

Meta-analysis seeks to explain why dogs wag their tails

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A team of biologists, life scientists and animal researchers affiliated with

several institutions across Europe and one in the U.S., has conducted a meta-analysis of dog tail wagging to find out if the combined efforts of multiple research efforts might explain the behavior. In their paper [published](#) in the journal *Biology Letters*, the group describes several theories that have been developed and which they see as the most likely possibilities.

Dogs are known to wag their [tails](#) when reuniting with their owners or even other dogs they know and like—most animal scientists agree that such behavior is likely a form of communication—a means for expressing happiness when seeing someone they have been missing.

But how did the behavior evolve? Wolves and foxes do very little tail wagging; thus, it would appear to be a trait that evolved during the domestication process. To gain some insight into the origin of tail wagging, the researchers combed research databases for ideas put forth by others looking for the same answer.

The research team did not find any sort of consensus—no one really knows how or why dogs started wagging their tails. But they did find that prior research has yielded evidence that it originated during domestication. Silver [foxes](#), reared in captivity over multiple generations, for example, tend to start wagging their tails more.

It has been noted that dogs tend to wag more to the right when happy, and to the left when stressed or afraid. And testing of hormones in dogs wagging their tails versus sitting silently showed, unsurprisingly, that the [dogs](#) wagging their tails were more excited, aroused or just plain happy. One relatively new theory suggests that tail wagging came about as humans selectively bred for more tail wagging for no better reason than that humans respond well to rhythmic behavior.

The researchers conclude that stronger evidence is required to narrow

existing theories and perhaps to gain more insight into the factors at play when humans domesticate animals in general.

More information: Silvia Leonetti et al, Why do dogs wag their tails?, *Biology Letters* (2024). [DOI: 10.1098/rsbl.2023.0407](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2023.0407)

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