
Watch-wher Biology & Behaviour

by Amanda Kear with bits pillaged from Smitty & Holly's original "Fauna of Pern" article

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*Watch-wher, watch-wher,
In your lair,
Watch well, watch-wher!
Who goes there? Dragonflight*

One of the self-perpetuating 'mistakes' produced by the first settlers' attempts to produce dragons, watch-whers are the familiar guard animals of Pern, but they are also used by the Mincraft below ground. Reasonably intelligent and with some minor telepathic abilities and a strong sense of loyalty to their human friends, watch-whers are low-slung, ugly creatures with malformed eyes that cause them to be photophobic.

In the South, watch-whers are found only in captivity. This is because the Southern Continent has its own distinct species of wher which lacks the watchwhers' photophobia and ungainly gait, and thus out-competes any watch-whers which escape into the wild. (See Handbook article *The Fauna of Pern* for more details on the whers of the Southern Continent).

There is contradictory information on watch-wher behaviour and abilities in various Pern books, which give radically different interpretations of their talents and importance to Pern's fight against Thread. Rather than make the people and dragons of Pern look a bit dim for not having noticed these amazing watch-wher abilities for thousands of years, Kadanzer Weyr chooses to take what is written in the earlier books (e.g. *Dragonflight*, *Dragonsdawn*) as canon, and thus taking precedence over the novels written later (e.g. *Dragon's Kin*, *Dragonsblood*). Our watch-whers do not go *between*, do not Impress to humans, and – before anyone suggests it – do not chew firestone or produce flame.

This article covers:

- Appearance and general habits
- Do watch-whers impress?
- Can watch-whers fly?
- Senses
- Courtship and reproduction
- Diet
- Working underground
- Guard duties
- Do watch-whers need to be oiled?
- Feral watch-whers of the Northern Continent
- Watch-wher memory
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Appearance and General Habits

Oblivious to the stench of its rank breath, she hugged the scaly head to her, scratching its ears and eye ridges. The watch-wher was ecstatic with pleasure, its long body trembling, its clipped wings rustling. It alone knew who she was or cared. And it was the only creature in all Pern she had trusted since the dawn she had blindly sought refuge in its dark, stinking lair to escape the thirsty swords that had drunk so deeply of Ruathan blood. Dragonflight

The other dragons answered back, their warbles shriller than Mnemeth's male bellow. The watch-wher which had cowered at the end of its chain lifted its voice in a thin, unnerving screech until the Hold emptied of its startled occupants. Dragonflight

Watch-whers are typically described as 'ugly'. They are similar in appearance to dragons and firelizards, but the proportions of their bodies are different, making them less aesthetically pleasing to the human eye. They also have a strong, unpleasant, musky odour, and their calls are higher pitched and more harsh on human ears than the roars and bugles of dragons – neither of these features endears them to people.

Like firelizards and dragons, watch-whers have six limbs. But in contrast to those beasts, the limbs are all short and stocky. Their short legs give them a 'slithering' gait, with the belly held low to the ground and the tail dragging behind. Their wings are also shorter and blunter in shape than dragon wings (see *Can Watch-whers Fly?* for more information on this). In addition, domesticated watch-whers may have their wings clipped.

They show the same range of colours as the firelizards and dragons. Like dragons, only the golds can breed – see *Courtship & Reproduction* for additional information.

A fully grown, gold watch-wher is significantly smaller than the smallest green dragon. Nose to tail it is about 4 to 5 metres long, and stands about 1 metre high at the shoulder. Watch-whers are like firelizards, in that size differences between the different colours is not as pronounced as it is in dragons. Browns, greens and blues are only a little smaller than bronzes, which in turn are slightly smaller than golds.

Dragonflight describes watch-whers as 'scaly'. But as Anne McCaffrey never describes them this way again, the watch-whers of Kadanzer do not have a scaly skin. Instead they have a hide that is similar to dragon or firelizard skin, but rougher and drier to the touch. See *Do watch-whers need to be oiled?* for further information on watch-wher hides.



Do Watch-whers Impress?

Three weeks before, Wind Blossom's latest attempt had hatched. The four creatures who had survived had not been

Impressed by the candidates awaiting them although the creatures ate the food presented but certainly made no link as the First dragons had. Indeed the poor beasts turned out to be photophobic but Blossom, much to the disgust of Pol and Bay, and against their advice, had insisted on special darkened quarters for the beasts to continue examinations of this variant. Dragonsdawn

“Well, it’s unbelievable that Ruatha could have fallen to such disrepair in ten short Turns. Every dragon caught the feeling of power, and its obvious the watch-wher has been tampered with. That takes a good deal of control.”

