REGARDING DRAGONS

A DRAGONKEEPER'S GUIDE

BY HUAN TAO - DRAGONKEEPER

black dog

An imprint of Walker Books Australia

Regarding Dragons

There are few dragons in our world. I am fortunate to have known a number of them, in particular a fine green dragon named Long Kai Duan.

Since the destruction of the bamboo books containing all knowledge of these creatures, I do not think there is a person alive who knows more about dragons than I. It is my intention to write down everything I know, so that people understand these wonderful creatures, and humans and dragons can live in harmony.

Huan Tao
Dragonkeeper

ANATOMY

Some people think dragons are magical beasts, but they are flesh and blood like all creatures. Large and handsome, an adult dragon is a sight to behold. There is a huge creature that lives in Tianzhu called the elephant, mentioned in the teachings of the Buddha and said to be the largest creature in the world. I believe some dragons are larger still, in height and length, if not in bulk. The dragon's body is sinuous and quite slender for its size. A dragon's strength lies in its muscular legs. Even after a dragon grows wings, it may still choose to walk many *li* to keep its leg muscles strong.

It is a daunting experience when an unknown dragon lowers its head to examine you. With its breath on your face and its enormous teeth a handspan from your nose, it is enough to make even the bravest person tremble. Once it has proved itself to be friendly, though, it is wonderful to observe a dragon at close range. For those not fortunate enough to have seen a dragon, I will describe its features in detail.

SCALES

Dragon scales are fan-shaped and two or three inches long. They are tough, with the hardness of fingernails, and feel like dry leather to touch. Though the scales are opaque, they have a lovely translucent quality, as if light can penetrate to a certain depth but cannot pass through them. It is this light-absorbing quality that makes dragons glow in moonlight. All dragons are born with purple scales. These change to one of the five colours – green, yellow, red, black or white – when they are about two years old.

Beneath a dragon's chin there are five larger scales, slightly curved, which lie in the opposite direction to the rest of the scales. Referred to as "reverse scales", their sole purpose seems to be storage of emergency food rations or precious items. Dragonlings begin to place things behind their reverse scales at a very early age.

It is written that a dragon has 117 scales and they have magical powers. Of these scales, 81 can be used for good purposes, 36 for bad. The number of scales is, obviously,

much more than that and dependent on the dragon's size. However, the number is always a multiple of nine, and the ratio of good to bad scales always 9:4. If a dragon gives a scale freely as a gift when leaving a friend, the recipient will dream of that dragon. The scale will continue to glow in the moonlight while the dragon still survives.

SPINES

A row of specialised pointed scales runs along the ridge of the dragon's back from under the mane to the tail terminal. Each fourth or fifth spine is longer than the others. They are usually softer than the other scales, but when fighting or trying to impress a prospective mate, the spines fill with blood. Then they become hard and sharp as claws and can pierce flesh. This makes it difficult to ride an angry or amorous dragon. When the dragon is miserable or unhealthy, the blood drains from the spines and they droop.

HORNS

A dragon grows horns around the age of five hundred. The horns of a full-grown dragon can be three feet in length. They are very elegant, curving and tapering to a fine tip. It takes a lot to break a dragon horn, and the tips are sharp and make lethal weapons. No human has been known to survive a goring with a dragon's horn.

As the dragon ages, its horns branch, and the number of branches and elegance of their curve is a source of admiration.

TAIL

The tail ends in a multi-spiked terminal. This is another of the dragon's formidable weapons. Each spike is hard and sharp and the tail can be used like a whip, causing ugly wounds. If aimed at the head, I can report from experience that the tail can knock a person unconscious.

MANE

A dragon's mane is made up of coarse hair usually in shades of brown. It continues under its chin in the form of a beard. There are also tufts of hair that sprout from the back of the knees. Apart from these tresses, there is also a pair of whiskers, one each side of the nose. These are not formed from hair, but are fleshy and fibrous, a growth from the unscaled skin around the mouth.

TALONS

Each dragon paw has four vicious claws that can be several inches long. Even though they cannot be retracted, a dragon never unintentionally harms any creature with their talons. The talons are curved and can be brought together to grasp items. The third and fourth talons of the forepaws can close together just like a human's fourth finger and thumb. This makes dragons most dexterous. They use these talons when eating small items such as nuts and berries.

EYES

All dragons have exceptional eyesight and it is often said "a dragon can see a mustard seed from 100 *li*". Dragonlings are born with bright green eyes. Eye colour changes to brown within the first two years.

