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**KING OF THE PLUSHIES**  
 "Fox Wolfie Galen"  
 with his beloved stuffed  
 animals. Photographed at  
 his home in Pennsylvania  
 on January 12, 2001.

## PLEASURES OF THE FUR

Welcome to the world of "furries": the thousands of Americans who've gotten in touch with their inner raccoon, or wolf, or fox. Judging from the Midwest FurFest, this is no hobby. It's sex; it's religion; it's a whole new way of life

BY GEORGE GURLEY

**A** moose is loitering outside a hotel in the Chicago suburb of Arlington Heights. The moose—actually a man in a full-body moose costume—is here for a convention . . . and so is the porcupine a few feet away, as well as the many foxes and wolves.

Even the people in regular clothes have

a little something (ferret hand puppet, rabbit ears) to set them apart from the ordinary hotel guests. One man in jeans and a button-down shirt gets up from a couch in the lobby and walks over to the elevator, revealing a fluffy tail dragging behind him. The elevator doors open. Inside, a fellow is kissing a man with antlers on his head.

The other hotel guests look stunned. "We're a group of people who like things having to do with animals and cartoons," a man in a tiger suit tells a woman. "We're furries."

"So cute," the woman says.

Welcome to the Midwest FurFest. Here, a number of "furries"—people

whose interest in animal characters goes further than an appreciation of *The Lion King*—are gathering together.

At 7:30 P.M., near the front desk, three men known as Pack Rat, Rob Fox, and Zen Wolph are scratching one another's backs—grooming one another, like macaques in a zoo. "Skritch-ing," they call it. I am tempted to turn around and run. Instead I find myself talking with Keith Dickinson, a self-described "computer geek." Not long ago, this man, a 37-year-old from Kansas City, Kansas, was so depressed he could barely bring himself to go to the grocery store. And then it hit him. He started to believe that, somewhere deep down, he was actually ... a polar bear.

"In normal society," Dickinson says, "two people who hardly know each other do not walk up and scratch each other's backs. But when you're one of the furs, it's one big extended family."

Next to him is his skinny, longhaired, fedora-wearing sidekick, a 23-year-old art student named Ian Johnson (nametag: R. C. RABBITS'FOOT). Last year, Johnson, who has brought the ashes of his dead cat to the FurFest, persuaded Dickinson to attend another furry convention in Memphis, and that's what did it.

"It's a new way of looking at the world," Dickinson says. "It's like looking at it with baby eyes, or cub eyes."

"You regress into a child when you come to a convention," Johnson says, "because it's that kind of camaraderie, or childishness."

RIDING WITH OSTRICH

It's night. Ostrich has to run an errand. We get into his Chevrolet Metro and speed away from the Sheraton, toward the nearest mall. The headlights illuminate the road ahead.

Ostrich, whose real name is Marshall Woods, is a compact guy in a denim jacket and blue jeans. He's 39 years old and works as a network administrator at a rubber company in Akron.

"When I was very, very young, I knew I wanted to be some type of animal," he says. "I didn't necessarily want to be the animal, but I wanted to have the animal shape, as far back as I can remember. It's that way for a lot of people."

He did normal things, like playing in the high-school marching band ... but he couldn't stop thinking about cartoon animals. Throughout his teenage and college years, he hid his furriness, thinking it was a "babyish thing."

"What the hell," he says. "Now I'm old and I'm warped, everybody knows it, so I don't bother hiding anything anymore!"

It wasn't until 1994 that he came upon

others who shared his interest. He was a chemist at the time, collecting dinosaur stuff on the side. One day he went to a comic-book shop and discovered *Genus*, a furry comic-book series with sexy characters. "And I looked at it and I was like, Whoa! This looks pretty much exactly what I'd like to read—I gotta have one of these," he recalls.

Now he writes a newsletter for Ohio Furs, an organization of furrives with 87 members.

He got his name after taking some ballet classes and not being very good at it. "I was sincere but not impressive," he says. "I guess I was technically competent, but not very much fun to watch. And I was compared to the ostrich ballerinas in *Fantasia*. They are trying very hard, but they are not quite there."

In 1998, Ostrich put up a Web site where you can see his animal drawings, his animal-themed poems and short stories (one of which was published in *Pawprints*, a magazine for furrives), his instructions on how to build a fursuit, and pictures of himself engaged in animal-centered activities. Like the time he made a solo trip to Sea World. "There's something just inherently cheerful about ducks," reads the text next to one picture on his Web site. "They seem almost ridiculously optimistic about the world and their place in it." Next to a photo of sea lions, the caption reads: "Do they have any idea how cute they look when they beg? Who could refuse them?"

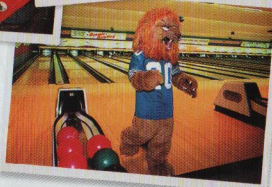
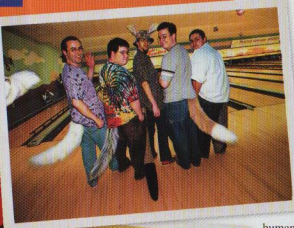
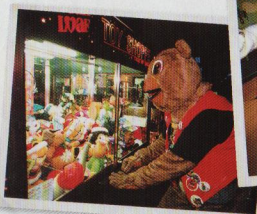
For a while, he concedes, he was a "plushie," which is the word for a person who has a strong—usually erotic—attachment to stuffed animals. He even wrote a plushie newsletter for a while, but gave it up. "It doesn't really interest me now," he says. "I just like to have the stuffed animals around. I would still say I'm a plushophile—I'm just not that interested in it that much sexually. In a casual way, but not really seriously."

