



Amazing Animal Teeth

by Laura Johnson

Animals
FROM
Head
TO
Toe
SERIES

Text Elements

Genre: Expository

Text Structures

Main: Categorical

Embedded: Description,
Cause/Effect

Text Features: table of contents,
headings, photos, illustrations,
captions, sidebars, diagrams,
labels, glossary

Amazing Animal Teeth

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Heinemann

361 Hanover Street

Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912

www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

Fountas & Pinnell Classroom

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ISBN-13: 978-0-325-06850-3

Design and Production by Dinardo Design LLC

Credits

Illustrations: p. 7 Rob Schuster

Photographs: cover, pp. 4–5 © Solvin Zankl/Alamy; pp. 1, 12–13 © Ardea/
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Printed in China

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Your Teeth

You probably don't notice your teeth except when you brush them. But if you had to describe them, what words would you use? Maybe you would use the words *small* and *white*. You might use *jaw*, *bite*, or *chew*.



Many animals have small white teeth too, and these animals also use their teeth to bite and chew. But some animals don't have teeth like your teeth. Their teeth are *not* small or white, and they *don't* grow on their jaws. These animals use their unusual-looking teeth to catch food, dig homes, and defend themselves.

Animal teeth come in many different colors. This river rat's teeth are bright orange.



Sharp Teeth

If you've ever bobbed for apples, you know it's not easy. That's because human teeth aren't made for grabbing food that's moving.



Dragon fish have teeth that *are* made for grabbing food that's alive and moving. Their long sharp teeth, called **fangs**, help them hunt in the deep sea. But dragon fish have a problem. They like to eat big fish that don't fit easily into their small mouths. Dragon fish also have weak jaws, so they can't snap their mouths quickly on their **prey**.

Dragon fish live in darkness near the bottom of the ocean. A string of bright lights grows under the dragon fish's chin and attracts prey.

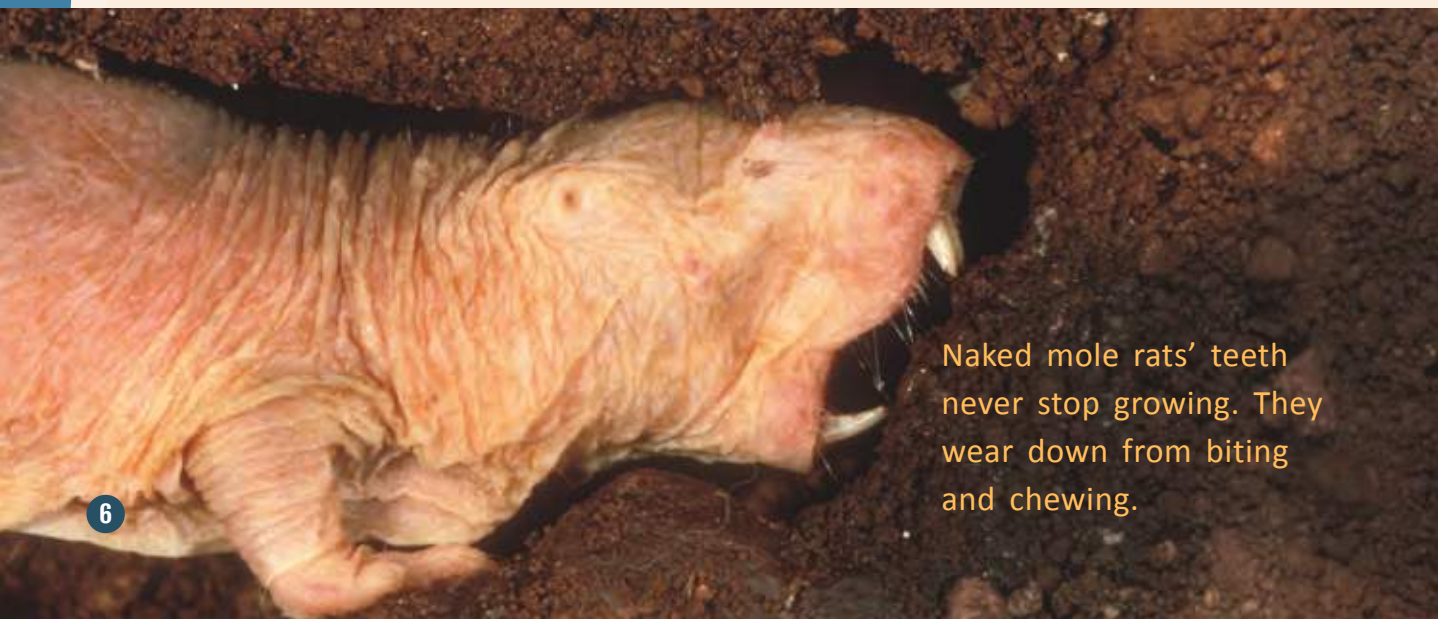
But dragon fish don't need to worry about their prey having time to escape. That's because dragon fish also have sharp teeth on their tongues. They use these teeth to hold their prey long enough for their jaws to shut on the big fish. Then it's time for dinner.



