

## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION 6

---

- The Broader Spectrum 10
- Animals and Color 12
- Humans and Color 16
- Color Meaning for Humans 20

### 2. HOW ANIMALS SEE COLOR 70

---

- The Anatomy of Eyes 74
- The Origins of Photoreception 80
- The Building Blocks of Color Vision 84
- Color Vision Variety 86
- Human Color Vision: From Cones to Concepts 96
- Birds, Bees, and the Colorblind Octopus 102
- Another Way to See Color 110
- Colors in the Brain 114

### 4. THE EVOLUTION OF COLORS 162

---

- What is Visual Ecology? 166
- Finding Vegetarian Food 170
- Color and Sex 176
- The Fighting Functions of Color 180
- Camouflage 186
- Colors on the Reef 206

### 1. WHAT IS COLOR? 24

---

- How Color Begins 28
- The Colors of Water, Rocks, and Plants 36
- How Do Living Things Make Color? 44
- Chlorophyll in Leaves and Plants 50
- Structural Color 58
- Fluorescence 66

### 3. HIDDEN COLOR 120

---

- Ultraviolet Sensitivity 124
- Sex and the Fluorescent Feather 140
- Sensitivity Beyond Red 146
- Bioluminescence 154

### 5. COLOR IN HUMAN LIFE 216

---

- Color Preference 220
- Why Do Girls Like Pink? 224
- Color Naming 226
- Color as a Trend 230
- Fashion 234
- Architecture and Interiors 238
- Color in Art 244
- Painting Color and Light 254
- Synesthesia 260
- Butterflies, Beetles, Birds, and Bio-inspiration 262
- Color Constancy and Color Photography 268
- Climate Change and a Bleached World 270

Glossary 276 / Further Reading 278 / Picture References 279  
Author Bios 280 / Index 282 / Acknowledgments 288

the Northwest Territories in Canada and the Isle of Harris in Scotland.

Granite is one of the bedrocks of our planet, but it is relatively rare on the surface beyond a few outcrops. Instead, our largest areas of exposed rock are the sands of deserts and coasts; there, the sands range from volcanic black to the more common red-yellow, to blinding white sands made from coral, shell, or exposed salt.

## Plants

The Earth is primarily a wet, living world. At the polar icecaps, the color is white as the result of light being scattered by snow and ice, while the vast expanses of deep water are blue. Elsewhere, plants color the earth.

Almost every terrestrial region that is not covered with snow and ice has some foliage. Coastal oceans may also contain green chlorophyll in algae. Only the very harshest of deserts are totally devoid of plant life, and most of the world is covered with either forests or grasslands.

Whether tree, shrub, or grass, all plant life derives its color from one set of molecules—the chlorophylls. It is difficult to determine what was the key innovation that led to our planet being as densely inhabited as it is, but most biologists would likely choose the evolution of chlorophyll, since it is central to the ability of plants, and many other organisms, to use the energy of the sun and to produce oxygen. Chlorophyll absorbs the blue and red parts of visible light in the initial step of this “light harvesting” (see page 29), leaving green light to be reflected back. Not all plants are green, however, and even green plants do not appear green all the time. This is because plants contain varying amounts of chlorophyll, and also because they contain other pigments that serve other functions. In some cases, these pigments are quite obvious—for example, certain ornamental plants and some trees have purple or red leaves. In other cases, those pigments are hidden by the stronger effect of the chlorophyll, as seen in most deciduous trees. When the leaves die in the fall, the chlorophyll is lost, often revealing the remarkable red, orange, and yellow pigments that have been present within the leaves the entire summer, but previously unseen.

OPPOSITE: A stream running through the El Yunque rain forest in Puerto Rico.

OVERLEAF: Dunes in the Sahara desert, Merzouga, Morocco.