He goes into a store and purchases materials for a puppet-making workshop he is scheduled to lead the next day. Back behind the wheel, Ostrich says, "I don't like the human form. I never really have. It does not please me. The body, just the flesh, the general design, I just don't like."

He says he'd prefer to be a lemur or a rabbit and still be intelligent and keep the opposable thumbs. He thinks the technology will be available relatively soon to help him achieve this dream. Talking about all this almost causes Ostrich to miss his exit.

"I. Need. To. Drive. More. Talk. Less." Eventually, CONTINUED ON PAGE 181

"I didn't necessarily want to be the animal, but I wanted to have the animal shape. ... It's that way for a lot of people."



**FURRIES' NIGHT OUT**  
Clockwise from top right: Furrives show some tail—from left, Scott Hubbard, Zach Taylor, Joey Rufus, Brian Moore, and Chris Eheart. Jeremy Normand (Simba T. Lion) exults. Jeff Ruhnke (BJ Buttons) digs for "plush." Photographed in St. Louis at their New Year's Eve bowling party.

WILLIAM GREENBLATT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 176 We pull back into a parking space back at the Sheraton.

"A lot of the people here are the very same way. We don't have a lot of deep real-life contact. It's superficial. I kind of skate through society. I mean, you see a lot of people—I see them at work—who have no idea what they're doing, or why, and they sit there and bang along from one hour to the next. As fucked up as I am, I at least know how I feel and what I want to do, and I have the good fortune to have a number of friends who feel the same way."

Ostrich leads me up to his suite.

It's filled with stuffed animals.

"Before I found the organized fandom, I lived in the country," he says. "I lived as far out as I could by preference. But the odd thing is, the longer I do this and the more deeply I get into it, the happier I am in the city and around crowds. I suppose it is, uh, it's probably a symptom of my increasing mental health, or something."

"How are you fucked up?" I ask.

"Everybody's fucked up in some way, I

"What I'd want is a whole new world where Canada was all raccoons, and the United States was all foxes ..."

think. Right now I'm happy, yeah. Feeling expansive. Willing to expand on topics and so forth. Talkative."

He sits on the chair and says there is a low percentage of women in the fandom, and a preponderance of gay men—or seemingly gay. "I am not really sure myself that as many of them are gay as think they are. It's just more, you like this person because of who they are rather than for their body. And we find as the number of women increases, the number of people who thought they were gay but decided otherwise increases, too. I know a couple people who thought they were gay until they met a furry girl."

He gets up.

"In some ways we're very closed off—sort of a subculture. I have trouble looking at it objectively, because it seems so natural. It's how I was my whole life, and all of a sudden, I'm like, Wow, here's a whole bunch of other people like this! Having not come to it from the outside, I have difficulty saying what it actually is. I'm too deeply into it."

## SOME FURRY THEORY

There are many kinds of furrries, but they all seem to have a few things in common. Something happened to them after a youthful encounter with Bugs Bunny or Scooby Doo or the mascot at the pep rally. They took refuge in cartoons or science fiction. After being bombarded by tigers telling them what cereal to eat, camels smoking cigarettes, cars named after animals, airplanes with eyes and smiles, shirts with alligators, they decided their fellow human beings were not nearly so interesting as those animal characters.

But it wasn't so liberating, having these intense feelings, when you thought you were the only person on earth who had them. The second big revelation for most furrries came when they got on the Internet. Not only were there others like them, they learned, but they were organized! They started having conventions in the early 90s. Now, such gatherings as the Further Confusion convention in San Jose, California, and Anthrocon in Philadelphia, attract more than 1,000 furry hobbyists apiece. (The Midwest FurFest is a smaller "con," with about 400 attending.) There are other conventions, too—even summer camps.

The furry group has its own customs and language. "Yiff" means sex, "yiffy" means horny or sexual, and "yiffing" means mating. "Fur pile" denotes a bunch of furrries lying on top of one another, affectionately, while skritch-ing. "Spooze" is semen—a possible outcome of a fur pile. A "furvert" is anyone who is sexually attracted to mascots and such.

Many furrries have jobs related to science and computers. They role-play on a Web site called "FurryMUCK," a chat-room kingdom where users pretend they're red-tailed hawks, foxes, and polar bears.

A high number of furrries are bearded and wear glasses. Many resemble the animal they identify with (especially wolves and foxes, the most popular "totems"). Some have googly, glazed, innocent eyes. A few are crazy-eyed.

## A MOMENT WITH MIKE THE COYOTE

Down in the lobby, a coyote is sitting on a couch. His nametag reads, SHAGGY, but his real name is Mike. Not all the conventioners want people to know their full names, lest their bosses or parents find out what they're up to on the weekends. Mike the Coyote says he is a

security guard in Indiana and has been going to furry conventions since 1992. The Midwest FurFest, he says, is "very mellow so far, rather surprisingly so, in fact. I hope it stays this way. We don't need the weirdies to fall out of the woodwork. For me, walking around a con with a tail hanging out my butt just seems weird. Just not my particular bag."

