

UNDERCOVER ANIMALS

The Ultimate Hide-and-Seek Champions

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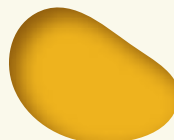
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*To Rahil,
who always sees what the
rest of us walk past*



Meet Nature's Masters of Disguise

Who doesn't want magical powers like the superheroes in Marvel Comics?

These include the ability to be invisible in broad daylight, to disguise yourself as someone or something else, to change your looks and hide in plain sight ... and perhaps even have some super weapons to fight the villains (or become a super villain!)

This book is about creatures who all have these powers and then some!

In the living world, it is all about the survival of the strongest, the best adapted, the cleverest, and our superhero animals have all these qualities in spades. Whether tiny like Assassin Bugs or apex hunters like the Royal Bengal Tigers, everyone could use a little help. Neither the prey nor the predator wants to be seen, and over thousands of years they have all evolved to become skilful shape-shifters. Ones that are best adapted for their lifestyles and occupy unique niches in the ecosystem.

What exactly do they do? How do they do it? Who are these creatures? Turn the pages to discover some of the most incredible shape-shifters that live amongst us – in fact a few may be hiding in your backyard!





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Shape-Shifting Fun



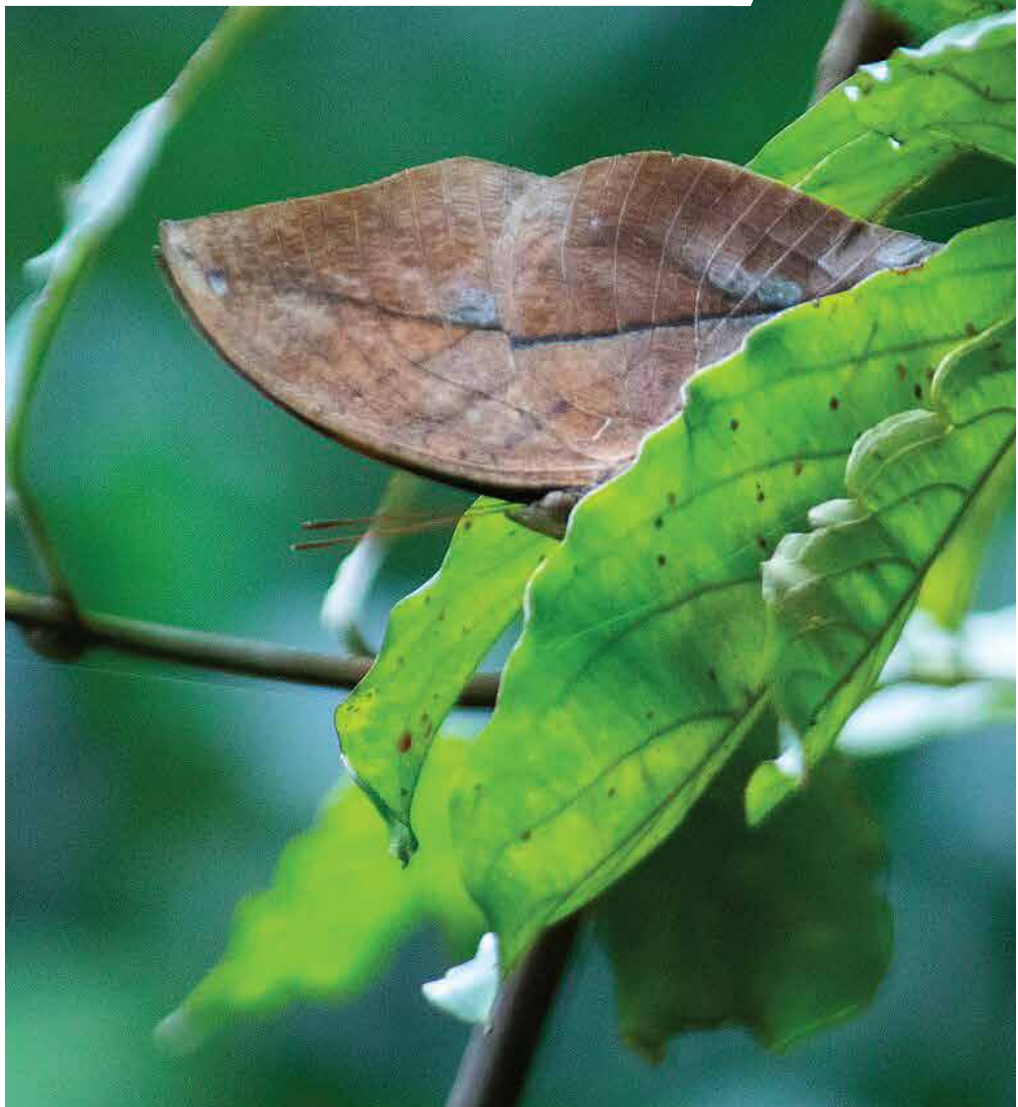
Orange Oakleaf Butterfly



Scientific name: *Kallima inachus*



Class: Insect





Best seen in:

The lower Himalayas, Kumaon, Garhwal and the north-east of India

The Invisible Insect

This little creature has a built-in invisibility cloak. If it wishes to be left alone, it simply folds itself and you could be staring directly at it but still not see it. If it wants to be on display, it will move and, in a flash, grab your attention, luring you from a distance, only to disappear again!

Who is this magical being with a special gift?

Meet the Orange Oakleaf Butterfly.