# HOW DO LIVING THINGS MAKE COLOR?

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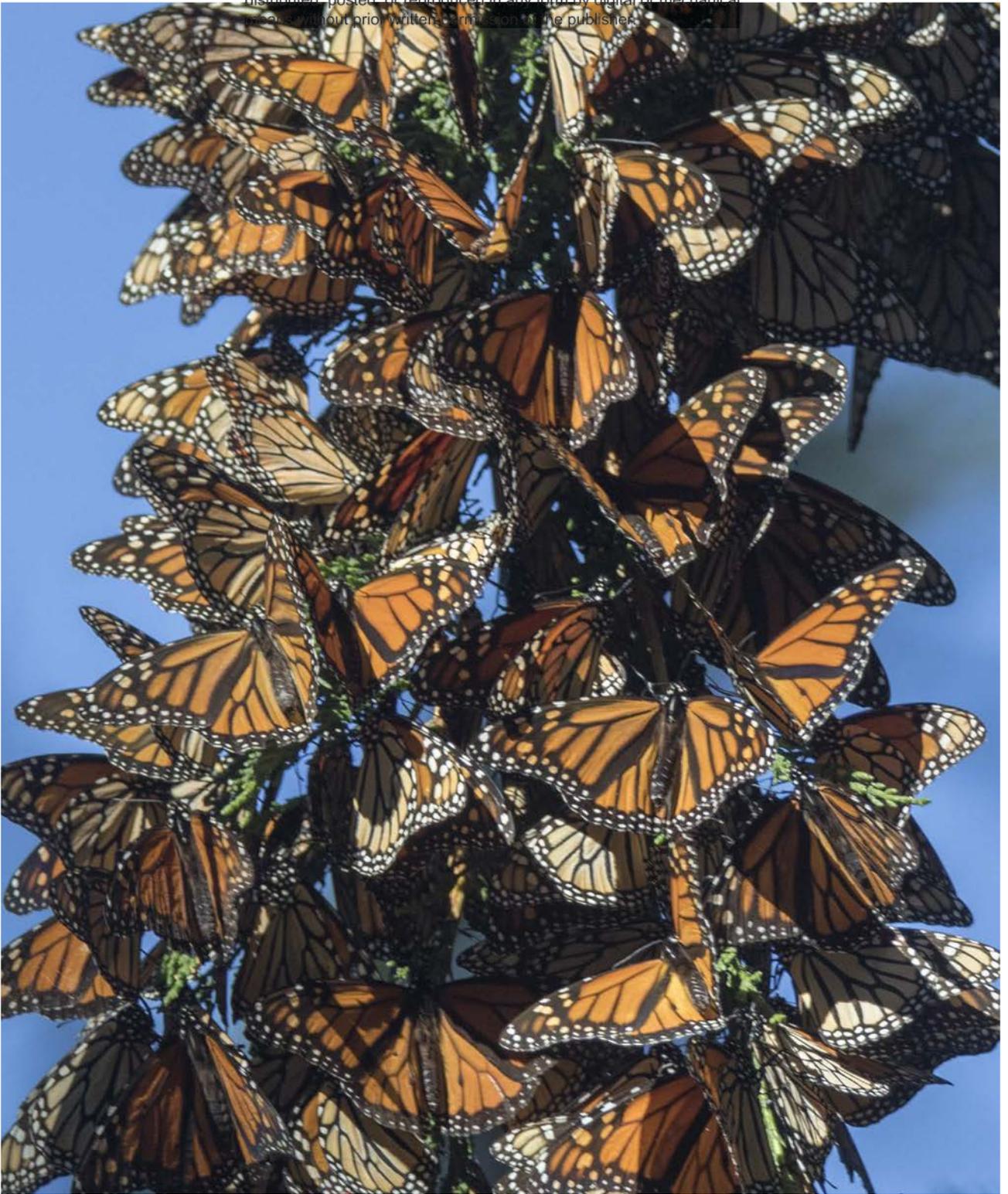
There are many ways to look colorful. Overwhelmingly, however, plants and animals rely on two very different mechanisms: pigments and structure.

Pigments are the most familiar producers of color in all living things. Pigments are based on atoms or molecules that absorb certain wavelengths of light, transmitting or reflecting the rest in a region of the spectrum that we perceive as color.