But Mike the Coyote has something for anyone who finds furriness strange: "Just go look at the Packers and Vikings fans at the game. You think *we're* weird? Look at the 350-pound guy that's got his body split in colors half and half, he's wearing shorts and paint and nothing else, and he's screaming, 'Vikings!' Oh my God! Anybody involved in beauty pageants? Children's beauty pageants, where they dress the little girls like they're 25-year-old prostitutes—which is just *sick*."

## "THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT RACCOONS"

One man who didn't make it to the Midwest FurFest is Ostrich's friend Fox Wolfie Galen, the King of the Plushies.

"He's O.K.," says Jack Below, a 28-year-old on-line worker at Southwestern Bell, who doubles as Spiked Punch, a wolf with a mallet. But, Below adds, Fox Wolfie Galen is "one of the people I really worry about. I really don't have anything against him; I just think if people really knew the full story on him, it would kind of set a bad image."

Two months prior to the FurFest, I visited Fox Wolfie Galen, whose real name is Kenneth, at his house in a small Pennsylvania city, where he lives with a roommate and more than a thousand stuffed animals. He was staring at his computer screen, monitoring an on-line auction. He put in a bid of \$40.01 for a 40-inch skunk stuffed animal, then lay down on his mattress on the floor.

"I pretty much can't afford to pay more than a dollar an inch for plush," he said, in a voice like that of Bill Murray's gopher-chasing groundskeeper character in *Caddyshack*. "I like skunks. I mostly collect bunnies, foxes, bears, ferrets, otters, sometimes dinosaurs."

Fox Wolfie Galen, aged 39, was wearing a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, green jeans, and thick, red-tinted glasses. (He said his eyesight is so bad that he receives \$500 a month from the government; he has no job; rent is \$200 a month.) Stuffed animals surrounded him and were stacked up to the ceiling against the wall by his bed. A big Meeko, the raccoon character from *Pocahontas*, in a Cub Scout uniform was looking at me with a crazed expression.

"That's what I wouldn't mind being in

real life," Fox Wolfie Galen said of the Meeko, which may be the most popular stuffed animal among the plushophiles. Between this one's legs was a little opening, a tear in the seam.

**F**ox Wolfie Galen had never traveled much beyond his hometown until four years ago, when he went to a furry convention in California with another plushophile he had met on-line. Since then he has made it to conventions in Toronto, Chicago, and Albany, New York.

Plushophilia began for him when he was around seven years old, even though he didn't own any stuffed animals. "From the time I was born until through high school, I probably touched three or four 'plushes,'" he said, using the plushophile's term for a stuffed animal. "It wasn't like I couldn't get them. I was interested; I just didn't make the connection. I knew I liked them, because I'd seen them on TV, or if I visited somebody else's house and they had plush. Or if somebody came along in a furry-animal costume, like a high-school mascot, I'd always sit close to where I'd think they'd be coming out."

After pep rallies he would find himself so aroused that he would have to walk

through the school's hallways with a book bag held in front of him. Growing up, he never fantasized about women. "If a mascot walked into a room surrounded by naked women, I'd be thinking about the mascot," he said.

His on-line bid won him the skunk and he turned off the computer. He told me he likes dressing up in full-body animal costumes sometimes, which, in the fandom's parlance, would make him a "fursuiter" as well as a plushie. "In the house usually," he said. "It's not something that's wise to do alone. Run into a gang of teenagers and you're liable to get beat up or set on fire. I've talked to so many people and sometimes you'll see news stories where they've beat up mascots and stuff, and the media seems to make that popular."

He grew up in the country. The closest store was five miles away. He liked to stay indoors watching cartoons or playing board games or reading science fiction and books about animals.

In high school, he said, he experimented with bestiality. "Usually German shepherds, Labrador retrievers, size-compatible things," he said. "It all started because

the dog started it. The dog would come and start trying to hump your leg and I'd be like, Wow, that's interesting. I was at that age where I was learning to see what made things work. I don't do it anymore."

At a nearby university, he majored in speech communication and drank himself "into stupidity" one semester. After college he lived with a woman in a wheelchair, and cared for her for nine years. At one point he got engaged to another woman, but broke it off. He preferred plush.

"I'm not like a person who hasn't had a human mate before," he said. "I actually have been with four different women in my life, and I can honestly say that none of them have come close to the tactile physical pleasure. Women don't feel like that. Human skin might feel good, it's smooth and everything, but it just doesn't feel the same way."

For a long time he thought he was the only plushophile on the planet. "Plushie" didn't exist in my vocabulary," he said. Then, in 1994, he discovered a Web site that captured his interest. There were some

frequently asked questions such as "Why do you have sex with stuffed animals?," "Do you actually go on your stuffed animals?," and "How do you clean your stuffed animals?"

"I'm reading this and

I was like, Oh my gosh, somebody else does this? I almost fell over."

He started his own Web site. There, you can see sexually explicit photos from furry conventions, doctored cartoon stills, and his short stories.

