



know when their owners are coming home is open to anyone who has such a pet, especially if they can count on the co-operation of family, friends and, of course, the animal itself. For students from homes with such pets, such research could be a science project of an extraordinarily interesting kind.

Why was this not done years ago? Because of powerful taboos, usually operating unconsciously. To start with, there is a general prohibition against taking psychic or paranormal phenomena seriously. If they really happen, they throw into doubt the mechanistic world view.

This taboo is actively upheld by sceptics who tend to equate the mechanistic world view with reason itself, and are passionate in its defence. They are scientific fundamentalists. Their fear is that if claims of the paranormal are allowed to gain a foothold, civilisation will be swamped by superstition and religion.

Among respectable educated people, interest in the paranormal is treated like a kind of intellectual pornography. It flourishes in private and in the less reputable branches of the media; but it is more or less excluded from the educational system, from scientific and medical institutions and from serious public discourse.

Yet knowing when their people are coming home is only one of the ways in which pets show surprising power. There are several others, including apparent telepathic communication. In dramatic cases, some pets seem to know when their distant owner is in danger, reacting with signs of alarm and distress. Other cases are more mundane: some dogs seem to sense with uncanny accuracy when they are going to be taken for a walk. Some pets seem to know when their family is going to go on holiday, even before they start packing.

Such basic phenomena are still virtually uninvestigated. A scientific partnership with pets could lead to a great expansion of understanding, and a deeper appreciation of their powers of knowing.

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TOMORROW

The secret of the homing pigeon

home (unless we called). Sometimes I'd stay a half hour or so later at an activity. Sometimes my husband's hearings would last all day, sometimes an hour."

Ms Vida Bayliss lives on 40 acres of woodland in rural Oregon, three miles off the highway. Her dog Orion is a seven-year-old male, a boxer dobermann mix, who ranges far and wide in the surrounding country. Yet when Ms Bayliss comes home, even though her schedule is quite irregular, she finds she is nearly always there to greet her. I have heard many other stories of free-roaming dogs and cats that likewise seem to know when to be back home to greet their owners. Orion also distinguishes between family members and strangers before they arrive, barking to give warning of the approach of strangers but remaining silent with family members.

Probably there are millions of people around the world who keep animals that seem to know when they are coming home. If only a few dozen were interested enough to do some

basic pioneering research, it could soon be established whether or not this phenomenon goes beyond the conventional kinds of scientific explanation. If there is a seemingly paranormal effect, and if this is confirmed by a range of independent researchers, then further experiments could be done to investigate the phenomenon.

The idea of a simple, inexpensive experiment to test how pets know when their owners are coming home came to me in a conversation with a sceptical friend. I kept coming across stories about this intriguing phenomenon, and I asked him what he thought was going on. To my surprise he did not dispute the phenomenon itself; indeed, he told me that his own dog seemed to have uncanny powers. But he was quick to add that there was nothing really mysterious going on; pets were good at responding to subtle cues and often had surprisingly sharp senses.

No doubt many people have

had conversations like this. But rather than petering out inconclusively in the usual way, this particular one sparked off the idea for a simple experiment. If a pet responds well in advance of the arrival of its owner, the possibility that its behaviour is explicable simply in the terms of routine anticipation or sensory stimuli can be ruled out by coming home by an unusual means and at an unusual time. Moreover, to rule out the possibility that the pet is picking up the expectations of the person waiting at home, that person should not know when the absent member of the family is due to return.

At the next stage of the research the involvement of professionals would probably be helpful. And since sceptics would probably respond by thinking up ever-subtler alternative explanations, more sophisticated tests would need to be done to check any reasonable sceptical hypothesis. But a point might soon arrive when the sceptics' hypotheses become even more fantastic than the idea of a connection