



Wildlife Olympians Sure to Bring Home the Gold

RESTON, Va. (February 15, 2010)—Winter Olympians have amazing physical abilities, but for wild animals, strength, speed, agility and endurance are a matter of survival. National Wildlife Federation offers some “Wildlife Olympians” with gold medal-worthy abilities!

River Otter

This member of the weasel family would be a real contender in the luge or skeleton competition. Known for their playfulness, otters often repeatedly slide down natural mud or ice chutes they create along riverbanks, seemingly just for the fun of it. Bears sometimes slide down snowy hillsides for fun too, but they’d definitely only get the silver medal if they were up against river otters.

Cheetah and Pronghorn

The fastest animal on the planet is the cheetah, which can run at speeds over 60 miles per hour, so it’s the Super G event for this speed demon. But even that doesn’t always ensure that this big cat gets a meal. The gazelles and other small antelope that are the cheetah’s main prey are not as fast as the cat, but they have greater endurance and agility in a high-speed chase and often escape the spotted speedster.

Downhill skiing would suit the pronghorn, the planet’s second-fastest animal with a top speed that almost matches the cheetah’s. Like any high level athlete, competition from the other top contenders in your sport often makes you better, and the same is true for cheetahs and pronghorns. While today the felines are only found in Africa and parts of Asia, thousands of years ago they also roamed North America and hunted pronghorns. Only the fastest pronghorns survived and, over many generations, the species evolved to be almost as fast as cheetahs.

Lynx and Snowshoe Hare

When it comes to ability to navigate deep snows, it’s anyone’s guess whether the snowshoe hare or the lynx would take the gold. However, they might be perfect ice dancing partners because their huge feet would allow them to glide gracefully over the ice. In the wild, their big tootsies allow them to get around in several feet of the white stuff without sinking. The hares have the extra advantage of their pure white winter coat, which provides excellent camouflage in their frozen habitat, but even that doesn’t always save them from the lynxes’ exceptional agility, hearing, eyesight and sense of smell.

Bush Baby

These tiny primates live in the treetops and have incredible leaping abilities, ski jump anyone? As they prowl the tropical forests at night looking for fruits and insects to devour, bush babies can make leaps of 20 feet or more, which is many times their own body length. They are great jumpers and acrobats and perfect for the freestyle aerials too but they also move in complete silence and can see in almost absolute darkness with the help of their huge eyes.

Spotted Hyena, Least Weasel and Tasmanian Devil

Sign these guys up for the hockey team. Spotted hyenas have incredibly strong jaws, which they put to good use in the game of survival but since hockey players always seem to be breaking jaws and losing teeth, the hyena would be a valuable contributor to the team. Hyenas can literally consume every part of their prey including bones, horns and teeth! But contrary to popular belief, hyenas wouldn't win a medal in a biting competition among mammals.

Recent research has shown many mammalian carnivores have a stronger bite force quotient than hyenas, including gray wolves, lions and even giant pandas (which don't even regularly eat meat, instead feeding primarily on tough bamboo which requires strong jaws). The tiny least weasel could join the team, especially a North American team since it lives there. Captain of the team would be Australia's Tasmanian devil, which has a bite force quotient higher than any other living mammal.

Sooty Shearwater and Arctic Tern

When it comes to long distance endurance, there's a heated rivalry between two sea birds, both which would do well in cross country skiing which requires great fortitude. For years, the Arctic tern held the title of the bird with the longest migration, traveling from the Arctic all the way to the Antarctic, and back again, each year. They literally migrate from one end of the planet to another.

Then, scientists discovered that the sooty shearwater also has an impressive migratory journey, beginning in New Zealand and ending in the North Pacific. Each bird was estimated to travel over 40,000 miles annually. However, a recent study reports that the Arctic tern can go as far as 50,000 miles, making it the favorite in this year's Wildlife Olympics. But who will take the gold and who will settle for the silver is anyone's guess! One thing is sure, compared to these two avian migrants, the Pacific gray whale, the longest migrating mammal, can only hope for the bronze with a maximum roundtrip journey of only 12,000 miles.

Learn more cool facts about amazing wildlife at www.nwf.org/wildlife.

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