mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Are dolphins really one of the smartest animals in the world?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, It's Danni! One of my favorite things to do is observe animals and how they act. It's just so fun watching all the amazing things they can do. This bird is a cockatoo. Watch how it dances to the beat of the music. And that's not all. Some cockatoos use sticks as tools to make beats of their own. Pretty amazing, right? Okay. Let me show you one more. Ready for it? Introducing an orangutan, wearing a hat. Orangutans have been known to make umbrella hats out of leaves to keep them dry from the rain. That's so cool. Someone named Claire is curious about another amazing animal. Let's give Claire a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Danni!

- Hi, Claire!

- I have a question for you. Are dolphins really one of the smartest animals in the world?

- That's a great question.

But before we answer it, we kind of have to figure out what counts as smart in the animal world. Is it using a tool like a cockatoo can? Or is it solving a problem like keeping dry from the rain like an orangutan does when it makes an umbrella hat? Figuring out how smart an animal is isn't

easy, but we can find clues to how smart they are by observing how they're using their brains to think. Watch this elephant move a tire. You'll see why in a second. And that might give you a clue about how the elephant is using its brain to think. Before I go on, I'm curious. Why do you think this elephant is moving that tire?

VIDEO 2

I don't know what you thought but here's the rest of the video. You may have already guessed that the elephant is trying to get to fruit from that tree. And finding food like that takes thinking. Your dog or cat has to think to find its food bowl. A bird has to think to find a worm, but what this elephant is doing takes a little more thinking than just finding food. It can't reach the fruit in that tree. So it's using a tire as a tool to help climb up and get it. Whoa! It takes a special kind of thinking to solve a problem with a tool like that. A kind of thinking that only a few animals have like this dolphin. See that thing on its beak? That's a sea sponge. The dolphins in Shark Bay Australia were getting cut by sharp rocks at the bottom of the ocean. That's a problem. So some of them started wearing sea sponges on their beaks like helmets so they wouldn't get hurt while hunting for food. Problem-solving like that takes more thinking than just finding a bowl of food. And it's not just the dolphins in Australia that can problem-solve. Dolphins all over the world are pretty incredible at thinking like that. For example, these dolphins thought up a great way to trap fish. See how that dolphin is making a wall of mud? The other members of its pod chased the fish into the wall of mud and the fish are getting trapped, like in a big net. What a great idea. Working as a team to hunt and trapping fish like that definitely takes a special kind of thinking. But that's not all these dolphins are doing. They're communicating while they're looking for food. And that takes thinking to a whole new level. Here are those whistles? Those whistles aren't just

random sounds. They mean something. See, dolphins use different whistles and chirps to communicate where they are when they're hunting. Some types of whistles mean they're happy. Some mean they're scared. And some types mean they've found a large school of fish to eat. And need help rounding them all up. Get this. Dolphins are such good communicators that they even have a special whistle to identify themselves. It's like their name. They use this special name whistle to tell their pods where they are so they don't get lost. Kind of like saying, hey, Mom, I'm over here. Pretty cool! Dolphins have to think in a special way to communicate like that. Which makes animal experts believe they're some of the best thinkers in the animal world. Communication takes thinking. So observing how animals like dolphins communicate is a good way to tell how smart they are, but it's not the only way. You can also observe how an animal thinks by using one of these. A mirror. I'm serious. A mirror is a great way to tell how an animal thinks. When we look at a mirror, we know we're looking at ourselves, and that takes a certain type of thinking. We have to think, Hey, that person in the mirror is moving their arms like I am, and they're smiling like I am. Whoa, that's me. But believe it or not, most animals don't recognize their reflections in a mirror. They might ignore it. They might think it's another animal and try to play with it, or they might even get scared. But not dolphins. Bottlenose dolphins not only recognize themselves in a mirror, they even seem to enjoy it. They'll open their mouths to see what's inside or do tricks in front of it just for fun. Now, dolphins aren't the only animals that can recognize their reflections. Chimpanzees can, so can orangutans, and some elephants but there just aren't that many that can, and that's just one more reason why animal experts believe that dolphins are one of the smartest thinkers in the world. Sure, all animals think, but dolphins show a special kind of thinking. When they solve problems by using tools like sea sponge helmets. When they communicate with each other while they're hunting for food, and have special whistle names for themselves. And when they recognize themselves in a mirror, which is

something most animals can't do. Amazing! That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Claire for asking it!