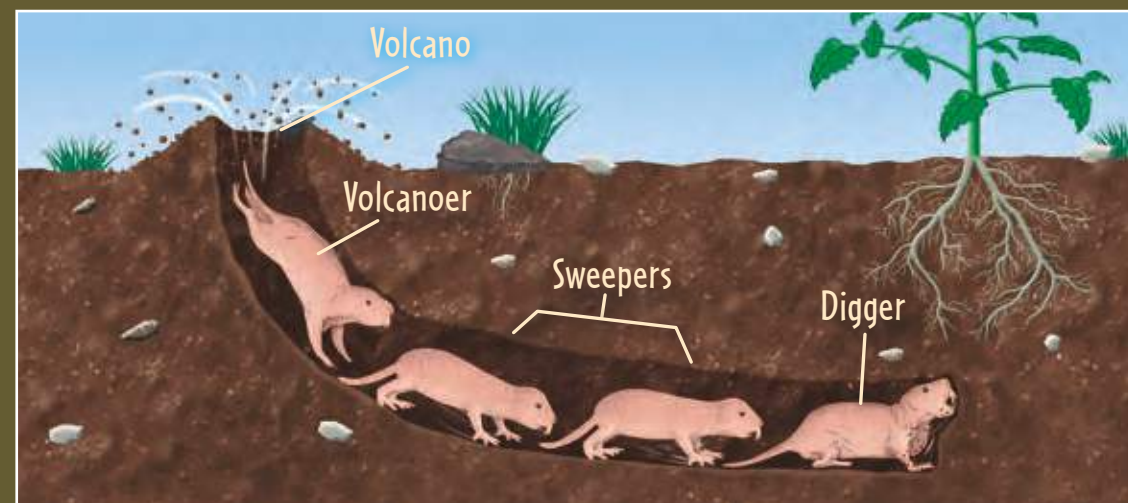
Moving Teeth

Naked mole rats are pink and don't have much hair, so they look like small sausages with legs. They have only four teeth, but those teeth really get a workout.

Naked mole rats live in underground tunnels called **burrows**. They use their sharp, curved teeth, called **incisors**, to build their burrows. A team of rats works together in a line. The mole rat at the front of the line uses its teeth to dig through dirt and roots. After it collects a pile of dirt, the rat walks backward in the tunnel. It uses its feet to sweep the dirt it dug up to the back of the burrow. Then another mole rat moves to the front of the line and digs some more.

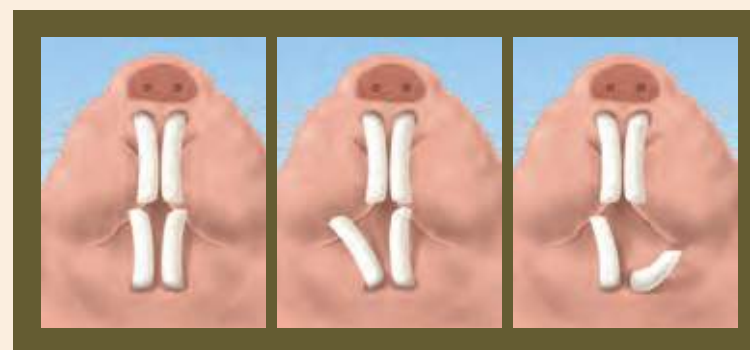


Naked mole rats' teeth never stop growing. They wear down from biting and chewing.



Team Effort

Naked mole rats work together to dig out their burrows. The last mole rat in line is called the "volcanoer." It kicks dirt out of the tunnel, making a small hill shaped like a volcano. The line of rats moves forward, so the rats rotate from one job to the next.



The naked mole rat's teeth aren't just for digging. Its bottom teeth can move apart and together like scissors or chopsticks. The mole rats use their teeth to pick up and carry things like food and their babies.

Did You Know?

Your lips close in front of your teeth. A naked mole rat's lips close behind its teeth. This keeps dirt from getting into its mouth as it digs.

Poison Teeth

A rattlesnake has two fangs that lie flat in its mouth—until it's about to bite its prey. Then its fangs swing forward fast. Like the dragon fish, a rattlesnake uses its fangs and smaller teeth to hold on to animals so they can't escape.

But that's not all their fangs do. When the snake is about to bite, its hollow fangs fill with a poison called **venom**. The venom flows through the snake's fangs and into the animal that was bitten. The poison kills the animal. Then the rattlesnake opens its jaws very wide and swallows the whole animal without chewing it.

