

12 Family-Friendly Nature Documentaries

“March of the Penguins,” “Monkey Kingdom” and more illuminate the wonders of our planet from the safety of your couch.

By Scott Tobias, New York Times, April 1, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/arts/television/nature-documentaries-virus.html?smid=em-share>



Jane Goodall as seen in “Jane,” a documentary directed by Brett Morgen. Hugo van Lawick/National Geographic Creative

Children under quarantine are enjoying an excess of “screen time,” if only to give their overtaxed parents a break. But there’s no reason they can’t learn a few things in the process. These nature documentaries have educational value for the whole family, while also offering a chance to experience the great outdoors from inside your living room. Being self-isolated makes one happy to have a project — plus, it would feel good to write something that might put a happy spin on this situation we are in, even if for just a few moments.

‘The Living Desert’ (1953)

Disney’s True-Life Adventures series is a fascinating experiment in edu-tainment, an attempt to give nature footage the quality of a Disney animated film, with dramatic confrontations and silly little behavioral vignettes. There are more entertaining examples than “The Living Desert” — the 1957 gem “Perri,” about the plight of a female tree squirrel, is an ideal companion piece for “Bambi” — but it was the company’s first attempt at a feature-length documentary and established a formula that would be used decades down the line. Shot mostly in the Arizona desert, the film marvels over the animals that live in such an austere climate while also focusing on familiar scenarios, like two male tortoises tussling over a female or scorpions doing a mating dance to hoedown music.

Stream it on [Disney Plus](#). Rent it on [Apple TV](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).

‘Microcosmos’ (1996)

A typical nature doc is culled from hours and hours of patient observation by camera crews in the field, but insects usually play a supporting role at best, for the obvious reason that their behavior can’t be detailed by the naked eye. But through the special lenses created for the French documentary “Microcosmos,” ants and spiders and ladybugs have the presence of amazing prehistoric creatures or the foes in an old “Godzilla” movie. The film has all the action of other documentaries of its kind — the labors of survival, the dance between predator and prey, the sheer beauty of nature — but these underfoot nuisances have a revelatory sophistication when blown up in the frame. Scarab beetles, for example, might seem too gross to consider, but in close-up, who can’t relate to the Sisyphean labor of pushing balls of dung uphill?

Rent it on [Apple TV](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).



One of the feathered families in “March of the Penguins.” Jérôme Maison/Bonne Pioche

‘March of the Penguins’ (2005)

There’s a generally a ceiling on how well nature documentaries can do in theaters, but “March of the Penguins” was a blockbuster event — not merely by nature-doc standards, but by the nine-figure

standards of major-studio tentpoles. And for good reason: The plight of the beautiful emperor penguins of Antarctica was framed as the ultimate love story and an affirmation of family values. Trekking across the unforgiving polar tundra to breeding grounds far from the sea, the male and female penguins mate for life, and that's only the beginning of relationships in which the males protect the eggs, the females strike out to the seas for food and each family's precarious survival is at stake.

Rent it on [Apple TV](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).

'Life' (2009)

It was no easy feat for David Attenborough and the BBC Natural History Unit to follow up their 11-part behemoth "Planet Earth," which in 2006 was the most expensive series of its kind and the first to deploy high-definition cameras. But "Life" was equal to the task, with its enormous scope and timely main theme, which is about what living things must do to survive. There's a simple genius to the conceit: It allows the series to engage both with the survival tactics of individual species and the way plants and animals have had to make rapid adjustments to a landscape altered by climate change and other forms of human intervention. The 10 episodes are neatly divided in broad categories like "Mammals" and "Fish," but it's worth paying special attention to an hour on plants, which don't often get the spotlight.

Buy it on [Amazon](#).



Zebras on the move in "Great Migrations." Beverly Joubert/National Geographic

'Great Migrations' (2010)

The National Geographic Channel invested heavily in "Great Migrations" as a multi-night event with cross-promotion in the magazine and an accompanying book; it also came with a team of big-name narrators, led by a robust Alec Baldwin. The bulk of the episodes detail the ancient migratory patterns of various animals, from Christmas Island red crabs that chitter across roads and forests en route on mating grounds on the beach, to monarch butterflies fluttering across North America. These patterns are threatened by human disruption, which in many cases worsens already death-defying slogs. But

the series also benefits from an episode on how scientists monitor migration with high-tech trackers and a finale that's a completely narration-free "visual concert."

Stream it on [Disney Plus](#). Buy it on [Apple TV](#) and [Amazon](#).



A school of bigeye trevally in "Oceans." Disneynature

'Oceans' (2010)

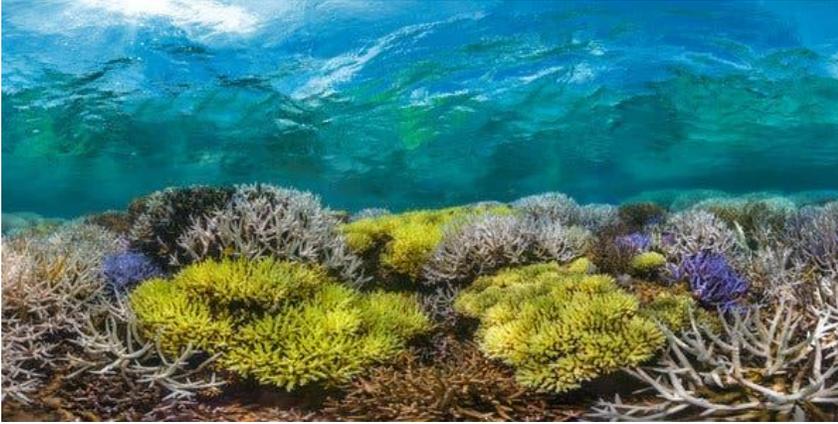
As producer and occasional director of films like "Microcosmos," "Winged Migration" and "Voyage of Time," Jacques Perrin has sought to render the majesty of nature and space as an almost alien beauty, with as much emphasis on art as science. With the full resources of Disneynature behind them, Perrin and co-director Jacques Cluzaud took to the seas for "Oceans"; in this film, they manage to strike an ideal balance between the compulsory elements of a Disney film and their own instincts for abstraction, like shooting a rocket launch as it reflects from the eyes of a marine iguana. Pierce Brosnan's narration dips into New Age bromides too often, but the film compensates with nonstop aquatic wonders. (Kids will want to keep their eyes closed, however, when baby sea turtles try to waddle for safety from diving gulls.)