If a dragon's eyes are yellow, it is a sign that they are ill. I have also witnessed a particular sickness that makes the eyes turn milky white.

When a dragon becomes angry enough to attack an opponent, its eyes turn red. Black dragons are the most aggressive of all the dragons, and their eyes can be red with suppressed anger even when not challenged.

WINGS

The wings are the most fragile part of a dragon's body. They are made of a leathery skin stretched over thin bones. The wings can be damaged by the teeth, claws and horns of a hostile dragon, and are even more vulnerable to the weapons of humans. The wings do not grow until the dragon is around one thousand years old.

I have noticed that artists often paint dragons without wings. I believe there are several reasons for this. Firstly, dragons are experts at hiding themselves when in flight. They can shape-change, they can make themselves look smaller or take on the colour of the sky. Even without these special skills, they can merely hide themselves above clouds. So, few people have ever seen a dragon in flight. Secondly, when the dragon is not flying, its wings are furled so tightly it is easy to mistake them for ridges of bone.

The third reason is the saddest and makes me ashamed of my kind. Because of the crimes of dragon hunters and necromancers, fewer dragons reach the age when their wings grow. So on the rare occasions when people glimpse dragons, it is more likely to be a younger creature without wings.

LIFE CYCLE

Dragons are the most long-lived creatures in the entire world. They can live for up to 3000 years. In the past they lived in extended family groups, but diminishing numbers have caused them to form groups of unrelated dragons, known as clusters.

Dragon mothers lay eggs called dragon stones. They are beautiful, like large purple gemstones – from palest mauve to deep thundercloud violet. Dragon stones are often threaded with veins of colour. To those who know how to read them, they can reveal if the egg has had a calm and healthy growth or has experienced danger and hardship. Female dragons usually lay single dragon stones, though clutches of two or three have been known. A female will lay no more than six times in her lifetime.

Unlike the eggs of birds, dragon stones do not have a particular incubation time. The parents decide when it is time for them to hatch, and eggs laid in the same clutch can be hatched at different times, sometimes hundreds of years apart. Hatching begins when the parents cry out in a particular way – the father first and then the mother.

The hatching is a momentous event that affects the atmosphere around it. There are rainstorms, thunder and lightning. When the dragon stone cracks open, water pours out of it, much more than it seems possible for the egg to hold.

A newly hatched dragonling is small enough to fit in a human hand. Its tiny scales are soft at first, but dry to a protective hardness within days.

At first, dragonlings are dependent on their parents, or other adult dragons. A dragonling generally spends its first fifty years with its mother and other females in the cluster, helping with daily chores and learning herb lore. Then the dragonling, whether male or female, will begin training with the males in self-defence. At this age they gradually start to take on roles within the cluster.

A dragon is believed to have reached maturity when its horns grow. It can take a mate and even produce young, but it is rare for a dragon to leave the cluster until it has grown its wings, as without the ability to fly, it is vulnerable to attack from enemies.

HIBERNATION

Most dragons prefer to live near water. Whether it is a pond, a lake or a river, most dragons need to spend some of the winter months immersed in water. Prolonged contact with water has a restorative effect. It revives their spirit and renews their strength. For the young, hibernation is also a protection against predators.

Dragons must feed throughout the winter months and they wake every few weeks to eat from their winter stores. Females who have laid dragon stones wake to check them.

Dragons can breathe under water. When they enter the water they are able to slow the workings of their organs – heart, liver, lungs – and they enter a sleep that is close to death. There are small glands on the side of a dragon's neck that activate when the dragon enters hibernation. These glands extract a small amount of air from the water, just enough to keep them alive. Dragons also believe that the glands extract the water's *qi*, and this is what revives them.

The glands activate at other times when a dragon finds itself submerged in water. Some dragons use this to their advantage when fighting, and lure their enemy into deep water. The glands only activate when the dragon is in a calm, meditative state. Some dragons do not like to be immersed in fast–flowing water and become agitated. I believe a dragon could drown if it was panicked and unable to calm itself in order to activate the glands.

Diet

Dragons will eat almost anything if they are hungry, but when food is plentiful, they can be very picky creatures.

They are carnivorous, and they eat most mammals and birds. They will also feed on fish, but they will not eat lizards, as their form is similar to their own. They also forage for berries, nuts and mushrooms if meat is in short supply.

Dragons who associate with people can develop quite a taste for cooked food and will eat with chopsticks so as not to offend their hosts. In rare cases, they will also cook food themselves, though they require a human to light a fire for them.