“From someone of the Blood,” F’lar reminded him.
Dragonflight

“At least Blossom has the good sense to keep those wretched photophobes of hers chained. I cannot think why she persists with them.” Bay gave a shudder of revulsion. “They positively fawn on her.” Dragonsdawn

“Once they get to trust you, they’re quite harmless,” Telgar went on. “Cara adores the latest hatchling and it won’t let her out of its sight...” again that mirthless smile, “unless she leaves the Hold. Keeps watch at her door by night.” Dragonsdawn

Watch-whers, unlike dragons and firelizards, do not impress to a human upon hatching. Nor do they bond to another member of their own species, as wild firelizards do. They do have limited telepathic powers, but these are not utilised to form the deep and permanent bond that forms between human and dragon, or human and firelizard.

For those of you who would quibble at this, remember that Lessa had never experienced anything like Impression until she met Ramoth. In addition, remember that Lessa had special abilities above and beyond anything seen on Pern before and since – not only could she Hear All Dragons, but she could influence the actions of beings as diverse as the kitchen canines and F’lar with her telepathy! Her ability to control and interact with the Ruathan watch-wher should not, therefore, be seen as typical.

Instead of Impression, the bond that a watch-wher forms with its handler can be seen more as imprinting rather than impression: the sort of attachment a baby bird, puppy or kitten will form with a human it mistakes for ‘mother’. As the watch-wher grows and matures, this bond would normally lessen and disappear. If the watch-wher is to be little more than a living burglar alarm, then the lack of bond to a human is not a problem – an animal that is aggressive to all comers is a perfectly acceptable type of guardian in certain circumstances. (See *Guard Duties*).

However, a skilful handler can make use of the watch-wher’s limited telepathic abilities to turn the initial imprinting bond into something else. An experienced trainer, or one with some affinity for telepathic creatures, can engender in a watch-wher the kind of love and loyalty that a dog feels for a beloved owner. This allows watch-whers to be used for more refined guard duties than snarling at everyone, and to work down mines.

This advanced training may be what leads F’lar (and presumably other Pernese, particularly holders) to assume

that only someone ‘of the Blood’ can control a watch-wher. Sensible watch-wher handlers would make sure their beasts didn’t routinely snarl at their Lord and Lady or their Heir, so a simple and practical solution – introduce the Lord to your wher as a ‘friend’ – could get turned by rumour into ‘folklore’ that a watch-wher at the Main Hold can be tamed or controlled by someone of the Blood. Canny lords might promote the myth. And it may also become a self-fulfilling prophecy if a potential watch-wher handler is too nervous to command a wher because deep down they believe only those of the Blood can do so.



Can Watch-whers Fly?

Lessa looked down for one more long moment at the repulsive head. She laid it down to the stones, caressed the clipped wings. Then with quick fingers, she undid the heavy buckle that fastened the metal collar around the neck. She threw the collar violently away. Dragonflight.

Mnemoth informed F’lar that he, a fully matured bronze dragon, was no relation to any scrawny, crawling, chained and wing-clipped watch-wher. *Dragonflight.*

The wings of watch-whers are smaller and more rounded in shape than the wings of dragons and firelizards. Also watch-whers do not have any of the telekinetic powers of their relatives – so they cannot go *between* and they have to rely on muscle power alone to get them airborne. As big creatures with small wings, flight is extremely difficult and very energy demanding for watch-whers. Just watch a swan trying to get into the air – it takes a lot of running and flapping before take-off is achieved, and swans are far better designed for flight than watch-whers are!

Flight in watch-whers is therefore very limited in scope. They can manage a short and ungainly flap over a short distance, but are not distance flyers, fast flyers or particularly manoeuvrable in the air. Think of watch-whers as being like domestic chickens: they are certainly capable of flying to the roof of the cothold, but most of the time instead of flying over it, they’ll walk around it because it involves less effort. In addition, a watch-wher that has spent all its life chained to a kennel, will be as useless at flying as a battery hen that has spent all its life sitting in a cage. Neither will have had the requisite practice and exercise at a young enough age to master the skill properly.