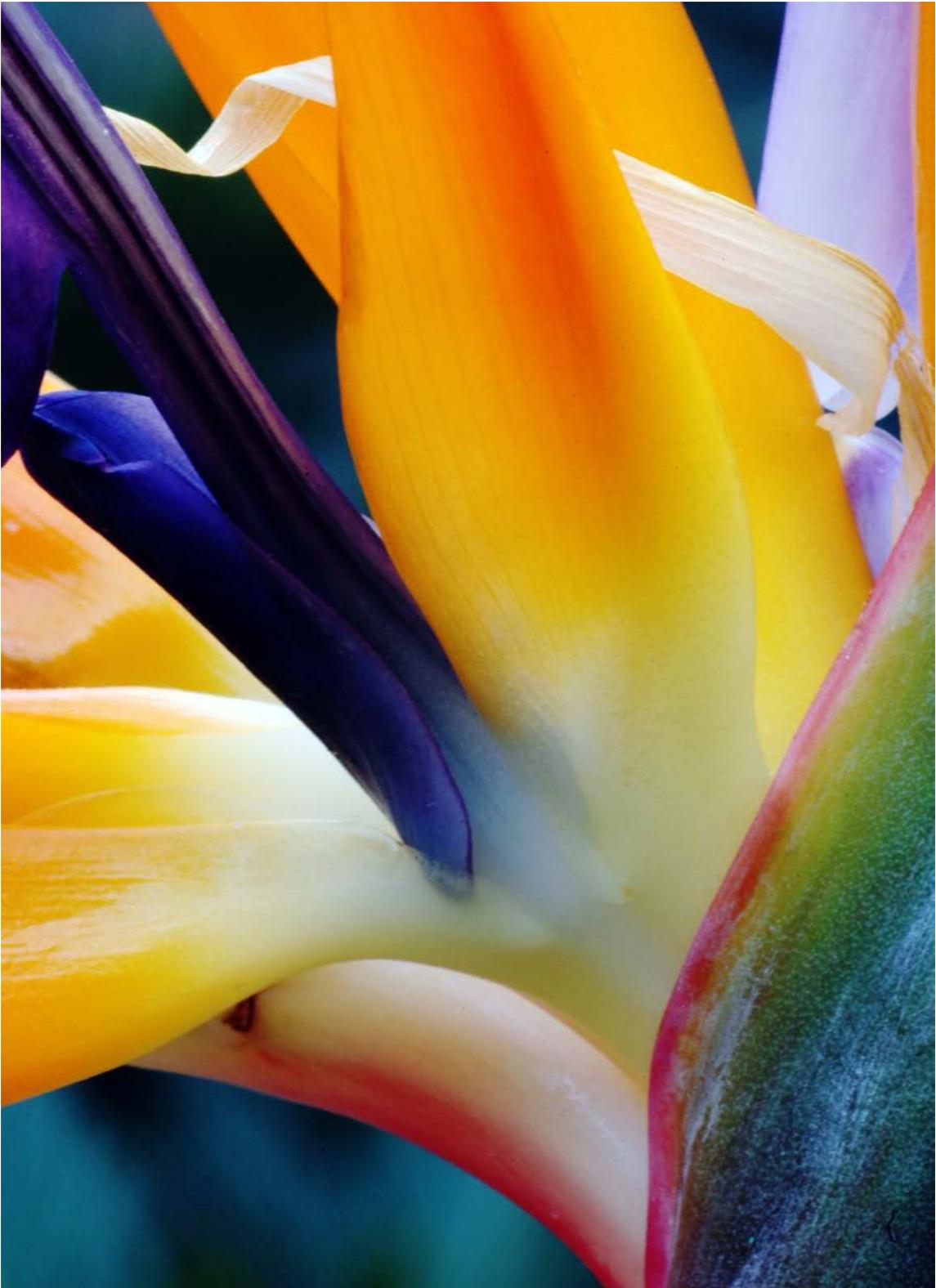
Pigments are ubiquitous in our world—they are used to color nearly every manufactured object that humans make, such as furniture, paints, appliances, cars, textiles, and so on. They are even used to color our own bodies in the form of tattoos or body paint. Many of these artificial pigments are inorganic molecules, such as minerals or artificial dyes, or even elements like copper or gold.

Animals and plants use neither of these, instead employing organic compounds they make themselves or sequester from their food. Sometimes these compounds include metal ions: examples are red hemoglobin in blood or green chlorophyll in plants. The basic organic structure of these, called a “porphyrin,” is molecularly very similar in each case, but hemoglobin binds iron, making it red in color, while green chlorophyll has magnesium instead.

In most cases, pigments in animals and plants produce color by reflection, but transmission of color is also common. Structural colors are very different, relying on the geometry of components that are so small that they are on the scale of light waves. Humans use structural components to produce iridescent colors in polishes and they also occur by chance in the thin films formed by oil and other pollutants on the surface of water. Many animals and some plants make structural colors by scattering light (often appearing powder blue) or by controlling it with nanostructures called “photonic crystals.”



A cluster of monarch butterflies, showing their orange ommochrome pigments highlighted by black melanin borders.



In addition to these two approaches, which create color by reflecting or transmitting light, a few animals make color by emitting light. Some are fluorescent, absorbing light of one color and re-emitting it as a different one; others are bioluminescent, making their own “cold” light biochemically (in contrast to the hot light of a fire or arc lamp). A very few fungi are phosphorescent, radiating light captured during the day later on at night in a spooky, ghostly glow.

## Pigments and their diversity in plants

OPPOSITE: Bird-of-Paradise plant, possibly colored by green chlorophyll, orange carotenoids, and red or blue anthocyanins.

The beauty of the natural world is largely the gift of plants, which dominate the visual spaces of the terrestrial landscapes where most humans live, and provide the vibrant colors of kelp beds and coral reefs. Their beauty extends beyond this, though, because many animal pigments are either taken directly from the plants they ingest as food, or are modified from these plant pigments. Humans have long used plant pigments, such as annatto, saffron, or indigo, to color their textiles (and sometimes their bodies). The trade in such dyes is probably among the most ancient of human economies.

Plants are master biochemists, making their own colored pigments for photosynthesis, protection from damaging ultraviolet light (photo-protection), flower decoration (for pollination), and fruit enhancement (for dispersion). The chemicals they use for coloration are generally complex organic compounds, and commonly incorporate nitrogen and sulfur atoms in addition to the usual carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. Chlorophyll adds magnesium to the mix. Few of the ways that plants use to produce pigments occur in animals, which explains why animals must ingest them for coloration.

Chlorophyll is a porphyrin. There are several types of chlorophyll, with different but similar molecular forms. Then there are pigments called “phytochromes,” which plants use to measure the color of natural light and thus evaluate day length and season. Other familiar plant colors come from isoprenes, which form the colorful red, orange, and yellow carotenoids, and flavonoids, which synthesize the brilliant violet and red anthocyanins.

