

## Hybrids: Reading

Perhaps Nathaniel was the only person that thought the birth of a *liger* at the local zoo last spring was a bad thing. The newspapers were certainly giving it a lot of attention, and photos of the cub appeared on every front page. It was undoubtedly cute, and blissfully unaware of the fuss surrounding its birth. The zoo was definitely happy as many more people were paying to visit and see the creature for themselves; more people had been to the zoo in one week than in the previous three months. There was also a competition to name the animal – schools had encouraged their pupils to enter with suitable suggestions, and the local radio music station wanted someone to write a song to commemorate the event.



So, why was Nathaniel the only one put out at the time? And what exactly is a *liger*?

“I’m not against zoos really,” Nathaniel explained, “I can see that they have an important role in helping to preserve certain endangered species or to educate the public. I understand that for many people, zoos give them the opportunity of seeing wild and exotic animals for real, and this can be very exciting. Also most zoos are much healthier now for animals than in the past, and many try to provide a natural habitat and lots of space rather than confining them to small, unhygienic cages. However, I object to zoos breeding animals simply for public amusement. This zoo created a freak, something that would never have happened naturally, and just to make money.”

Nathaniel indicated the numerous photos on the front page of one newspaper. “The father is a lion called Daniel and he’s been in the zoo for the last four years or so. There used to be a lioness called Diana but she died earlier in the year. The zoo had been hoping to breed the two so her death was a blow to that project. However the zoo also has two tigresses: Nancy and Nathalie, but no male tiger. The zoo still wanted to have cubs (the public love baby animals) and decided to put the lion together with Nathalie, and it worked. You can see that the cub looks mostly like a little lion but it has faint stripes along its back. Now it’s a few months old and the zoo says that it already likes swimming – something that lions don’t do. Good zoos frown on the practice of mixing two species and don’t breed *ligers*, or *tigons* for that matter. There was a long tradition of lion/tiger breedings in India but this ended back in 1985 following a campaign by the Worldwide Fund for Nature. So I think it’s terrible that we are doing that here.”

Nathaniel pointed out that although hybrids are not common there are some that exist, the most common one being the mule which is the cross between a female horse and a male donkey. Mules however are sterile and so never have offspring themselves. Other examples include the *zorse*, a zebra/horse cross, and in fact one was born a few months ago in Germany. Other zebra crosses include the *zeedonk*, the *zony* and the *hebra*. There’s also the *cama*, a camel/llama cross, plus the *geep*, the *wolphin* and the *yakow!* Nathaniel doesn’t object to mules: “They are tough and healthy and are bred because they make strong animals that can carry a lot on their backs. Unfortunately, *ligers*, like *tigons*, often have health problems, this one is likely to fall ill and die young. There’s a park in the US the breeds *ligers* and only

three out of the last 24 cubs have been normal, but they still developed head shakes as they grew older. In fact this one is lucky to still be alive now, four *tigons* were born in China but none survived.”

The fuss over the new born has died down in the town since the first week, with other local news taking prominence, but there’s still enough interest to keep up the number of visitors to the zoo. The results of the naming competition have also been announced. So what did they decide to call it?

“Ah yes,” he said, suddenly looking embarrassed, “the winning name was \_\_\_\_\_, I suppose I should’ve seen that coming!”