Fox Wolfie Galen said he does have intercourse with his stuffed animals but more often rubs himself externally on the fur. He doesn't believe the stuffed raccoon is alive... but he can dream, can't he?

"I'll look at his eyes, and I'm thinking, Oh, it's alive," he said. "There are people who do kinkier things than me with their plush. Some people put openings in all their plush. Some people even pray to their plushies. There's mutilators. That disturbs me, because they're turned on by destruction of something, and I see no reason for it."

It was getting late. He was still lying on his mattress, now discussing "crush" videos—a recently outlawed form of pornography made for men who like

#### HE'S AN ANIMAL

Marshall Woods (Ostrich), in raccoon costume, isn't comfortable with the human form. Photographed at his home in Fairlawn, Ohio, on January 10, 2001.



to watch animals being crushed by women.

"I consider that immoral," he said. "You heard of Jeffrey Dahmer? He started out doing that stuff. If you could do it to an animal, you could do it to a human."

He said he wished it were possible to be part man and part beast. But if such a thing were to come about—the advent of hybrid species—he wouldn't want to be alone.

"If I was the only one, they'd find out. They'd put me in a lab and dissect me. You know, it wouldn't be fun. What I'd want is a whole new world where you had, say, Canada was all raccoons, and the United States was all foxes, and Mexico's all badgers, and every country is a different race of animals, and they're all friendly with each other and there's no war."

In an ideal world, Fox Wolfie Galen would be a ferret, a rat, a skunk, a fox, or a raccoon. "There's something about raccoons. They actually have fingers, opposable thumbs and everything. I could imagine a raccoon being half a human and walking on two feet. It would kind of be like a living Disney cartoon."

But the government would screw it up, he figured.

"They'd probably make some hybrid human resistant to attack, something reptilian, scaly, and hard to kill. So you're probably going to have a whole bunch of alligator men or turtle-shelled men running around. They'll be intelligent, but they'll be slaves to whatever the government wants them to do, like go and kill people. I would only volunteer if we were to be considered at least remotely equal. I'd be a raccoon, most likely."

I called a taxi and went to the bathroom. When I came back to his lair, Fox Wolfie Galen was in a full-body tiger suit. He was gesturing to a rip in the costume, between his legs.

The taxi arrived.

Outside his house, Fox Wolfie Galen was waving good-bye to me—with a fox hand puppet.

#### CALLING DR. PERVERY

Sex researcher Katharine Gates has written about Fox Wolfie Galen, among others, in her book *Deviant Desires: Incredibly Strange Sex* (Juno Books, 2000). Now she was sitting down in the living room of her Brooklyn Heights apartment, where she lives with her husband. In the book, Fox Wolfie Galen called sex with stuffed animals a "sacramental act."

#### ARE YOU FURRY? A QUICK QUIZ

Are you very interested in this W.N.B.A. mascot, right, the New York Liberty's Maddie? Then you may be furry, as are "Wolfus," below, shown here at the Midwest FurFest, and the two "fursuiters," bottom, at the bowling party in St. Louis.



"Everything is fetish fodder. I can't think of anything in this world that couldn't be sexualized."

"How can you not laugh?" Gates said. "I mean, because it's absurd. Even ordinary sex is pretty damn absurd when you think about it. It's pretty silly, it's pretty awkward, and so I don't think it would be fair to point the finger entirely at these people—but, no, it's funny. And the people who do it for the most part have a great sense of humor about it. Galen is a good example."

Gates, who is 36 years old, said some plushophiles may not be "relationship-suitable": "In some cases—and this might be cruel to say—but we may be wired for the zeta male, the lowest male, to turn to other pursuits besides the pursuit of another human being. These people need a way of having intimacy and pleasure, too."

Gates's book features chapters on fat admiration, pony play, balloon fetishists, and, on the dark side, the crush freaks. Her Web site, stevendesires.com, has a forum in which different fetishists can talk to one another—the women who masturbate with bathtub toy boats can talk to the plushies, and so on.

She opened a cabinet and found a video called *Smush*, made by Jeff Vilencia, whose work is admired by crush enthusiasts.

"Jeff's quite the artiste," Gates said. "This film has actually played at a bunch

of film festivals all over the world."

We watched. A pudgy woman appeared and then... worm after worm after worm began exploding under her footsteps. "I love to step on worms with my big feet," said the woman, actress Erika Elizondo. "I love to smush worms. I love to tease them when I press them down softly at first. I am going to step on you and smush you!"

Clearly, we were at the other end of the sexual spectrum from the gentle plushophiles. The men who enjoy these videos, Gates said, like to imagine themselves at the mercy of all-powerful goddesses.

"Mmmm, I am stepping on youuuu!" the actress was saying.

Splat.

"They are no match for my big, beautiful feet!"

Squishhhhhh.

"That was the come shot," Gates said. "You want to see it again?"

There are probably no more than 1,500 crushers out there, Gates believes. They got some exposure last year through the ABC legal drama *The Practice*, on which Henry Winkler had a recurring role as a dentist who liked to watch women in the act of stomping on bugs. In 1999 there was a crushing death in Florida: a 28-year-old Okeechobee man named Bryan Loudermilk, deeply into the fetish, managed to have his pickup truck rolled over his body. He was killed.

