

**The Pros and Cons of  
Dating Wildlife**

Jemima couldn't help but notice that people were staring at Andrew as they walked through the cinema foyer. This was to be expected. She'd never been out on a date with a seagull before, but on the phone Andrew had sounded positively charming.

"How did you get my number?" Jemima asked.

"Quite simple really," replied Andrew. "I merely followed you home from the beach one day. Then I was able to fly up to your window, the one nearest the kitchen. From there I could read your name on some bills on the fridge. Then I just looked you up in the phone book."

"It must have been difficult, turning the pages of the phone book and dialling".

Andrew splayed out his snow-white wings. He looked at their delicate, feathered tips and shrugged. "When there is motivation enough, a creature can do most anything."

Jemima blushed. He really was charming. "So what would you like to see?" she asked.

"Oh, I really don't mind."

"Well, I made the decision to come to the movies, so you should decide which movie."

"I really don't mind."

Jemima sighed. It was an all too familiar scenario. The awkward circlings of a new acquaintance. Commit to nothing, that's the battle cry of any first date. She really should have known better; seagulls spend half their lives sitting on fences.

"Let's see that one about Pearl Harbour, the one with the explosions," said Andrew suddenly.

"Oh. I... well... do you really..."

"Yes."

Jemima's lips crinkled in the corners and her stomach did a little somersault. Now there was a confidence to match the charm. She could name three... wait, *four* movies she'd rather see than some shoot-em-up piece of Americana, but Andrew had given her a committed response. This was a rarity. A firm declaration of any sort on a first date was worth at least two hours of filmic drivel.

"Two please," Jemima said to the young girl beyond the perspex. She reached into her bulky black handbag and removed her purse, but Andrew was too swift.

"Nonsense," he said as he flapped up onto the counter, the air twisting and his red webbed feet scraping for traction. "It would hardly be very gentlemanly of me to allow you to pay, or worse, go 'dutch' would it?"

His wet, black eyes shone against the fluorescent light, two glimmering oil drops in the midday snow. He didn't wait for an answer. A small brown drawstring bag fell onto the counter from up under Andrew's wing. It landed with a metallic shuffling.

The girl beyond the perspex watched with growing interest as Andrew used his bright orange beak to begin scratching out two tickets' worth of change. "Forgive me," he said to both the girl and Jemima. "It is rare to find anything but coins at the beach."

Jemima squeezed her hands together. It must have taken Andrew months to scavenge all those coins. And he was willing to spend them all on her. "Why thank you Andrew," she said. "That *is* very gentlemanly of you." It was hard to tell, but Jemima thought the feathers around Andrew's smooth white head were momentarily underscored with a hint of red.

Andrew fluffed his plumaged and craned his neck at an awkward angle as he picked up a final coin. Twenty cents, sea-salt rusted and caked with green. He dropped it onto the pile by the perspex. "Sixteen dollars," he said.

Using his wide wings he began herding the pile of coins towards the girl, but bumped straight into the perspex shield. He shook his head. "Forgive me. Just something we birds do." Once again, Jemima thought she saw a crimson hue spread beneath his silky white feathers. How endearing.

The pimply ticket-taker guarding the cinema door did nothing to conceal his surprise as Jemima motioned - empty handed - towards Andrew. For his part, Andrew patiently offered up the unchecked tickets crinkled in his sharp beak. But still the usher stared.

With a short, sharp flurry of white, Andrew landed on the shiny brass ball atop the shiny brass poll that was holding up the red rope. He bent his neck like a toilet s-bend and offered up the tickets once more. This time the usher took the bits of paper and tore them in two. Carefully, like a child handing a peanut to an elephant, he then held the stubs out for Andrew to take. Andrew snapped them back into his beak. "Imbecile," he muttered quietly through the bits of paper.

Jemima nodded vaguely. She was still thinking of the myriad of twists and assortment of angles that Andrew could work his neck into. It was her turn to blush.

"I must say," said Andrew, "I am ever so glad you said yes to this stepping out. Since that first day I saw you at the beach I have been quite mesmerised,

unable to think of much else save for your exquisite form and your beautiful eyes. I don't get to date many women with blue eyes."

Jemima's stomach did another somersault. A squishier one this time. She bent down and ran her fingers over Andrew's smooth white head. So smooth. Andrew arched his neck to her touch, his glimmering black eyes disappearing behind soft white lids. It was the first time they'd touched and neither could ignore the tingling.