Unlike animals, which manufacture melanins to make black colors, plants have no specific black pigment. Instead, they use high concentrations of tannins or anthocyanins, or other less-well-understood mechanisms.

You might have noticed that none of these pigments produce blue! Faint blues can be derived from modifying some anthocyanins, but there are some other exotic blue-producing biochemical systems.

## Pigments and their diversity in animals

The brilliant colors of many animals, including vertebrates such as birds, reptiles, and fish, and arthropods such as insects, are based on a widely shared palette of pigments.

Melanins are used to make black in almost all animals. Usually, yellow, orange, and red colors are derived from carotenoids, although other pigments can come into play. A derivative of melanin called phaeomelanin is used to make yellowish or reddish colors in many vertebrates. The red-winged blackbird displays all three of these popular pigments: melanin on most of the body, red carotenoid on the wing epaulets, and yellow phaeomelanin bordering the red patch.

Besides carotenoids, insects and crustaceans often use ommochromes, derived from the amino acid tryptophan, to make reddish or brownish colors. For example, the monarch butterfly has ommochrome-colored dark-orange wings, outlined by melanin. The white patches are structural colors, not pigmentary. Crustaceans regularly incorporate carotenoids into proteins to make complexes called carotenoproteins, which are blue or green. When a lobster is cooked, its blue carotenoprotein is denatured, revealing the red carotenoid color instead.

Other than the blues of crustaceans, blue colors in animals are almost always structural. Green colors, on the other hand, originate from a variety of sources. As Kermit the Frog noted, “It’s not easy being green.” Frogs use something called biliverdin, which results from the breakdown of hemoglobin. This is usually excreted, but here it is combined with a protein called serpin to make a pigment that circulates in the blood, coloring the skin green. (Hemoglobin itself is commonly used to produce red patches: often ones that appear and disappear rapidly like shy blushes.)

Sloths have green hair from chlorophyll, being symbiotic with the green algae living there. Parrots have pigments called psittacofulvins, which are yellow. When parrots look green, it is because they combine a structural blue with this pigmentary yellow—there is no actual green pigment.

OPPOSITE: A red-winged blackbird shows off its brilliant red carotenoid patch against its melanin-black body, highlighting it with a yellow phaeomelanin border.



# CHLOROPHYLL IN LEAVES AND PLANTS

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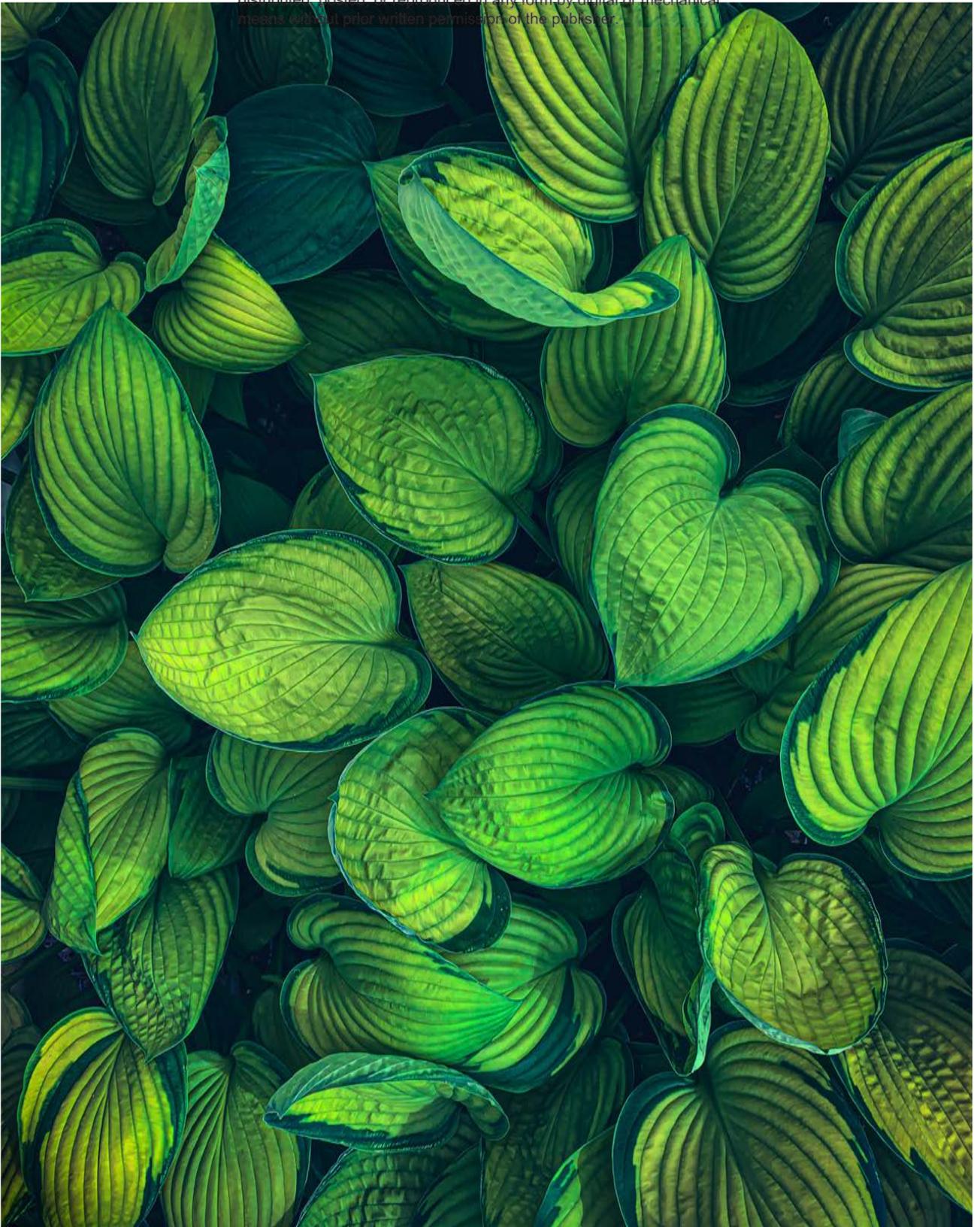
Why is chlorophyll the most important of all pigments? Putting it simply, the diversity of life that we know today would not exist without it.