A large butterfly with a wingspan of up to 110 mm, it shows off its brilliant orange band and iridescent blue scales as it flutters and flies in the forest. You follow it as it descends and lands on an overripe fruit, and suddenly it vanishes! In place of bright orange and blue, there is now a ... dead leaf! The Oakleaf has simply closed its wings.

This butterfly has a dual personality, one brilliant and dazzling, and the other, well, dead! With folded wings, the Oakleaf takes camouflage to a different level. The shape of the closed wings matches a leaf; there is a dark line running through the middle, just like the midrib; thinner lines branching out resemble veins and there are spots that look like the fungal spots on decaying leaves.



What is the need for this elaborate deception?

While at rest, sleeping or feeding, butterflies sit with folded wings. This is a time of great danger as a predator could pounce on them, and so they do not want to be seen. This is why butterflies have duller undersides – it helps them merge with the background. But the prize for the best invisibility cloak surely goes to the Orange Oakleaf Butterfly.

Did you know?

The Orange Oakleaf Butterfly changes its shades according to the season! In the dry season, it perfectly matches the dry leaves on the forest floor, while during the rainy season, its wings turn darker to match the richer colours of the wet undergrowth.

Did you know?

The Orange Oakleaf Butterfly won the popular choice poll as the National Butterfly of India!

Indian Chameleon

 **Scientific name:** *Chamaeleo zeylanicus* ▲ **Class:** Reptile





Best seen in:

Dry forests and mangroves south of the Ganga river in India

The Colour-Changer

Think 'master of camouflage' and the first animal most likely to pop up into your mind is the chameleon. The very word is linked with disguises, changing appearances at will and hiding in plain sight, and indeed it is a reputation that is well deserved.

Indian Chameleons are truly fascinating reptiles. Don't confuse them with the lizards that live in your garden, also referred to as chameleons or *girgits* – those are actually Calotes lizards.

So what makes a chameleon a chameleon? Most people would say it is the colour-changing ability, the fact that it can match the shade of the object it is resting on and the belief that it can switch anytime, making its camouflage perfect. Right? Actually, no. Let's fact-check:

Can all chameleons change their skin colour? *Yes.*

Can they all change to any colour? Blue, green, purple? *No.*

Do they change colour only to camouflage? *No.*

Then why do they change colour?

Believe it or not, chameleons change their colours to show their feelings – just like a mood ring! A bright colour can tell a female chameleon 'I like you', or it can signal to an intruder chameleon – 'My space! Back off.'

They also change their skin tones to thermoregulate (maintain their body temperature) – remember they are reptiles, hence cold-blooded. They darken to warm up so that they have enough energy to go about the day's business of hunting insects, and switch to lighter tones to cool down when it gets too hot.

What about camouflage? The natural colours of the chameleon help it meld into the background. Species of chameleons that hang out in trees are usually shades of green, while those that live in the desert are brown. Add to this their slow, swaying movements – forward and back like a leaf in the wind – and they are practically invisible.



Did you know?

Each of the chameleon's eyes can move independently. When one looks up, the other can look down; one can look left, the other right; one can look back, the other front ... you try it! When the chameleon spots its lunch, it focuses both its eyes on it and unleashes a lethal weapon.

Did you know?

What's the Indian Chameleon's lethal weapon?

a) Venom b) Fangs c) Talons d) Tongue

You guessed it! The chameleon has a super sticky tongue that is 1.5 times the length of its body and it can shoot it out at super speeds to nab an unsuspecting insect!

Flatfish

 **Order:** Pleuronectiformes

 **Class:** Fish





Best seen in:

Coastal waters of India

The Shape-Shifter

Shape-shifting ... no one does it better than a flatfish!

Plaice, Sole, Turbot and Flounder are all types of flatfish found in all oceans worldwide. They get this generic all-purpose name because they are all flat and bottom-dwelling, and most interesting of all, they are asymmetric! In India, the Indian Halibut is one of the commonest types of flatfish.

Most animals are bilaterally symmetrical – you can divide them into two identical halves. And that's how flatfish begin their lives as well. They hatch out of eggs as tiny fry and swim upright looking like any regular fish, with eyes on either side of their heads.



So, when and how do they transform?

Within a few weeks, as they become adults (yes, growing up happens fast for some animals!), a transformation takes place. One eye starts travelling over the top of the skull to the other side to join its partner!

With both eyes on one side of its face, the fish changes its shape and position. It flattens and settles on the sea floor, with both eyes looking up. Given its location, it helps that the flatfish has a sideways mouth and a fin under it that helps to push it off the seabed when needed.

The flatfish also have skin that changes colour. The side that is hidden turns white, and the topside gets a mottled appearance, helping them blend with the sand on the sea floor. They burrow into the seabed, with only their eyes and mouths exposed. Having perfectly merged into their surroundings, they wait to ambush and lunge at any unwitting fish that wanders too close.



A young flatfish is shown resting on a sandy beach. The fish is flat and oval-shaped, with a mottled brown and tan pattern on its skin. Its head is on the left side of the frame, and its body extends towards the right. The sand is light-colored and granular. Two blue callout boxes with white text are overlaid on the image: one in the top left corner and another in the bottom right corner.

Did you know?

The young flatfish's eye wanders because its skull changes shape to move both eyes to one side of its face. Growing muscles and bones on one side push the eye to the other side!

Did you know?

With both eyes protruding on its topside, the flatfish has a wide field of view (360-degree vision) and can look in all directions.

Day Octopus

 **Scientific name:** *Octopus cyanea*  **Class:** Mollusc