Their favourite food is swallow, preferably roasted. Dragons will spend hours designing clever snares for these birds and will wait patiently for one to fall victim to their traps. Although the reward is small, to dragons the birds are a delicious delicacy well worth the time and effort.

Like all creatures, dragons drink water, but they are especially fond of water from hot springs that contains dissolved arsenic. While lethal to humans, this substance has a restorative effect on a dragon. Arsenic solutions are odourless, but if a dragon catches the smell of a sulphurous hot spring, he is prepared to walk many *li* on the off chance that there will be an arsenic pool there as well.

Dragonlings drink their mother's milk at first. The mother begins to offer solid food soon after birth. She starts with insects, chewing them and then spitting out the chewed substance for the dragonling to eat. The selection of insects must be done with great care. Dragonflies, caterpillars and butterflies are acceptable, but no insect with a sting or a hard shell should be offered. Worms and snails are also fed to dragonlings, though the latter must be squashed before the babies can eat the tender flesh. These continue to be enjoyed throughout a dragon's life.

Characteristics

The dragons of Huaxia can be one of the five different colours. The different coloured dragons share many characteristics. They all grow horns and wings. They all make the same range of metallic sounds that express their mood and emotions. All dragons have excellent eyesight, but are hard of hearing.

The breath of a dragon is misty and moist, and this gives them one of their most important traits – they can form clouds. The natural forces of the world produce most rain. But when these systems fail and there is drought, dragons can form clouds and make rain fall.

Even though dragons bring life-giving rain, there are humans who hunt them down and kill them. This is because of greed, for many parts of a dragon are considered to have magical and medicinal powers, and can be sold for high prices.

If dragons are angry with humans, they refuse to bring rain. There have been times when the dragons have been so angry they created rain without stopping, until there were floods. This has led to humans distrusting dragons.

As well as rainmaking, which is a skill common to all dragons, there are other skills and characteristics that dragons of each colour have.

GREEN

Though I may be somewhat biased, in my opinion, the green dragon is superior among dragons. They may not be the biggest or the strongest, but I think they are the most intelligent.

They are excellent shape-changers and can in fact take on the shape of anything they please – an animal or a bird, a human, a plant or an inanimate object such as a rock or a vase. Among their other skills is what they call the mirage skill. This is when they change their colour to blend in with any background.

Green dragons have the strongest connection to water and are completely at home in any body of water, be it a still and shallow pond or a deep and raging river. They can manoeuvre in water like fish, and often use a river as a method of swift travel if the current is flowing in the right direction. They are wise, and make natural leaders.

RED

Red dragons are the biggest. They can grow to three *chang* in length and six feet high at the shoulders. Though referred to as red, their scales are actually a rusty colour. In old age their whiskers turn blue.

They are not interested in taking up leadership. Their skill is in mediation. They are able to calm a group of ill-tempered dragons, and carefully weigh the points of view of the other dragons before suggesting a suitable compromise. They never base decisions on their own desires.

Red dragons cannot shape-change, but they are particularly adept at using the mirage skill.

WHITE

By contrast, white dragons are the smallest. Again, white does not accurately describe the colour of their scales, which are a pale grey, like old snow. Because of their light body weight, they are the best fliers. They use this skill to act as scouts and to hunt small animals for food.

The whites are fun-loving creatures, enjoying playing aerial games. Those privileged to watch such sport are treated to a breathtaking aerobatic spectacle.

Their shape-changing skills are limited. They can only take on the shape of large white birds.

YELLOW

Yellow dragons are the colour of sand. They grow to be medium-sized dragons and the females are usually quiet and timid. The males are excellent fighters, and are the ones to train all the young in a cluster in the arts of attack and defence. They have the keenest sense of smell.

Yellow dragons swim, but do not like to immerse their heads. They therefore swim in the style of a dog. They do not shape-change, but they can change their size with skill – or at least appear to. The common saying that dragons can make themselves "as small as a silkworm or as large as all-under-heaven" refers to yellow dragons.

BLACK

Black dragons are solitary creatures. Living in large groups does not suit them and they spend a lot of time away. And yet they are most loyal to their cluster.

The scales of a black dragon are the colour of dark stone. Blacks are large and though not as large as the reds, they are more powerful. They can be short-tempered and aggressive. It is wise to choose words and actions carefully when near a black dragon. They have excellent night vision, and they can focus on fast-moving objects or creatures. The combination of their strength, eyesight and aggression make them excellent hunters. It is a point of pride for black dragons to be the main providers of food for their cluster.

