mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Are unicorns real?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! I got my stuffed animal narwhal here—I love this animal! I remember seeing a cartoon of a narwhal in a movie once and I remember thinking—there's no way that's a real animal! A whale with a horn? It seems like something from a fairytale.

Someone named Yadira has a question about another animal from fairytales. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Yadira!
- I have a question for you. Are unicorns real?
- That's a great question.

My friend, Sam, tells a story that when he was young, he and his babysitter were on a walk through a park. It was late afternoon, they were in a big grassy field. All of a sudden he heard his babysitter say, "Look! A unicorn!" Sam turned his head and saw a shadow of a large creature, with what seemed like a big horn. "A real-life unicorn?", he thought. He had only heard about them in books.

Now in stories and movies, unicorns are these amazing animals, you know, giant, white horses with twisted magical horns. So, Sam couldn't believe there might be a real unicorn right there in the park. When the animal heard them it looked up towards them and that's when Sam noticed it was just a big deer munching on some twigs. His babysitter had played a little joke on him but even if it was just a deer, unicorns have to be real, right?

I mean, think about this, unicorns are mentioned in stories told in different cultures all around the world. In the country of India, for example, they tell stories of a beast with one big horn colored white, black, and red. And in Scotland, people loved the idea of the unicorn so much that it is one of their national symbols. You'll see it on buildings and signs.

So, are unicorns real animals that are actually walking around out there in the world? Or are they only made-up animals from stories?

VIDEO 2

Well, what makes the idea of a unicorn so special is that there aren't that many animals with a single horn like that. For example, moose have antlers and rams have horns, but those come in pairs—there are two of them on their heads. But there are a few animals out there with only a single horn.

On the small end of the animal kingdom, you've got this—the rhinoceros beetle. A type of insect that has a single long horn similar to a rhinoceros. And among the larger animals, there's the amazing narwhal. The type of whale I mentioned earlier. It's a real animal that lives in the Arctic. Its horn is actually a single long tooth that it uses to hunt fish.

So, are unicorns part of the real-life, one-horned animal club? Are unicorns real?

Scientists recently found a good clue to answer this question. A fossil. Now you might know that a fossil is when the remains of an animal get captured in rock. It could be a footprint or track, but in this case, it's what used to be a bunch of bones.

In Asia, scientists had been finding fossils of dinosaurs and mammoths, but then they found a creature from even more recent times. A one-horned creature. They called it the Siberian unicorn and this is a painting of one based on what scientists think that it looked like.

Now, like a unicorn, it did have that single, extremely long horn. But other than that it looks pretty different from our usual idea of a unicorn. It was short, it was big, and it was probably really furry. It looked more like a rhinoceros mixed with a buffalo, rather than a horse. But it did have one horn the way a unicorn does. So scientists decided it made sense to call it a unicorn.

They think that the Siberian unicorn even walked on Earth around the same time as ancient human beings. So even if you've never seen a unicorn, maybe your great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandparents did.

So in summary, there are a lot of different animals with horns, but only a few of them have one horn, and none of them are horses. We don't think unicorns are real animals that are alive today. But based on fossils that have been found, maybe a long time ago unicorns were real.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Yadira, for asking it!