Rattlesnakes' fangs curve backward toward the inside of the mouth. This keeps prey from escaping.



Did You Know?

After a rattlesnake bites an animal, the rattlesnake's fangs fold back into its mouth. This way, it can't bite itself.

Orange Teeth

You probably know that porcupines have sharp needles called quills. But you might not know this—porcupines have bright orange teeth.

Porcupines need strong teeth to eat tree bark, a food they eat in winter. The front side of a porcupine's front teeth has a bright orange covering. This hard covering keeps porcupines' teeth from wearing down.

Porcupines' front teeth never stop growing. If porcupines don't chew on enough bark and wood, their teeth get too long. That makes it hard for them to eat.

Only the front side of a porcupine's teeth is orange and hard. The other side is white and soft.

Teeth That Change Color

It would not be good if *your* teeth turned brown, but it's good for a rat. As rats grow, their teeth change color. Rats are born with white teeth. When they're about 25 days old, their teeth turn light yellow.

When they're about 38 days old, their teeth turn bright yellow. Adult rats (two to three years old) have orange teeth, and old rats often have brown teeth. So if you're a rat with brown teeth, you've lived a long life.



Thin Teeth

Vampire bats have that name for a reason. The only food they eat or drink is *blood*. Their teeth are so thin and sharp that the animals they bite don't even know they have been bitten.

Vampire bats lick up blood with their tongues and often drink for as long as 30 minutes. But they don't drink enough blood to harm their **victims**.

Did You Know?

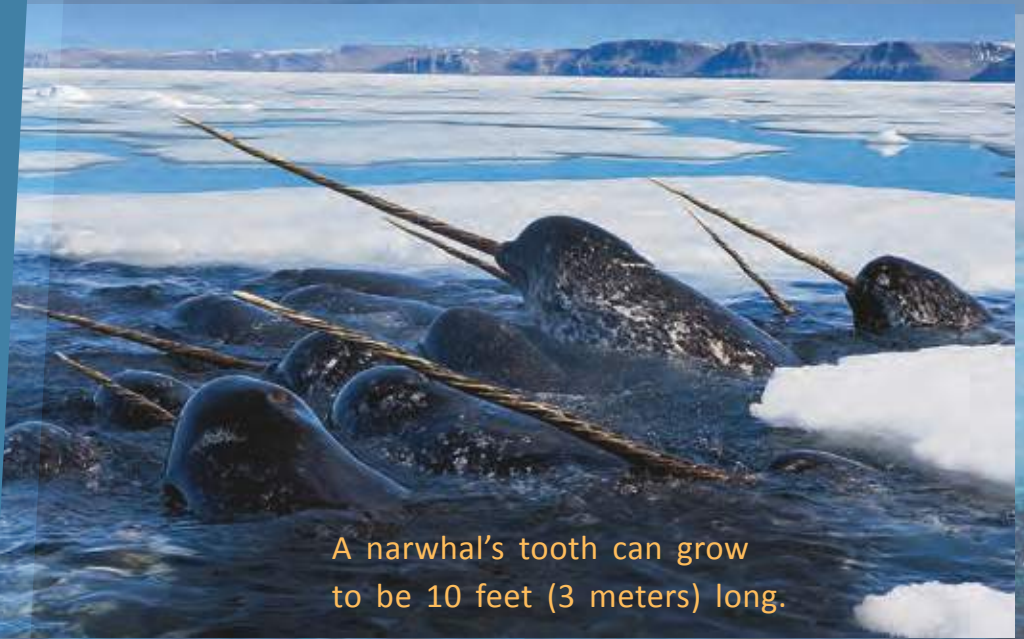
Vampire bats look scary, but they take care of each other. They share meals with their babies and other hungry bats that are not able to find food.

Vampire bats usually drink blood from sleeping cows, pigs, horses, and birds.