They do not like water and cannot swim. They do not hibernate at all. They are unable to shape-change. They fly high and rely on humans assuming they are large black birds.

Black dragons are wary of humans. If you manage the rare feat of befriending a black dragon, he will be a staunch ally for your entire life, and beyond, transferring his loyalty to your descendants.

DRAGONS OF FIVE COLOURS

This is not a separate sub-species of dragon, and it is not a permanent colouring. It is instead a rare characteristic that could belong to a dragon of any colour. In certain extreme situations of aggression or other strong emotion, the tips of the dragon's scales take on shimmering hues of all five colours. In dragon culture, a dragon of five colours has the highest position and all must defer to his wisdom. If such a dragon claims leadership of a cluster, no one can challenge him. If there is a current leader, he or she must stand down.

Kai is such a dragon and I have witnessed him transforming. It is a breathtaking sight.

Likes and Dislikes

Dragons have many peculiar characteristics, but none more strange that their likes and dislikes.

I have already mentioned their favourite foods. Other things that dragons like are precious stones. It is not uncommon for a dragon to have a small hoard of precious items in a hidden place. Jade and pearls are their favourites. Coral is also admired.

Tigers are dragons' natural enemies, but they are well-matched and are rarely killed by them. Their fear of centipedes is, in my view, irrational. They are terrified that these creatures will crawl into their ears and eat their brains. My observations of these *wuji* are that they are capable of giving a sharp nip, but it does not lead to harm. The enemy that has the most lethal effect on dragons is, sadly, humans. With their iron weapons, superstitions and the great value they ascribe to dragon parts, humans are a dragon's most deadly enemy. Dragon hunters, though few in number these days, still stalk the empire in their relentless and single-minded search for dragons.

Dragons do not like iron, and there is good reason for this. The metal has a terrible effect on them. Proximity to iron saps their strength and renders them unable to use their powers and skills. It also weakens their eyesight, and eventually can make them blind. If iron touches any part of their hide that is unprotected by scales, it causes it to blister almost immediately. Prolonged contact causes weeping sores and lesions. It can also wear away the scales, and the effect of iron chains and shackles on a dragon is terrible to see. A wound inflicted by an iron weapon, if left untreated, will be fatal. A salve made from red cloud herb heals the wounds.

All parts of the chinaberry tree are poisonous to dragons. It weakens the heart and makes them desire sleep above all else. Splinters of the wood sticking into dragon flesh have the same effect. Though I have not heard of any cases of death following ingestion of chinaberry leaves or berries, the weakness that follows makes them susceptible to their enemies.

Another thing that dragons fear is thread woven from strands of silk dyed the five colours – black, white, red, green, yellow. Herbalists often use multi-coloured thread to bind together bunches of herbs for sale. I believe that dragons might have found bunches of chinaberry leaves hidden in these places affect them, and attributed the adverse effects to the thread as well as the leaves.

It has been my great privilege to live among dragons. I pray that all people of Huaxia will learn to treat them with respect, so that these wonderful creatures continue to grace us with their presence.

Text © 2017 Carole Wilkinson. All rights reserved.
Illustrations © 2014 Sonia Kretschmar. All rights reserved.

Carole Wilkinson is an award-winning and much loved author of books for children. She has a long-standing fascination with dragons and is interested in the history of everything. Though Carole has written over 30 books, she did not write her first book until she was nearly 40. Before that she had worked as a laboratory assistant and as a film and television writer and editor. Carole's website is **carolewilkinson.com.au**

Praise for *the*

DRAGONKEEPER SERIES

"Blending fantasy with fiction, this outstanding series is a continuous inspiring adventure, constructed with subtle philosophical and thought-provoking messages on accountability, strength, courage and compassion."

Buzzwords Books

"In Dragonkeeper *Carole Wilkinson transports the reader to a richly evoked ancient China during the Han Dynasty … in an absorbing, textured, adventure story."*

The Age

"Wilkinson has given young readers a superb novel that chronicles more than a physical journey. She manages to involve the reader so much that the option of closing the book and doing something else is greatly diminished."

Canberra Times

"In all, I rate it 99.9999999999999999%."

Celine, 11, Alphabet Soup

For the Dragonkeeper, the path of destiny is paved with danger.

THE THRILLING CONCLUSION TO THE

DRAGONKEEPER SERIES

OUT NOW