Hollywood people such as Mickey Roo-

ney and Loretta Swit have made their opposition to crush videos a cause célèbre. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is not a fan. Congress voted against the sale of crush videos in 1999, and President Clinton quickly signed the ban into law. Not even the American Civil Liberties Union came to the aid of Mr. Vilencia and his ilk.

"It's gross, it's disturbing, it's sort of upsetting," Gates said—but she calls the government ban "stupid." It should definitely be illegal to stomp on a cat or a dog or a monkey, she believes, but bugs and worms? "I'm not saying they're disposable, but to get up into arms about that is really a distortion," Gates said. "I have shot animals in the past as a hunter, so I can't take the sort of moral high ground. No, I don't jerk off while I'm shooting a groundhog, no, I don't derive a sense of pleasure from this torture, but in the end I don't think that the laws against these videos are appropriate."

Gates admitted she was a pervert, but only in the fantasy realm. "Little Red Riding Hood," for example: "I think that's incredibly sexy, and when I was a kid I used to masturbate to the fantasy of being eaten by a pack of wolves. And I still find that sort of an exciting image. I can call that into my head when necessary."

She likes furry stuff, too. "Take my word for it, I've got a really dirty mind, and my dirty mind has gone to places that are beyond the pale. I think amputee stuff is hot, I think furry stuff is hot, I think slash fiction's hot, but as far as acting stuff

out... I mean, I've ridden pony boys and pony girls"—people dressed up with bridles and saddles, etc.—"and I found that very exciting, but I'm uninclined to ask my husband to put on a saddle. And we find the ordinary, old vanilla stuff completely satisfying and very, very perfect."

She considers the plushophiles to have a lot in common with practitioners of vanilla sex. "They may think about sex as often as we do, which is often, and they may think of stuffed animals instead of Pamela Anderson, but they're very ordinary people," she said. "Sex is not just what happens to the genitals. Everything is fetish fodder. I can't think of anything in this world that couldn't be sexualized by somebody."

A BADGER SPEAKS

Back at the convention, it's rehearsal in the Sheraton's Chicago Room. Onstage, a chicken puppet is "bock-bock-bock"-ing along to "Born to Be Wild." An engineer from Long Island named Lincoln (nametag: J. BADGER) sits down at a table. "You have to understand something," he says. "I was a very shy person. And a couple years ago, something broke, and I'm not shy anymore. Then I became a manager at work and so it improved my whole life!"

I ask J. Badger if there was wild sex going on at the con. "I don't want to know about it. And I think it's up to the con committee to keep that out of public view. The public should not even be aware."

He has heard about "things" that went on at furry conventions in California, with its large population of wild San Francisco-based furrries and its nexus of furrydom near Disneyland. J. Badger prefers a family-oriented furry experience. "If you don't make it for the kids, you will not have a next generation," he says.

A few rows ahead of J. Badger, a guy is skritch-ing a pal's neck with his bear claw. "You have to understand, that is just human affection; that has nothing to do with furry," J. Badger says.

Besides gardening and volunteer work, these days J. Badger attends about 10 furry and science-fiction conventions a year. "I also do other conventions that I will not talk about," he says. "There are other conventions that are for adults only and I go to those."

Onstage now, three bears are playing air fiddle and plastic fish for guitars while a hillbilly song plays. It has a catchy chorus:

*Wearing my mask, yay!  
Looking like a bear, yay!  
Wearing my mask and looking like a bear  
I'm a rac-cooooo!*

THE FURRY SHOW

Now it's showtime. The Chicago Room is full of furrries.

"Y'all ready for a good three, four hours of entertainment?" says Tyger Cowboy, the master of ceremonies.

Babs Bunny is the first act. Basically, it

HOW TO TALK FURRY

Feeling "yiffy"? Before you join up with the "furry fandom," take a moment to study its argot

**everyfur** *n.* A term for all those with a pronounced interest in animals or animal characters.

**fur pile** *n.* Three or more people in animal costumes lying on top of one another while engaged in scratching, cuddling, and other physical expressions of affection or sexual desire.

**furottica** *n.* A form of pornography featuring fantastic animals, animal characters, or human-animal hybrids.

**furry** *n.* A person who identifies very strongly with animals or animal characters (such as Mickey Mouse or Bugs Bunny). <"I realized I was a furry when I got my first Tickle Me Elmo.">

**furry fandom** *n.* The loosely organized group of people who enjoy dressing up as, or fantasizing about, animals or animal

characters. Also, the fandom.

**fursuiter** *n.* A person who dresses up in full-body animal costumes for fun or sexual excitement.

**furvert** *n.* A person with strong sexual feelings for animal characters or for people who dress up as animals. <"All these furverts are ruining the fandom.">

**mundanes** *pl. n.* People who do not have strong feelings for, or a fantasy life involving, animals or animal characters. <"The mundanes just don't understand.">

**plush** *n.* A stuffed animal. <"I just paid \$20 for some nice bear plush.">

**plushie** *n.* 1. A plushophile. 2. A stuffed animal.

**plushophile** *n.* 1. A person who is

fond of stuffed animals. 2. A person who is sexually intimate with stuffed animals. <"Those plushophiles are giving this furry convention a bad name.">

**skritch** *v.* To use the fingernails or claws of an animal costume to dig or scrape the body or animal costume of another person. <"To scratch is human, to skritch divine.">

**species dysphoria** *n.* A term denoting deep unhappiness with the human form and an intense longing for transformation, possibly through bioengineering, into animals or human-animal hybrids.