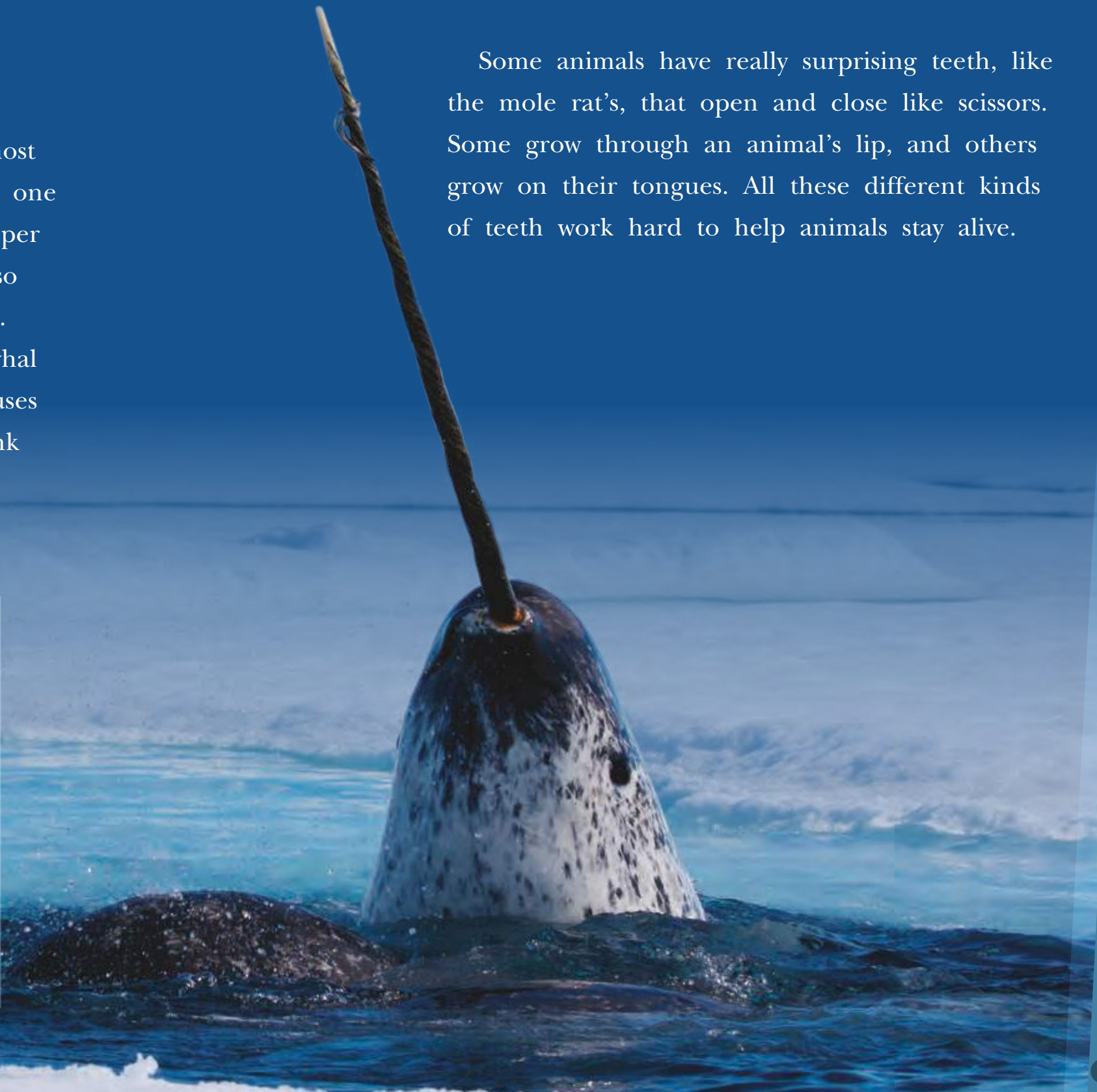
One Long Tooth

Narwhals, a kind of whale, may have the most remarkable teeth of all. A male narwhal has one long, straight tooth that grows *through* its upper lip. This long tooth looks like a horn. It also has one short tooth that grows inside its lip.

Scientists are not sure why the male narwhal has this long tooth. Some think the whale uses it to catch prey or to break ice. Others think this tooth lets the narwhal know if water is warm or cold.



A narwhal's tooth can grow to be 10 feet (3 meters) long.



Some animals have really surprising teeth, like the mole rat's, that open and close like scissors. Some grow through an animal's lip, and others grow on their tongues. All these different kinds of teeth work hard to help animals stay alive.

Glossary

burrow a hole in the ground made by an animal for shelter

fang a long sharp tooth

incisor a tooth that has a sharp edge for biting

naked mole rat a small animal with pink, wrinkly skin and very little hair

narwhal a whale with a long straight tooth that grows in a spiral shape

prey an animal hunted by another animal for food

vampire something that feeds on blood

venom poison produced by an animal

victim someone or something that has been injured or killed



Teeth Like Bricks

You grow two sets of teeth in your lifetime—your baby teeth and your adult teeth.

An elephant grows *six* sets of teeth in its lifetime, besides its two long tusks. New teeth grow in the back of an elephant's mouth. The teeth slowly move to the front as they are worn down from chewing. Worn teeth fall out and newer ones take their place.

The teeth in each new set are bigger than the last ones. So the teeth of old elephants look like long bricks. Just one tooth can weigh 6 pounds (almost 3 kilograms).



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The Surprising World of Animal Teeth

What if you had one tooth that
grew straight through your upper lip?
Some animals have amazing-looking
teeth, and their teeth look like that
for a reason.



Nonfiction Expository

781 Total Running Words

Level N



ISBN: 978-0-325-06850-3



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