Nearly all plant growth is fueled by chlorophyll's ability to capture the energy in sunlight and use it for chemical synthesis, ultimately forming nearly all the molecules of life. There are a few microorganisms that are able to survive on chemical energy in hot springs and deep-ocean seeps, and small communities of animals that feed on these microbes. Overall, though, chlorophyll-driven biology dominates life on Earth, and chlorophyll's reactive by-product, oxygen, fuels the high-energy lifestyles of complex animals.

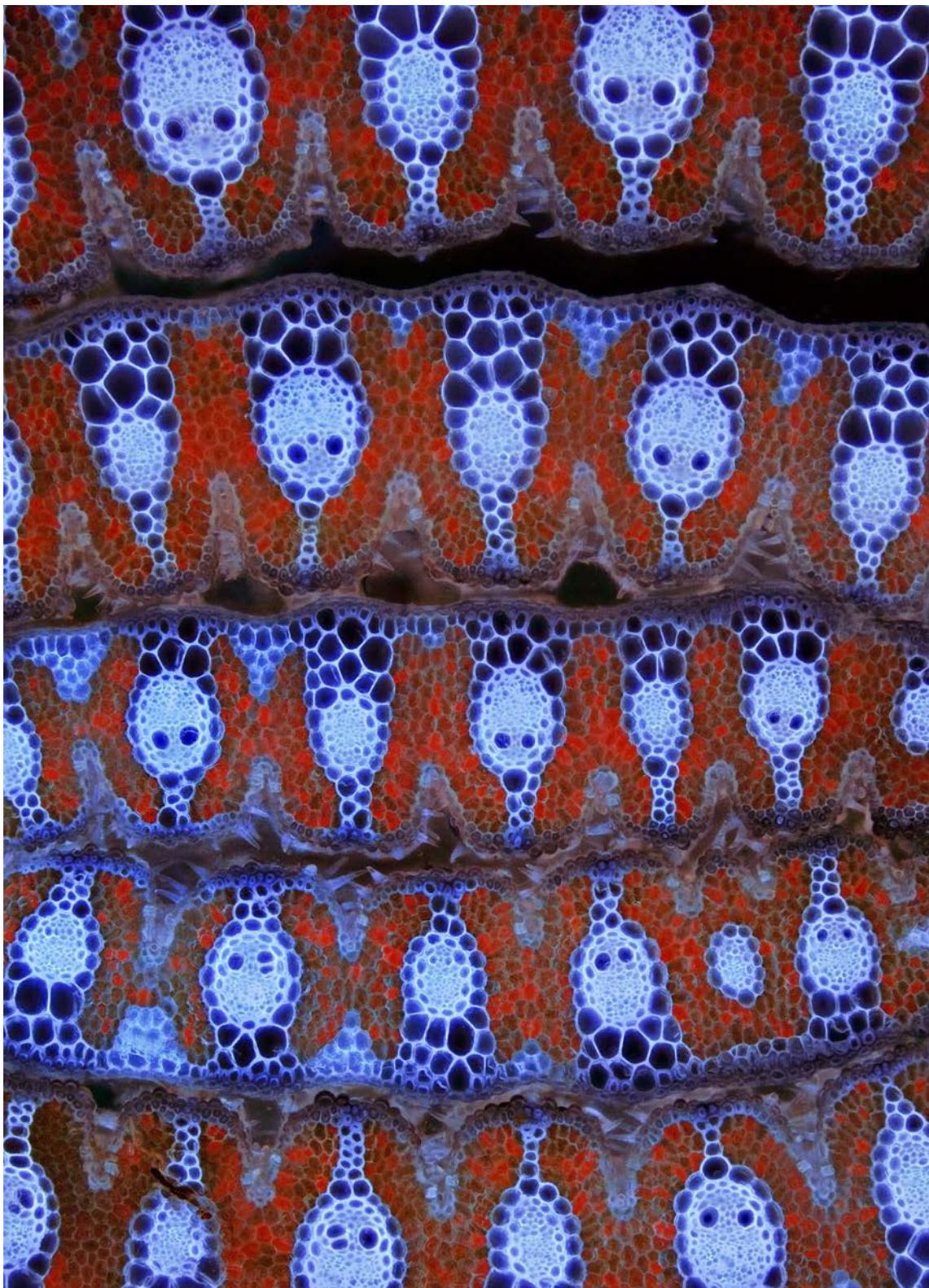
All the plants that we are generally familiar with produce two forms of this pigment—chlorophyll *a* and chlorophyll *b*. These are the two most abundant pigment molecules on our planet. Chlorophyll *a* is very ancient, first appearing billions of years ago. Chlorophyll *b* originated more recently, but is chemically nearly identical to its ancestor. Both are porphyrins containing a magnesium ion. There are other chlorophylls in some algae, but these do not appear in terrestrial plants.