Because they *can* fly a little, the wings of watch-whers are sometimes clipped to prevent their escape. This is not like clipping a bird’s wings! They have no flight feathers than can be harmlessly cut. There are two possible methods to ‘clip’ the wings of a hatchling watch-wher. The first involves cutting away the wing membrane and then burning the edges of what remains, so it does not regrow (a sort of cross between cropping a puppy’s ears and the way goat kids are dehorned by burning the horn buds). The second method is to physically sever the bones of the hatchling’s wings – much as horses’ and dogs’ tails are docked. Even with

liberal application of numbweed, this isn't likely to be a pleasant experience for the young watch-wher.

Since they are poor flyers, watch-whers do not have mating flights – see *Courtship & Reproduction* for more information.



Senses

She touched the awareness of the watch-wher, slithering on its rounds in the courtyard. It circled at the choke limit of its chain. It was restless, but oblivious to anything unusual in the predawn darkness. Dragonflight.

Quickly she thudded down the stairs, crossing to the watch-wher. It cried piteously, its great eyes blinking against the growing daylight. Dragonflight.

Due to Wind Blossom's genetic tampering, watch-whers have abnormal eyes that are over-sensitive to the wavelengths of visible light. This makes them photophobic, as normal daylight hurts their eyes and renders them almost blind. In low light levels, however, they can see very well. In fact, watch-whers have better nightvision than dragons or Terran animals like horses and cats. Starlight provides more than enough light for a watch-wher to see by, and even on the sort of completely overcast night that makes horses and felines reluctant to move about, a watch-wher can still pick out objects and find its way without blundering into obstacles or other animals. They possess another sense apart from vision which aids in this – see below.

It was stated in *Dragon's Kin* that watch-whers are not photophobic, but thermophobic (afraid of heat), and it was the heat of the sun rather than its brightness that drives them into their dens at daybreak. Just stop and think about this for a moment... If such were the case, then watch-whers would happily come out in broad daylight on cold winter days, and hide away whimpering on hot summer nights or indeed all year round in tropical climates.

Although their flight capabilities are minimal (see *Can Watch-whers Fly?*), watch-whers do possess one of the senses associated with flight – namely acute pressure sensors in the wings and muzzle that can accurately measure air flow. Because pressure senses like these are useful in sensing the environment around you (such as the distance to obstacles, or the approach of an object), the Minecraft have inadvertently preserved and heightened this ability in the watch-whers they breed for working underground. Whers with a talent for navigating in the mineshafts and sensing pitfalls or dead ends would have been prized by the miners and thus been more likely to be bred to produce the next generation. Inept whers would have been culled – assuming they didn't come to some unfortunate end down the mine.

Telepathy is not as strong in watch-whers as it is in dragons, nor even as strong as it is in firelizards. They can pick up some meaning from their handlers and those around them, but cannot broadcast words like dragons do or even as complex an image as firelizards can. Communication

between handler and watch-wher is likely to be only simple emotional content: *Danger!* or *Hungry!* or *Angry!* The telepathic communication also does not stretch over the vast distances that riders can speak to their dragons across or dragon can communicate to dragon over (e.g. Jaxom communicating with Ruth while the latter was on the Dawn Sisters).



Courtship & Reproduction

"We can't have uncontrolled breeding of those creatures," Paul said quickly.

"We'll see to that, Admiral," Ozzie said solemnly, "but they're right useful little buggers."

"Strong, too, carry more'n they weigh themselves out of the mines," Cobber added. Dragonsdawn

As with dragons only the gold watch-whers can breed – the greens having been engineered to be sterile. Greens still have mating heats, however, and if there is no available gold, a male will happily mate with a green.

Although watch-whers are capable of limited flight, they do not have mating flights. They cannot sustain the effort that such a flight requires, and because they are solitary there are not large groups of males habitually associated with a female in heat. Instead, when a female watch-wher comes into heat, she gives out a strong telepathic broadcast of the fact and makes constant vocal calls, to alert nearby males to her needs.

In the wild (see *Feral Watch-whers*) the males from nearby territories will turn up in response to the gold's calls. If more than one male arrives, the gold will flirt with all of them until a fight develops. This involves the males wrestling, biting and buffeting each other with their wings. Fights can be vicious, but are rarely prolonged or fatal.

For domesticated watch-whers, their mating is controlled by humans. The Minecraft will bring a male of their choosing to a gold or green who is in heat and calling for a mate. If the female accepts him – which is normal for greens but not a given with golds – the pair will mate several times over the next few hours, then the female will drive the male away.