**spooage** *n.* Semen. —*v.* To ejaculate. <"He spooaged on his Barney."> —**spooagey**, *adj.*

**theriomorph** *n.* A person who shifts from human to animal

form, either mentally or through wearing animal costumes.

**toonophile** *n.* A person usually fond of animal cartoon characters.

**totem** *n.* An animal or animal character that a person especially identifies with or longs to be. <"My totem used to be a fox, now it's a wolf.">

**yiff** *n.* 1. Sexual activity between people who have a strong interest in animals or animal characters. 2. The noise made by a fox. —*v.* To engage in furry sex.

**yiffy** *adj.* 1. Sexually aroused or horny, esp. when this feeling is brought on by contemplation of, or proximity to, animal characters or other people who imagine themselves as animals or animal characters. <"The sight of that fur pile got me yiffy."> 2. Erotic. <"Her fox drawings are quite yiffy.">



is someone in a bunny outfit hopping around while singing Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" in a high-pitched voice.

A group of furies in cat regalia do a few songs from *Grease*. A little boy in the front—a son of the convention chairman, Robert King—has his fingers in his ears.

The Squirrelles sing "You Can't Hurry Love." An Elmo muppet does "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." Ten seconds into the number, a wolf creeps up and rips Elmo apart. The place goes nuts.

#### THE FURRIES VS. THE U.S. ARMY

The next morning, at 11:50, the lobby is full of furies and ... soldiers in camouflage gear. The 85th Army Reserve Division, headquartered in Arlington Heights, happens to be having a convention here, too—a commanders' conference, during which they're to go over what took place in 2000, and set goals for 2001. The furies in the lobby look baffled. A few military men are smirking. One square-jawed hard-ass stares at a rabbit-eared furry for a moment and, finally, says, "Yeah!" It's sarcastic. He sounds like a high-school jock sizing up the class freak.

"Unusual," says a Sergeant Major Jennings.

"I think it's comical, myself," says one of his subordinates.

"God bless America," says the other.

Ostrich comes tearing past them, saying, "The fursuit parade's about to start!" Soon, about 40 people in mascotwear—the fursuiters—are marching quietly through the lobby. Flashbulbs pop. Furies in civilian clothes reach out to touch the fursuiters as they go by.

A big puppy.

A wolf with a huge mallet.

A bear eating a raccoon.

"Show us some tail, baby!" says a furry bystander.

"I didn't know rabbits were in season," says an army guy.

A Lieutenant Colonel Flowers is taking it all in, good-naturedly. "A little unusual," he says. "Of course, they'd probably say the same thing about us."

A half-kangaroo walks by.

"Pretty good, pretty good, pretty imaginative," the lieutenant colonel says. "What are they, an advocacy group?"

Another lieutenant colonel, named Farrar, is unfazed. "Well, when you see people wearing dog collars and chains ... you know, I went to college," he says. "It doesn't take much of an imagination to figure out what these people might be doing behind closed doors. The clean aspect, O.K.,

these guys are cartoon figures, I can see that. But if you go a little left of that, then suddenly you're adding a new dimension to it. It doesn't make me very comfortable. Certainly nothing I agree with. Tantric sex comes to mind. People that have problems." He thinks some more. "But we're all getting along!" Without hesitation, he poses for a picture with a brown bear.

Another man in uniform, Lieutenant Patrick George, is chatting with a young raccoon. "This is something nice to bring kids to," Lieutenant George says.

The raccoon suggests there might be no more war if everyone adopted the furry attitude toward life. Lieutenant George smiles. "There will always be wars as long as there's people on this earth," he says.

"Not if they all pretend to be animals," the raccoon says, then rejoins the parade.

Lieutenant George has been watching some of the furies. "Touchy-feely, with each other," he says. "I noticed that last night. They're scratching each other and laying in the lap. You don't have to be too smart to figure it out. It's easy." He stops his friendly chuckling, however, when he learns he has been chatting with a guy who might really want to be a raccoon.

"That's different," he says. "But different people have different beliefs in this world. We can't be the same, we're all individuals. So to each his own."

#### A SKRITCH SESSION

The Eagles are playing loud inside Trophies, the hotel sports bar. Football is on the big screens. The crack of pool balls can be heard over "Hotel California." Tyger Cowboy is holding court at a table and working on a Reuben and an iced tea. His real name is Christopher Roth, and he's a 36-year-old travel agent who has booked flights for many of the furies present. "I am a tiger in a human body, yes. I am very feline. I am very neurotic about having my paws sticky. They have to be washed. Yechh!"

Roth lives in St. Louis, with his mate, Jack Below (Spiked Punch), the wolf trapped in a human body. They're both well-known furies, and they run ARF, a support group of furies, who do things together such as visit hospitals and volunteer at the zoo. Tyger Cowboy, who has been in the fandom for three years, also runs the UniFURSAL mailing list in St. Louis. He was picked on growing up. He lived near a nature preserve and was very "animal-oriented." Later, he says, he played semi-pro hockey and CONTINUED ON PAGE 193

"I am a tiger in a human body. I am very neurotic about having my paws sticky. They have to be washed."