Chlorophyll is green—the name means “green leaf.” This color may seem ideal for capturing the high-energy solar radiation in the blue-green to green wavelengths in sunlight. However, being green means that chlorophyll does not absorb green, but instead reflects or transmits it. Instead, chlorophyll absorbs red and blue light best. Accessory pigments help by transferring some energy at middle wavelengths to chlorophyll, but the overall conversion of solar energy to chemical energy is surprisingly low—only about 1 percent. Fortunately, there is a lot of solar energy out there.

In addition to producing oxygen and providing energy for biosynthesis, chlorophyll is important because its action turns carbon dioxide into the organic chemicals needed for life, removing it from the air and fueling the major mechanism that offsets climate change. This is why the loss of chlorophyll via deforestation is having a major impact on Earth's weather and ecosystems.



Green leaves richly colored with chlorophyll.



Chlorophyll has another useful feature: it fluoresces light strongly at red and infrared wavelengths, which enables remote sensing of terrestrial and marine regions where photosynthetic plants are abundant.

## Tuning chlorophyll

Chlorophyll is the only plant pigment that produces useful chemical energy from light, but it absorbs only part of the solar spectrum. As you would expect, the billions of years since chlorophyll *a*'s first appearance have provided plenty of time for adaptations to evolve that improve this critical molecule's performance. Pigments called accessory pigments harvest light from spectral regions where chlorophyll does poorly, and then transfer the absorbed energy to chlorophyll.

OPPOSITE: Red fluorescence from chlorophyll seen in a microscopic view of a pampas grass leaf lit by ultraviolet light. The "faces" are the leaf vascular bundles, with xylem vessels for "eyes."

Of the two chlorophyll pigments, only chlorophyll *a* actually converts light to chemical energy. Chlorophyll *b* is an accessory pigment that links to chlorophyll *a* and passes energy to it. The other major class of accessory pigments is made up of the carotenoids, which are chemicals that are present in chloroplasts together with the chlorophylls and that directly transfer energy to chlorophyll *a*. (Chloroplasts are the cellular components where chlorophyll allows plants to make oxygen and form simple organic chemicals.)

Carotenoids appear bright red, orange, or yellow; these molecules and their derivatives are taken from plants to make similar colors in animals. They are effective absorbers of blue-green and green light, and thus fill in the parts of the spectrum that the chlorophylls normally fail to capture. Other molecules, closely related to carotenoids, are the xanthophylls, which look brown or yellow.

Even though all these variously colored pigments are always present in leaves, they are so much less abundant than chlorophyll that we rarely see their colors. Their high concentrations in most leaves are only revealed when they are chemically extracted—or when the chlorophylls that overshadow them naturally degrade. Nature's beautiful gift of autumn foliage exists simply because the chlorophylls disappear rapidly as photosynthesis shuts down at the end of summer. Leaves then show their carotenoid content by displaying their oranges and reds, and their xanthophylls by becoming yellow. Those beautiful pigments have always been there, it is just that chlorophyll is so much more abundant that they

were previously concealed. Despite their reluctance to display themselves, these pigments are essential for the success of plants.

## Flowers and their pigments

Flowers are beautiful, ephemeral entities: they may sometimes be weird or alien, but are often awe-inspiring. Their shapes range from simple to fantastic, as do their colors and pigments.

Plant favorites are anthocyanins and carotenoids, each in a dizzying variety of types. The colors they produce range from blue-purple to orange-red in the case of anthocyanins, and from yellow to deep red in carotenoids.

