

Supinah was an odd bird, one of those orangutans that wouldn't be an orangutan. Despite rehabilitation she worked so hard at mastering human ways that camp residents once almost voted her an honorary human. She put more effort into washing laundry and sawing logs than she did into orangutan skills. When she ventured into the forest, she broke the trees.

She was a prodigious imitator: she hammered nails, sawed wood, sharpened axe blades, chopped wood, dug with shovels, siphoned fuel, swept porches, painted buildings, pumped water, blew blowguns, fixed blowgun darts, lit cigarettes, (almost) lit a fire, washed dishes and laundry, bailed water from a dugout

by rocking it side to side, put on boots, tried on glasses, combed her hair, wiped her face with Kleenex, carried parasols against the sun, and applied insect repellent to herself.

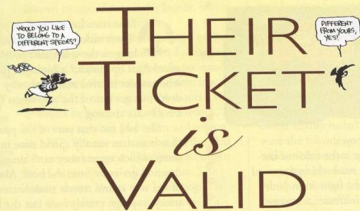
I met Supinah at Camp Leakey, an orangutan research center on the island of Borneo in Indonesia. I was at the camp to conduct research on imitation, an important area of study at the time for anyone interested in nonhuman intelligence.

Since the turn of the century science had accepted what nonscientific observers had long assumed, that many animals imitate. Parrots, for instance, parrot; and apes ape. In the late 1980s it was pointed out that there are many ways to copy actions and that some of those ways are mentally

simple, while others are more complex. Imitating an action one already knows, like yawning, is very simple. Even dogs and cats can do it. But learning new actions just by watching someone else perform them is not simple at all. This imitative learning is understood to require reasoning, and as such it has been considered an ability that humans alone possess. So the many reports of great ape imitation that had accumulated over the 20th century were discounted, assumed to be of the simple-minded rather than the complex kind. But what Supinah was doing

didn't seem simple at all. It seemed to me that she held a ticket that should allow her into the land of reason.

I suspected that the great apes had been underrated because most had been observed in captivity, where they were intellectually disadvantaged by privation. Camp Leakey's original purpose was research on wild orangutans, but it had been pressed into service to care for orangutans that had been confiscated from traders or villagers and to prepare them for release into the forest. So Camp Leakey was a crossover



THEIR TICKET *is* VALID



text and photographs
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