#### PLUSH NATION

"Babs Bunny," top, sings "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" at the Midwest FurFest. Above, puppeteer Steve Plunkett with his puppet Scarlett at the FurFest. Right, furry leader Christopher Roth (Tyger Cowboy) and Jeremy Normand (Simba T. Lion) at the bowling party.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 188 rode broncos in the Texas Gay Rodeo. But now he lives for furrydom.

The guy next to him is wearing a dog collar and a black T-shirt that reads, BAD DOG, NO BISCUIT. His name is Robert Norton. He is 23 years old and works at Wal-Mart while attending technical school in Wisconsin, but he's really a... "I'm a Rottweiler," he says. "A lot of my friends used to say I acted like a canine, especially Rottweilers. I've had Rottweiler breeders tell me I remind them of one of their dogs. Certain expressions I do. I chew on furniture. Little mannerisms. If somebody says the wrong thing and it upsets me, I've been known to spontaneously start growling at them without realizing it. I kind of got myself in trouble at work doing that. I growled at a customer."

It's time for the charity auction, and Tyger Cowboy has to get into his seven-foot tiger-kitten costume; he is offering a five-minute skit to benefit Tiger Haven in Tennessee, an animal sanctuary damaged by a fire in which four tiger cubs died.

Up in Room 822 ("Furry Central," they were calling it), Tyger Cowboy strips down to his tight white briefs. Norton, morphing into his Rottweiler persona, gets on the floor and begins gnawing on a chair. Behind him is another man who fancies himself a Rottweiler; he gives Norton a vigorous back rub. Rottweiler number one starts exhaling loudly. "He's drooling again," Tyger Cowboy says. "Felines rule, dogs drool."

He puts on his tiger head and then, with his right paw, beckons me closer to him. He put his claws on my head... and gives me my first skritch.

"You have a cat?" he says.

"Yes."

"Just think. You've been petted by a cat!"

### THE COFFEE MUG OF DREAMS

The bespectacled auctioneer is Dr. Samuel Conway (furry name: Uncle Kage). He's a biomedical researcher and a furry celebrity of sorts. He is auctioning off the mallet belonging to Tyger Cowboy's mate, Spiked Punch.

"Spiked will give you a nice big hug if you buy his mallet," Uncle Kage says theatrically. It sells for a hundred dollars.

Soon, Uncle Kage is showcasing a coffee mug with Native American art depicting the transformation of a young brave into a wolf. "Don't we all wish—isn't this all of our dreams? I have \$30 for the mug that depicts our dream, the transformation of a man into a wolf—let's hope he stays that way, because it's unthinkable to go back... Sold for \$30!"

### THE CAT AND THE FOX

In the vendors' room, furies are buying comic books, cartooning kits, swords, axes, and tomahawks. A sign on a table reads, NO CHILDREN. Behind it is a wild-haired, busty woman named Bushy Cat. She is an artist whose drawings show erotic furry fantasies, with fantastic anatomies drawn in glorious detail.

Back in 1997, Bushy Cat was going nowhere. Her animal art wasn't selling at craft fairs. "I was ready to work at McDonald's," she says. "I wasn't clearing any money at all, and no recognition."

Then she went to Anthrocon in Philadelphia, where she found out what sells. With binders full of X-rated drawings, she went to conventions in Tennessee, California, Washington—all over—and put in 30,000 miles on Greyhound.

Jurann Foxtail, a 24-year-old dot-com

"Obviously, I'd like to rework my body... I'd want a tail, I'd want some fur and some cute cartoon eyes."

worker, stops by. He is a "huge collector" of "yiffy" art. He says his life changed after he saw Disney's *The Fox and the Hound* at age four. "For weeks I begged my parents to be the fox," he says. "I wanted to be the fox. 'I want to be the fox, Mommy, I want to be the fox!' 'You can't be the fox, you're a person!' 'Oh, that's no fun.'"

### FOX TALK

It's Saturday evening, and a discussion group, "Foxes in the Fandom," is in progress. It is moderated by a pudgy, bearded man who goes by the name Craig Fox. About two dozen males are present; half look like foxes. Like Randy Foxx and Phallon. And Rowdy Fox, smiling naughtily as his fox hand puppet nibbles on his free hand.

"Do you think movies and books portray foxes evil more, or good more?" Mr. Fox the moderator asks.

"If the main character was a mouse or a rabbit, then the fox would be the evil villain," says Denver, a longhaired guy in an ELTONJOHN.COM T-shirt. "It also depends if the main character is, for example, a lion. I've run into a couple where the fox is a bumbling sidekick. It depends on basically the line of the food chain with who's the star."

"Right," says Mr. Fox. "Um, another thing about foxes, in general, is that—how can I say this?—the fandom looks upon them as extremely yiffy. Why do you think that is?"

There is some giggling.

"If you want to go yiffy," Mr. Fox continues, "let's look at the rabbits! Whereas foxes actually mate for life, as a general rule."

Now it's time for tales of real-life fox encounters.

"Has anyone been around an actual fox?" the moderator asks, before telling of how he once went to a petting zoo, where red foxes sat on his head and licked his face.