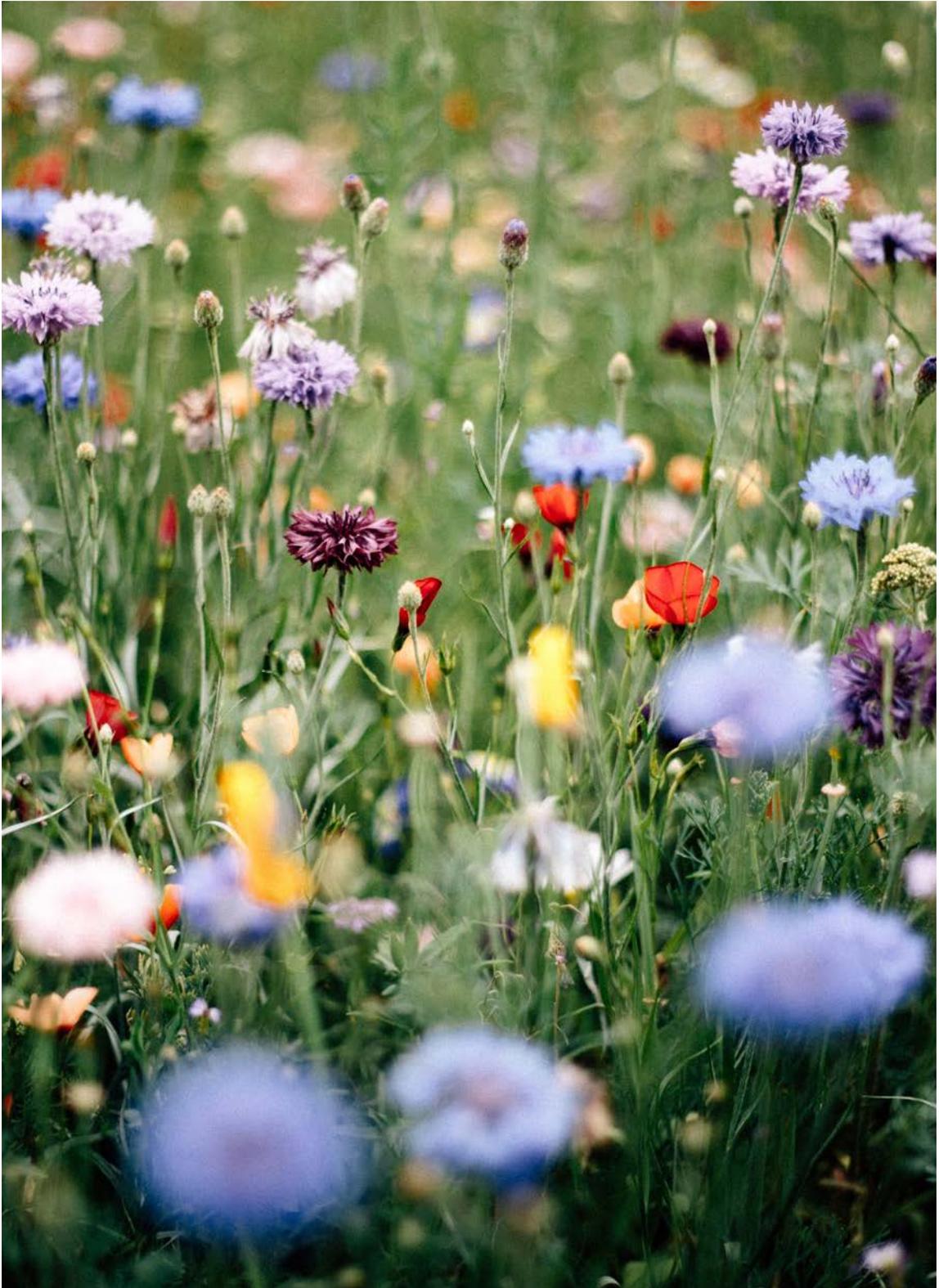
The variety of pigments is enormous, but a few names provide a bit of flavor. The anthocyanin pelargonidin is found in geraniums (genus *Pelargonium*). Mallows make malvidin and peonies make peonidin. Not all anthocyanins have such obvious names, however. Carotenoids are sometimes named by the colors they produce, such as aurone (golden) or xanthin (yellow).

Flowers first evolved only about 100 million years ago—relatively recently in geological terms—and often co-opt photosynthetic accessory pigments to make their stunning colors. Some flowers use only one kind of pigment, but most mix pigments to produce their stunning colors, often using both anthocyanins and carotenoids. The various yellows, oranges, and golds of marigolds are combinations of carotenoids, sometimes with a hint of anthocyanin. Hydrangeas make flowers with different colors based on the same anthocyanin pigment. The pigment is modified by aluminum ions, which are only freely available in acidic soils. That is why hydrangeas are blue in acidic soils, but are pink or red in alkaline ones. Depending on weather and growing conditions, hydrangeas can produce differently colored blooms on the same plant.

Not all flowers are colorful. The colorful ones exist to attract pollinators, especially insects like bees and butterflies, or nectar-feeding birds like hummingbirds, sunbirds, and honeycreepers. Over time, there has been a dance of adaptations, with animals evolving to better see flowers with abundant nectar, and plants adjusting to animals' vision to attract their pollinating ability. Some flowers even have ultraviolet colors, visible to their pollinators but not to us (see page 123).

OPPOSITE: Wildflowers displaying their showy assortments of pigments.

