fame** after her hit song went viral.
2. **Intriguing** (adjective) /ɪn'tri:ɡɪŋ/: Very interesting because of being unusual or mysterious.
Example: The old map showed an **intriguing** path to a hidden treasure.
3. **Debated** (verb) /dɪ'beɪtɪd/: Discussed a particular subject in a formal way.
Example: The politicians **debated** the new law for many hours.
4. **Assess** (verb) /ə'ses/: To evaluate or estimate the nature, ability, or quality of.
Example: The teacher needed to **assess** the students' understanding of the lesson.
5. **Evaluate** (verb) /ɪ'vælju,eɪt/: To judge or calculate the quality, importance, amount, or value of something.
Example: We need to **evaluate** our options before making a final decision.



Ronan possesses a remarkable talent for dancing. This 15-year-old California sea lion rhythmically moves her head to the beat of rock, electronica, and disco classics, such as "Boogie Wonderland."

Ronan gained considerable fame for her exceptional rhythmic abilities approximately a decade ago. Since the age of three, she has been a resident at the University of California, Santa Cruz's Long Marine Laboratory. Here, researchers have continuously assessed her capacity to recognize and respond to various rhythms.

Very few animals, apart from humans, parrots, and some monkeys, clearly demonstrate an ability to recognize and move in time with a beat. However, what makes Ronan particularly intriguing is her capability to dance without possessing the skill to sing or communicate musically.

"Scientists once believed that only animals who were vocal learners — like humans and parrots — could learn to find a beat," stated Hugo Merchant, a researcher at Mexico's Institute of Neurobiology, who was not directly involved in the Ronan research. Nevertheless, in the years since Ronan's initial rise to fame, scientists have debated whether she could still maintain her dancing prowess and if her beat-keeping was superior to that of humans.

The outcomes of a new study are unequivocal: Ronan still retains her skill, and she is performing better than ever. In this study, researchers focused on drum beats within a controlled laboratory environment. They recorded Ronan bobbing her head as a drummer played at 112, 120, and 128 beats per minute. Two of these tempos were unfamiliar to Ronan, allowing scientists to assess her ability to recognize novel rhythms.

Subsequently, the researchers requested 10 college students to perform the same task. "No human was better than Ronan across all the various methods we used to evaluate the quality of beat-keeping," explained Peter Cook, one of the researchers. He also mentioned that she has improved since her younger days, suggesting a capacity for lifelong learning. Researchers intend to train and test other sea lions. Cook anticipates that other sea lions can also move to a beat, but Ronan is expected to remain the star performer.

DISCUSSION

1. If Ronan could choose her favorite song to dance to, what kind of music do you think it would be? Would it be a super fast song, a slow and groovy one, or something totally unexpected?
2. Ronan bobs her head to the beat. If she could use her whole body to dance like a human, what awesome dance moves do you think she would create that only a sea lion could do?
3. Scientists usually test animals in labs. If Ronan could choose her own dream stage to perform on, where would it be? Maybe a giant floating platform in the ocean or a glittering underwater disco?
4. Very few animals can dance to a beat. If you could teach any animal to dance, which animal would you choose and what funny dance would they do?
5. Ronan is 15 years old! If Ronan had a birthday party, what kind of splashy fun would she have, and what would her special birthday cake (maybe fish-flavored!) look like?
6. Scientists compare Ronan to college students. If Ronan challenged a human dance team to a dance-off, what would be the wildest thing Ronan would do to win?
7. The researchers plan to test other sea lions. If they found a whole sea lion dance crew, what would their team name be, and what would be their signature group dance move?
8. Ronan is a "star performer." If Ronan could choose a superhero costume to wear during her dance, what would it look like, and what would her superhero name be?
9. This study helps us learn more about animals. If you could ask Ronan one question that she could answer, what would it be?
10. If Ronan could create a "sea lion dance school" for other animals, what would be the first rule she would teach, and what kind of silly reward would she give to her best students?