Denver says he has had 12 encounters with foxes, all in the wild. "There is one fox that lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts, that apparently likes me, because he has been staring in my window *all night*."

Everyone laughs hard.

After everyone agrees that it would be wrong to have a fox as a pet, there is a pause.

"What would people like to see the image of the fox be in the new millennium?" Mr. Fox asks. "What would you like to see, foxwise?"

"I got a question," says a woman in the back. She is half bat, half cat. "What's everyone's passion for foxes?"

Because I don't know anything about it."

### THE GRIFFIN IN THE BAR

Matt Davis, a slender 30-year-old dude with black close-cropped hair, is in the hotel bar. His T-shirt reads, MY SEXUAL PREFERENCE IS NOT YOU. DAVIS drove up to the Midwest FurFest with a few other furs from Arkansas. He's a security guard and furry artist who fantasizes about being a griffin, which would make him half eagle, half lion.

"I'd be a security-guard griffin," he says. "I could fly and patrol the area." He would have a griffin mate who would look like him but "a little bit thinner-boned" and "adorable."

"I've had fantasies that I've spent a long hunt through the forest catching my prey and bringing home to my nest moose and deer, something like that. Something large. Carrying it home to my nest, where my mate is waiting for me, and after eating, we engage in ferocious sex and fall asleep cuddling together in the nest."

With him is a rotund fellow with long blond hair. He says he is the March Hare (real name: O. Holcomb). "Being human, first of all, we're not all that


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Deviant Desires author  
Katharine Gates, with her  
handgun. Photographed  
at her home in Brooklyn  
Heights, January 8, 2001.

cute," he says. "In fact, we're butt-ass ugly. Second of all, intelligence, while it is a wonderful thing, is not that wonderful. Having what we think is understanding and then realizing it's *not* is more painful than being hunted down and killed by your predator." Being furry, on the other hand, is a solution to life. "It gives me thunder," says the March Hare. "I can walk into any situation and go, 'I am the dude!' It's like having a switch, a psychological switch you can tap into and turn something on." It helps even when he's flipping burgers. "You have 30 orders up there," he says. "If I wasn't the hare, I wouldn't be fast enough to get those 30 orders out—and in under three minutes—and be the dude."

**THE FURRY-HATERS**

Later on in the bar, at two A.M., a dozen 30-ish patrons, part of a wedding party, are making noise. I hear the word "faggots."

"They're freaks," says a blonde who gives her name as Sylvia.

"No," says Johnny. "Star Trek people that have lost Star Trek. Now they run around with mouse costumes on. Very disturbing."

"A bunch of freaks running around!" Sylvia insists. "What is the purpose of the fur costume?"

"Pretty much guys that can't deal with society," Johnny says. "There's more to it than the costumes—they're blatant homosexuals."

"Bestiality!" Sylvia says.

"It's a shame, because there's a lot of people here who are getting the wrong impression of Chicago," says Johnny. "Like, a bunch of queers running around in a mouse costume. It, uh, it just makes me sick. Whitey!"

Whitey comes over. He is wearing a Phish shirt and a red University of Wisconsin cap. "Oh, these fucking clowns running around?" says Whitey, who is drinking whiskey, smoking a Dunhill, and swaying a bit. "I'd love to take my 10/22 and take a couple plink shots at them!"

Today is the opening day of deer season, and Whitey missed it because of his "dumb-ass" friend's wedding.

"Freaks," Sylvia says, cracking up.

Still, Whitey says he is not one to "fucking cast judgment on anybody. And if that's their bag of tricks, that's cool, but it's just kind of like, I just think I could come

up with a better hobby." For example? "Killing real animals," he says. "Snow-mobiling."

**FURRY COMEDOWN**

Sunday is the comedown day. At noon, furies are catching vans to the airport. Uncle Kage, the biomedical researcher and auctioneer, is in the lobby, still wearing his white lab coat. "They put little bears with sweaters on our cribs," he is saying. "We have cartoons where rabbits make us laugh. Shirts with little alligators on them. Anthropomorphic animals are part of our culture."

R. C. Rabbitsfoot comes over with his dead cat's ashes in a soup can and hands it to Uncle Kage, who looks puzzled.

About 40 furies are in the lobby now. They're hugging and skritchng one another good-bye.

"I'm going to cry when I leave here," says the March Hare. "Probably everyone's going to. That's my closing statement."

**TOWARD A FURRY FUTURE**

A month after the Midwest FurFest, I call Ostrich at his apartment in Ohio. He has been sitting around drawing a picture of a fox and playing with his cat. The FurFest was a success, he says. "I've heard nothing but good about it," Ostrich says. "I've heard two complaints about it, and they're both from known malcontents." He confirms there was a fair amount of wild sex at the convention: "Oh, yeah, I know there was for a fact. I probably would have been involved in it if I hadn't been so busy."

Was he still hopeful about the possibility of genetic engineering?

"Oh, yeah. That's pretty much the future of the world—there's no way around it. If I can live another 30 or 40 years, I might live several hundred more. Obviously, I'd like to rework my body to make my physical body conform more to my body image. I'd want a tail, I'd want some fur, and, basically, some cute cartoon eyes and stuff. The technology for that's coming. I don't think it's as far off as most people think." □