

An Early Sighting?

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There are many things in life that seem to sneak up on you. If you remain open to what is around you, incidents and experiences that can have long lasting impact may occur at times and places that take you by surprise. My personal relationship with the mysteries of the Strawberry Monkey has been blessed with some of these experiences.

In the mid 1960s I, along with a few of my high school friends, was working at a discount store in the suburbs of Minneapolis. In those early days of discount shopping, this store tried to offer a full range of products and activities to attract families to their location. One particular feature was a pet shop near the front of the store. It was difficult for a family to enter or leave the store without the kids begging to see the animals. In those days, a pet shop was able to sell almost any kind of critter, including snakes, parrots, and monkeys. In our store's pet shop, the caged monkey was a highlight of many families shopping adventure. It was common to see little kids trying to drag their parents into the pet shop and then to hear the parents put up the monkey visit as a reward for good behavior while shopping. It was like going to the zoo.

At that time, we all assumed our monkey was just another common pet shop victim – perhaps a squirrel monkey – or similar. It was years later that I realized that the particular traits of this caged critter placed him among the nearly lost and extinct category of Strawberry Monkeys. The exact details of the discovery incident have been long forgotten, but at some point one of our friends, who worked in the pet shop, attempted to present the monkey with a small treat – a bright red strawberry. At the sight of the berry, the tame passive monkey instantly exhibited a brilliant display of male arousal. Much to the delight of our group of foolish teenage boys, each time a bright red object was shown to our little friend, he regained his state of arousal and excitement. This became a ritual. Whenever a family would visit our little zoo, with the children giggling with glee, “look mommy, look at the funny monkey”, one of our gang would subtly show the monkey a strawberry. The immediate physical arousal displayed by our friend would send the parents scurrying from the store dragging the kids behind asking, “Mommy, mommy, what happened to the monkey? What’s that?”

Knowing nothing about the monkey's endangered status or scientific importance, we soon began to call him simply the *strawberry monkey*. This was my first exposure to the wonders of the species and I had no way of knowing the importance he would play in my later life.