The cinema was empty except for two young couples concealed in the shadows of the back row. Damn, thought Jemima. That's where she wanted to sit...

...so that Andrew could see of course! So he could perch on top of the seat and see the screen without bothering any people behind. And, well, so that...

A warm flush rinsed through Jemima's muscles. So soft. Andrew was so soft.

Instead they settled for the fourth row from the back. Jemima nestled down into the fabric of the seat, while Andrew stood on top of the backrest, one leg tucked up under his body.

Cinema conversation is difficult at the best of times, let alone on a first date. One must balance on the razor's edge. Not too chatty, not too reserved. Not too loud, not too hushed. All the while with an increasing number of eager

ears sitting closer and closer. And when do you stop conversing? At the first commercial? At the first preview? At the beginning of the movie itself? It is a quandary, one that Jemima knew all too well.

It was a tremendous relief then, to find Andrew most adept at the art of movie house pleasantries. He inched his beak close to her ear and in his distinguished voice, he told Jemima of the many times he had observed her at the beach. Not in a whisper, but not loud enough to make her self-conscious, he told her how she looked more beautiful every single day.

This was the sort of cinema chat Jemima could listen to for hours. She did not want Andrew to stop. Not for the commercials, not for the previews, not for the movie itself. She moved her head ever so slightly closer to Andrew. She could feel his narrow stream of breath on her ear and it made her limbs turn to mush.

"I'm hungry," she said suddenly and loudly.

She startled Andrew.

She startled herself.

"I'm sorry. I... I just need to... I'll be back."

Jemima sat on the toilet and inhaled deeply on her cigarette. She'd been on a lot of first dates, but never once had she sensed herself being swept off her feet. It was a particularly unnerving sensation, to say the least. She had never been with a man who made *her* worry about impressing *him*. But then, she'd never been on a date with a seagull before.

She took one last, lingering drag on her cigarette and flushed it down the toilet. She reapplied her lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror, pouting her lips this way and that. She was beautiful. She was beautiful! Andrew was very lucky to be with her.

Laden with a drink and some hot chips and a Mars Bar, Jemima returned to her date. The movie had started and Andrew was watching it with great interest. "Sorry for ducking out," she whispered as she deposited her haul onto the empty seat beside her, "I didn't have any lunch."

"Please, don't apologise. I'm just pleased to have such beauty back beside me."

Jemima surrendered to a smile in the darkness and melded back into the seat. What a gentleman. Her gentleman. And he thought she was beautiful. "Would you like a chip," she whispered, offering the greasy white bag up to Andrew.

Andrew's beak twitched aggressively and his eyes opened wide. So very wide! His body spasmed like he might be sick and then became rigid. His pupils disappeared. He lent back and opened his beak. "SQUAWWWWWK."

"Andrew! What... shush..."

"SQUAWWWWWWWK... SQUAWWWK... SQUAWWWWWWWWWWWWWK."

Andrew hopped about, his hungry eyes now glued to the chips in the bag, his wings flailing wildly.

"SQUAWWWWWK... SQUAWWWWWWWWWWWWWK.... SQUA...SQUA...  
SQUAWWWWWWWK..."

"Hey, shut up," came the first of the voices.

"Keep it down," came the second.

The third, fourth, fifth... the rest of the voices, they were all the same.

"Andrew, what are you doing?" Jemima pleaded, her face now burning red.

"Stop it. Please."

Andrew didn't stop, he just kept squawking desperately and arching his long neck towards the chips.

"Hey, that seagull just crapped on the seat!" a man shouted.

Oh dear. Jemima dumped the chips and ran. Pearl Harbour was indeed a terrible disaster.

Andrew found her some thirty minutes later, slumped on a bus stop seat. She hadn't been hard to find, but then he hadn't been looking for too long – not with a bag of hot chips in the offing.

"I don't know how I can possibly redeem myself," he said. "I am truly, truly sorry. Unfortunately every species has its shortcomings."

Jemima could tell he was sincere. And he truly was a gentleman. But still...

"I won't be seeing you again will I?" said Andrew, bits of fluffy potato still stuck to his orange beak.

Jemima shook her head.

Andrew looked at her for a beat, then nodded. His red webbed feet made the softest noises as he walked away along the cold grey cement.

Jemima sighed. She had come so close. She often came so close.

Still, the night wasn't a complete catastrophe. She had met a very handsome cobra at the bus stop who had asked if he could call her sometime. She'd said she would like that. After all, there was an orchestra from Bombay coming to town. She'd heard it had a particularly charming flute section.