

Killer whales exhibit 'cultural learning'

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A Canisius College study has found killer whales are among animal species known to demonstrate "cultural learning."

The discovery was made by Michael Noonan, an animal behavior professor at the Buffalo, N.Y., college, during a study at Marineland at Niagara Falls in Ontario, Canada.

Noonan observed a four-year-old orca luring gulls into his tank by spitting fish onto the water's surface. The mammal then sank and waited for a gull to take the bait.

Within a couple months, Noonan observed the whale's younger brother

adopt the same gull-catching strategy, thereby demonstrating cultural learning -- a phenomenon in which animals of the same species learn from other members of their group.

"It looked like one was watching while the other tried," Noonan said of the whale's initial behavior.

"It was once believed that most animal behavior, from the food they ate to the places they slept, was based on instinct," said Noonan. "This new discovery supports the growing view that animals like killer whales are very prone to learning by imitation, and that they are 'cultural' by nature."

Noonan presented his findings during the August Animal Behavior Society conference in Snowbird, Utah.

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