Stream it on [Netflix](#). Rent it on [iTunes](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).

'Monkey Kingdom' (2015)

The main knock against Disneynature documentaries is their anthropomorphized treatment of wild animals, but monkeys are our evolutionary partners, so there's nothing wrong with enjoying a little old-fashioned monkey business. The backdrop of "Monkey Kingdom" is particularly striking, with a group of toque macaques swinging among the ruins of an ancient city in the Sri Lankan jungle. In this exotic playground, the film focuses on Maya, a new mother whose low status on a violently enforced caste system makes it difficult to provide for her infant. The film celebrates her resilience, but the tone is mostly light and silly, with Tina Fey narrating as if she knows distractible children are in the room.

Stream it on [Disney Plus](#). Rent it on [iTunes](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).



A scene from "Chasing Coral." Richard Vevers/Netflix

'Chasing Coral' (2017)

For most modern nature docs, ravishing images are the sugar that make the climate change medicine go down, but "Chasing Coral" is a case where beauty and environmental sickness are not so easily separated. Coral reefs are the treasures of the ocean, colorful and sophisticated natural structures that provide a sustainable home for tropical fish and other marine animals. Jeff Orlowski's alarming documentary grapples with the fast-spreading phenomenon of "coral bleaching," in which a two-degree rise in water temperature is wiping out reefs from around the world. There's still a visual magnificence to these haunted latticeworks—the film isn't just muckraking—but Orlowski is calling urgent attention to a crisis that's underwater, and thus easy to ignore.

Stream it on [Netflix](#).

'Jane' (2017)

Director Brett Morgen is a wizard at repurposing archival footage, assembling one of the craziest days in sports history, including O.J. Simpson's Bronco chase, into the 30 For 30 doc "June 17th, 1994," and various home movies and video clips into "Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck." For "Jane," Morgen gained access to 16-millimeter footage of a young Jane Goodall in the '60s, living among the chimpanzees in Gombe National Park in Tanzania. Goodall's infectious passion for these animals hasn't waned in the decades since, but her interview scenes are more supplement than main attraction. Cutting on rhythm to a Philip Glass score, Morgen gives her experiences a mesmeric charge.

Stream it on [Disney Plus](#) and [Hulu](#). Rent it on [Apple TV](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).



Hamadryas baboons in Ethiopia watching a storm break, as seen in “Hostile Planet.” National Geographic

Hostile Planet (2019)

“A snow leopard ... he hasn’t eaten in days... this may be his last chance.” So begins Bear Grylls’s narration for the National Geographic series “Hostile Planet,” which promises to skip all the harmony-of-the-natural-world wonderment and go straight to animals attacking each other. And to that end, the show delivers the goods: hippo vs. hippo, wolves vs. bison, flightless baby geese vs. craggy mountain cliffs. Add to that Grylls himself, whose image is more Indiana Jones adventurer than celebrity in a sound booth, and it risks coming off as thoughtless bluster. But the hostility of the title isn’t limited to the ballet between predator and prey, but the subtle way changes in the environment can make the difference between a meal and extinction.

Stream it on [Disney Plus](#). Buy it on [Apple TV](#), [Amazon](#), [Vudu](#), [Google Play](#) and [YouTube](#).



A scene from Netflix’s nine-part documentary series “Our Planet.” Jeff Wilson/Silverback Films, via Netflix

‘Our Planet’ (2019)

As climate change has continued to drive animal populations toward oblivion, nature documentaries as a genre have shifted their emphasis in kind — from gawping at the beauty and mysteries of nature to

fretting over calamitous disruptions of ecosystems. BBC audiences grew up with David Attenborough introducing them to exotic wonderments, but with “Our Planet,” an eight-episode Netflix series of staggering scale, the nonagenarian legend frequently adopts a more sober tone. The enthusiasm is still present, however, in a show that starts with a locale-jumping survey of the globe before settling into episodes set in jungles, deserts, tundra and seas, and one difficult hour on fresh water sources. Documentaries don’t get any more ambitious than this.

Stream it on [Netflix](#).

‘Night on Earth’ (2020)

What happens in the animal kingdom when the lights go down? It's not something many nature documentaries have had the opportunity to consider, given their dependence on natural light. But the special cameras deployed for “Night on Earth” are either heat-sensitive or able to capture images by moonlight. Over six episodes, narrated in an soothing whisper by Samira Wiley, “Night on Earth” is lighter on substance than it should be, but the predatory strategies of nocturnal animals are a rare treat to witness. An episode on “Sleepless Cities,” too, is a fascinating look at how animals have adapted to unnatural concrete jungles, poaching from their human neighbors under cover of darkness.

Stream it on [Netflix](#).