Watch-wher clutches are small: usually only 6 to 10 eggs, each about the size of a basketball, laid over a period of several days. As with firelizards, it is impossible to tell which eggs bear gold offspring. Also in common with dragons and firelizards, watch-wher eggs need a certain amount of heat to harden and develop properly. However, this temperature does not necessarily have to be as high as for dragon eggs – watch-wher eggs incubated at a lower temperature will simply take longer to develop and hatch out. If no heat sources are provided by humans, a gold watch-wher can keep her clutch warm by curling her body around them or (in the wild) by burying them in rotting vegetation. In cold climates or cold seasons, however, she may not be able to keep a whole clutch sufficiently warm. In these cases, eggs that are laid last receive less attention and may fail to hatch.

If humans wish to imprint and train the offspring, then the eggs must be removed from the mother and artificially heated until they hatch. Needless to say, persuading a maternal gold to hand over her eggs is not the easiest of tasks!

Because the eggs are laid over a period of days and may have received differing amounts of heat, the hatching of a watch-wher's clutch is a prolonged affair. In the wild, the gold will bring food back to the den for the hatchlings for the first few days of their life. In captivity, humans take on the role of feeding the young that they wish to train. Surplus hatchlings, or those of unwanted colours like greens, are culled at birth.

In the wild, offspring remain with the mother for a few months, learning to find food. They grow quickly and reach about 80% of adult size in this time. When she approaches her next heat, the gold will drive away any offspring from a previous clutch which are still hanging around her territory. All the colours reach maturity when they are about 1 Turn old.



Diet

"Eat anything," Ozzie added for good measure. "Anything so they keep a place clean." Dragonsdawn

"There's one window in the kitchen that they always forget to lock," Iantine said, "and I don't think they ever feed the watchwher enough. He's all bones. Something juicy might occupy him. And I think the window's beyond his chain's reach." Red Star Rising

Except for the fact the watchwher did not succumb to the choice bits of meat brought to lure it from its duty and M'shall had to have Craigath speak sharply to it, entry was obtained. Whoever should have heard the watchwher's one bellow did not. Red Star Rising

Watch-whers, like firelizards and dragons, are descended from the carnivorous dragonets, so thrive best when they have a lot of meat or fish in their diet. However, as noted in the quote above, the first settlers discovered that Wind Blossom's creations – like pet firelizards – could consume a broader diet than just meat. As the ugly and unloved relations of the dragons, many watch-whers have had to survive on scraps, rotten meat and other fare that a dragon would turn its nose up at. Generations of this will have caused natural selection to increase the species ability to be omnivorous or tolerate carrion as a large part of their diet.



Working Underground

All the Craftsmen involved, including those destined to inhabit the facility, would have preferred to enlarge the

cave system, but there had been two serious collapses of caverns and the mining engineers had vetoed interior expansion for fear of undermining the whole cliff-side. Even the mutant, blunt-winged, flightless photo-sensitive watchwhers had refused to go on further subterranean explorations which, their handlers insisted, meant dangers human eyes couldn't see. Red Star Rising

"Actually, Paul," Telgar said, glancing at Ozzie and Cobber, "those photophobes of Wind Blossom's have proved to be extremely useful in subterranean explorations. Their instinct for hidden dangers... pitfalls, in fact..." and the geologist gave one of his humourless smiles, "blind tunnels is infallible. I'd like to keep them now that Wind Blossom has abandoned them, so to speak." Dragonsdawn

The Minecraft makes extensive use of watch-whers in underground mine workings. The beasts have good vision in very low light levels, can navigate by smell and pressure sensors in total darkness (see Senses), and have the strength of a pit pony but are far more intelligent. Their main drawback is their solitary nature means that the miners can't have large teams of whers working in close proximity, and they need a strong willed handler to ensure they don't become aggressive to other humans.

Since they are smarter than the lesser colours, the Minecraft mostly uses golds for work in the mines. This also means that the Minecraft has a virtual monopoly on the breeding and distribution of watch-whers. Young males are often sold to Holds who want them as guard beasts (see Guard Duties). Greens are usually culled at hatching because their unpredictable mating heats makes them unsuitable as work or guard beasts, although the Minecraft tends to keep some to provide sexual relief for the males that work in the mines.

Contrary to popular belief, underground mine workings are not totally dark – at least not while everything is going well and the miners are down there working! The low levels of light from miners glows are not enough to disrupt the watch-whers' eyesight. They may find that there are some better-lit areas which cause them discomfort but overall, in terms of light, a mine is a fine working environment for photophobes like the watch-whers. Woe betide the miner apprentice who deliberately shines his glow light into a watch-wher's eyes though! Both handler and wher are likely to express their immediate displeasure.



