



Animal Histories HSTR 499R Capstone

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Your Humble Guide: Timothy J. LeCain, Assoc. Prof. of History

- **My Office:** Wilson 2-108
- **Office Hours:** Mondays, 1-3:00; Wednesdays, 10:00-12:00; or by appointment
- **E-mail:** tlecain@montana.edu
- **Seminar:** Mondays, 3:10-6:00 in Wilson 2-105

Course Description:

"A Horse! A Horse! My Kingdom for a Horse!"
—William Shakespeare, *Richard III*

Until very recently, almost all written history has been about humans. Just in the last few decades, however, a few historians have begun to move beyond their anthropocentric obsessions to explore how other animals have histories, most commonly in terms of their interactions with humans, but in some cases, histories largely apart from the human world. In this course, the goal is for you to develop an understanding of this new animals history, choose an animal or animals for your own research project, and write a serious 20-25 page paper on your subject. My definition of animals is as broad as possible, anything from insects to charismatic mega fauna like the bison of Yellowstone Park. Ways of thinking about the role of animals in history is equally broad, and might, just for example, include:

- Animals as sources of power and transportation
- Animals in zoos, national parks, nature preserves
- Animals in human popular culture, from wildlife films to Aesop's fables
- Animals as "pests" from mice and rats to locusts and spiders
- Animals as companions
- Animals as "wildlife"
- Animals in sports from hunting dogs to bear baiting to animal mascots
- Animals as taxidermy displays in museums or other venues
- Animals and the history of domestication
- Animal breeding and shows

This list is far from exhaustive. Indeed, once you begin thinking about this topic, I am certain you all will be able to add many other possible topics. In pursuing these topics, and in discussing the course readings, we will probe a number of key questions:

- Do animals have historical agency? In other words, can we think of them as historical actors akin to humans?

- Where precisely is the line between humans and non-humans, both in terms of historical thinking about this topic and our contemporary understanding?
- How might focusing on animal histories help humans escape their anthropocentric tendencies? Should we even try to escape anthropocentrism?
- Can we write histories of animals outside of their relationship to humans?
- Can some animals be best understood as technologies?
- What is the relationship between environmental history and animal history?

Readings: The first half of this course is reading intensive, and you will need to get through five serious academic books. All the books are available for purchase in the MSU Student Union Building bookstore. You may, of course, buy your books elsewhere, but be sure to match the ISBN number (usually found on the back of the book above the UPC code and also on the title page) exactly, as you need to have the proper editions. The books are:

- Ritvo, H. 1987. *The animal estate : the English and other creatures in the Victorian Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press. (ISBN-13: 978-0195304466)
- Russell, E. 2011. *Evolutionary history : uniting history and biology to understand life on Earth*, Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press. (ISBN-13: 978-0521745093)
- Mitman, G. *Reel Nature* (ISBN-13: 978-0295988863)
- Anderson, V. *Creatures of Empire* (978-0195304466)
- Coleman, J. T. 2004. *Vicious: wolves and men in America*, New Haven, Yale University Press. (ISBN-13: 978-0300119725)

Course Requirements

1) Reading and Seminar Participation (25% of grade): The first key requirement for the course is that you read the assigned books carefully and critically. The second is that you come to class and participate thoughtfully in our group discussion of the books. My goal in assigning each of these books is not primarily that you master all of the information they offer, but rather to expose you to the different ways in which the authors think about the role of animals in history—their theory, if you will. Of course, to understand the theory you must understand the information as well, so the two are linked. But in reading the material, focus first on how the author is treating her subject, second on the information conveyed. Note that each week, two or three of you (depending on the final class size) will be asked to lead the seminar on the book for that week. These seminar leaders will be expected to have an especially detailed grasp of the material, but all the students must read and master the basic arguments of the five books. You will also be expected to cite these books where appropriate in your final papers. Obviously, you must attend the seminar to earn participation credits, so if you miss any more than two of the class meetings without a legitimate excuse, you will not pass the course.