Guard Duties

Slowly she rose, cautioning it to remember to be as vicious to her as to all, should anyone be near. It promised to obey her, swaying back and forth to emphasize its reluctance. Dragonflight

The watch-wher, shrieking terror, anger and hatred, was lunging violently at the end of its chain, trying to come to Lessa's aid. It grabbed at F'lar as he strode to the two. Dragonflight

Typically the guard beast of a Hold or Hall will be a male watch-pher – the Minecraft keeps the golds for its own use and culls most of the greens as they can be troublesome to handle (see *Working Underground*). Bronzes, browns and blues are all equally talented as guardians of a hold.

As discussed above (*Do Watch-whers Impress?*), a pher used as a guard beast may or may not have a handler. In the latter case, the animal's inherent aggression and solitary nature is simply provoked, so that it will threaten or attack all those that come near. Such an animal will have to be kept permanently chained, as it is indiscriminating in its dislike of humans.

A more fruitful use of a watch-pher is for it to have a designated handler and be trained like a police dog or guard dog to recognise certain individuals as 'friend' and to treat strangers as 'foe' until told otherwise. A watch-pher trained like this can patrol with its handler, or be taken to and from its guard post. So the main entrance to the hold could be watched by guards by day, and have a watch-pher picketed there at night.

The limited telepathic abilities of watch-whers enhances their ability as guard-beasts: as well as recognising an unfamiliar scent or appearance, a watch-pher can, to a certain extent, sense the intent of an intruder. When a threat is sensed, the watch-pher then alerts the hold inhabitants by the same method as a guard dog – basically by yelling its head off. It will also maul any strangers foolish enough to come within reach.



Do Watch-whers Need to be Oiled?

Fortunately for the aggressive and unloved watch-pher on guard duty at many holds, oiling by a human companion is not a necessary part of maintaining watch-pher health. As watch-whers never go *between* they do not need the constant oiling and unblemished hide that firelizards and dragons must have to avoid the adverse effects of the cold of *between*. If watch-whers are being given an adequate diet, they can obtain the necessary oils from that, and their hide will stay supple from self-grooming and preening, though their hide will always feel rougher and drier to the touch than a dragon's skin does. A neglected watch-pher which is inadequately fed or inappropriately fed may, however, develop a patchy hide and skin infections.



All the "wild whers" on the Northern Continent are feral watch-whers – although rare, it is not unknown for golds to escape and breed in the wild. These wild examples are solitary animals, as watch-whers do not have the social instinct of dragons or firelizards. There are no feral watch-whers on the Southern Continent.

Feral watch-whers require some sort of den to hide away from daylight – most likely a cave. They are too large to dig burrows in the soil types that predominate over most of Pern, though there are regions here and there where there are soils soft enough for a watch-pher to excavate, yet structurally sound enough for the roof of a large hole not to collapse. The best caves – in terms of size and distance to a good food source – will be occupied by the golds, as they are socially dominant.

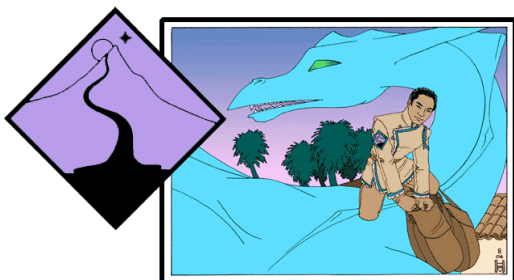
Wild watch-whers can cause considerable damage to livestock, and will attack humans if disturbed. The most dangerous to humans are (a) recent escapees, because they have no fear of people and associate them with the presence of food, and (b) a gold who has a clutch to defend. Watch-whers that have been wild for several generations are more wary of people than escapees, but are still dangerous.

Because watch-whers are entirely nocturnal, attacks on people are rare. However upon occasion a 'man-eater' may arise. These animals are often old, or crippled in some way, which makes them more likely to prey on easy targets like people. Their reign of terror is not usually long, however: because of their strong odour, watch-whers are easily tracked back to their dens by dogs or firelizards. However, flushing them out and killing them is a dangerous affair, even if the hunters use torches to keep the beast semi-blinded when they enter its lair.



Watch-pher Memory

The memory of watch-whers was not tampered with by Wind Blossom, so they do not have the short memories of their draconic cousins. However, they also lack the 'race memory' of firelizards. A watch-pher simply has the normal memory of a large, reasonably long-lived and fairly intelligent animal. So one could easily remember the sort of training or events that a horse, dog or chimpanzee is capable of.



Kadanzer Weyr

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