2) Final Paper Presentation (25%): Everyone will give a formal presentation discussing the results of their research and analysis during the final weeks of the class. You do not, and probably should not, need to have your final paper completed at this point, though your research and thinking

must be fairly far along. The goal is to present your ideas before a sympathetic but critical audience and receive some useful feedback that will help you to improve the final product. These should be highly polished and professional presentations that demonstrate considerable thought and effort. You will be graded both on the content of the presentation and the skill with which you present your ideas.

3) Final Paper (50%): The ultimate goal of the course is to help you make the key transition from being a consumer of history to being a producer of history by researching and writing an original historical paper. Researching and writing history is what defines a professional historian. To that end, you will need to:

1. **Formulate an interesting and original topic:** I will talk more about this later, but this is often the one of the most difficult yet critical aspects of doing history. The key is to think creatively in the context of the existing literature that you have read and always keep in mind your own passions and experiences. The best topic is one that you care about deeply and that engages critical intellectual questions in the field in new ways.
2. **Place your topic in the context of secondary literature and theory:** The first step in a historical research topic is to find out what others have written and thought about your topic, or at least about similar topics. There are few topics indeed about which absolutely nothing has ever been written, so you must begin by finding out what others have said and taking from among this what is useful to your own work.
3. **Conduct primary research:** One of the central intellectual tasks of the professional historians is the development of new knowledge about a subject, which generally is to be found in primary source material like archives, museums, on-line databases, historical journals, etc. Journalists, policy makers, the public, and others *read* history found in books and articles. Historians *write* the history that they read.
4. **Write an original research paper.** For many students, this is the most intimidating part of the process, but it can also be one of the most rewarding parts. So long as your new knowledge remains only in your head, it is of no use to anyone but you. History is also a written art, one of the few remaining disciplines that seamlessly combines both factual knowledge development and elegant narrative expression. Further, the writing skills you develop in these efforts will be of use to you in almost any career you may choose to follow.
5. **Present your work to peers.** In the profession, they call this process “peer review.” Any published work of history must be vetted by other experts in the field to be sure it meets basic standards of rigorous research, historiographical context, clear presentation, etc. While we do not have time in this class to have every student read every other student’s paper, we can and will do presentations that will serve the same end.

Grading

Your final grade will be determined by the following weighting:

- Seminar attendance and participation = 25%
- Research presentation = 25%
- Research paper = 50%

Please note that all the major course requirements (discussions, research presentation, and the research paper) must be fulfilled in order to receive a passing grade. All your grades during the course will be done numerically on a 100-point scale with the following letter grade equivalencies:

93-100: A
90-92.9: A-
88-89.9: B+
83-87.9: B
80-82.9: B-
etc.

CLASS SCHEDULE

*(Note that the readings are to be **completed** on the days indicated for discussion. I reserve the right to make changes in this schedule if necessary as the course proceeds.)*

PART ONE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Week One (January 14): Course introduction

- Begin reading Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*

Week Two (January 21): MLK Day so no class, but be reading for next week

- Continue Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*

Week Three (January 28)

- Discussion of Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*

Week Four (February 4)

- Discussion of Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*

Week Five (February 11)

- Discussion of Mitman, *Reel Nature*

Week Six (February 18): Presidents Day so no class, but be reading for next week

- Read Coleman, *Vicious*, and Russell, *Evolutionary History*

Week Seven (March 4)

- Discussion of Coleman, *Vicious*, **and** Russell, *Evolutionary History*

Week Eight 9 (March 11): Spring Break

- Determine your research paper topic and begin secondary and primary research

PART TWO: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS AND PEER FEEDBACK

Week Nine (March 18)

- Short student presentations on research topic

Week Ten: (March 25)

- Short student presentations on an important primary research source they have identified and will be using

Week Eleven (April 1): Tim is in Chile, no class

- Take this time to continue research and writing of paper

Week Twelve (April 8)

- Formal student presentations on their research project and tentative outcomes

Week Thirteen (April 15)

- Formal student presentations on their research project and tentative outcomes

Week Fourteen (April 22)

- Formal student presentations on their research project and tentative outcomes

Week Fifteen (April 29): Finals Week

- Final paper due in my email box (tlecain@montana.edu) **no later than midnight Wednesday, May 1st**