OVERLEAF: Lavender field at sunset, a sight not normal in the natural world but one that shows the human desire to amplify color sensation from flowers. In this case, smell sensations too.







# STRUCTURAL COLOR

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Interactions of light particles (photons) with organized tiny features in organisms lead to interference phenomena that reinforce or obliterate specific wavelengths of light, producing brilliant structural colors in living things.

An oft-repeated statement is that “bluebirds are not blue,” with the writer going on to explain that their color is an optical illusion. One could just as well say that goldfinches are not gold and scarlet tanagers are not scarlet—they too are optical illusions! The difference, however, is that complex organic pigments create red or gold colors, while blue colors generally arise from structure.

Structural colors are produced when light encounters repeated, fine-scale structures that constantly affect its speed of travel through a material.

Some familiar colors are produced by scattering light. Essentially, incoming photons are redirected by interactions with miniscule particles. Scattering produces both blue skies and white clouds; the difference is that the molecules of gas in the open sky are much smaller than the tiny water droplets in clouds.

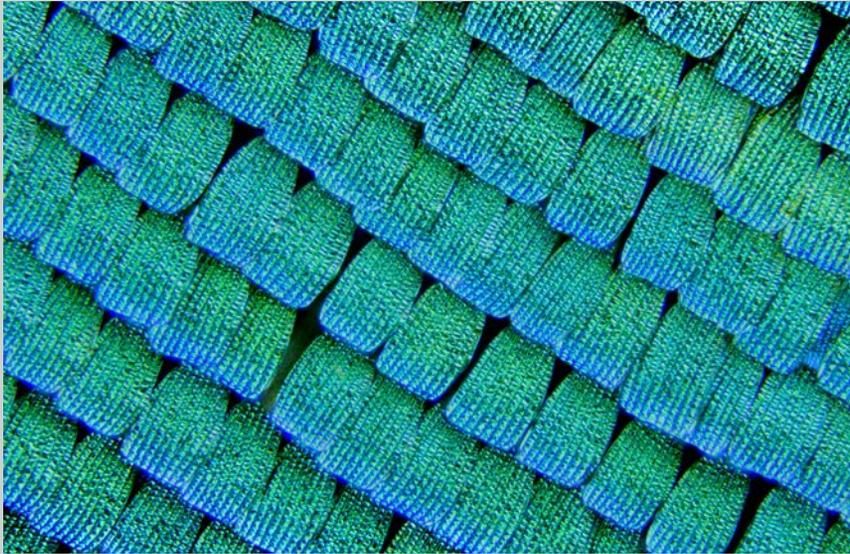
The colorful nanostructures in living things scatter light in a different way from atmospheric scattering. The scattering by living things is usually coherent, with all the outgoing light waves in lock-step. An example is thin layering of materials that affect how fast the light travels through them. If the layers are very regular, reflections are iridescent—their apparent color changes with the angle of view. Both plants and animals make iridescent colors, which are often brilliant and eye-catching.

These thin layers are one type of photonic crystal: a term that sounds straight out of science fiction, but simply refers to nanoscale structures with a regular geometry. The scale of the structure and the optical properties of its arrayed components determine the wavelengths of light it transmits or reflects. Stacked layers only affect light that enters perpendicular to the surface of the stack, passing from one layer

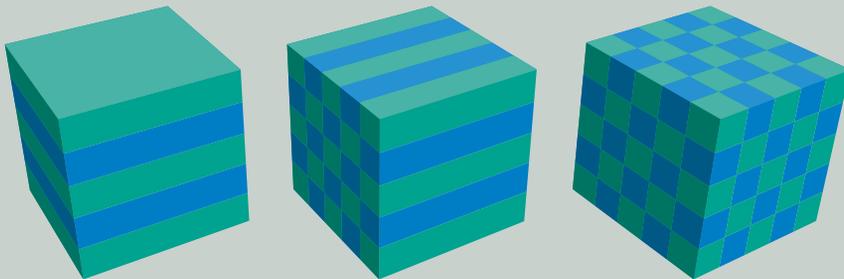


A violet sabrewing hummingbird (*Campylopterus hemileucurus*), clothed in iridescent photonic colors.

## STRUCTURAL COLORS IN BUTTERFLY WINGS



Scanning electron micrograph of the photonic crystals in a butterfly wing.



Diagrams showing the structure of one-, two-, and three-dimensional photonic crystals, where the colors indicate materials of two refractive indices.

to the next, so they are considered one-dimensional. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional photonic crystals also exist. Almost all naturally occurring photonic crystals are built by living organisms, although a few minerals, like opal, also contain them.

Whenever you see a brilliant blue on a living thing, or an iridescent flash, or a bright metallic sheen, you can be confident that photonic crystals are responsible.

## Structural colors in birds and insects

Biological systems routinely contain features with the intricate geometry required for structural coloration. Some of these intricate structures can even become fossilized, preserving the colors of long-extinct marine creatures and dinosaurs. Today, structural colors are flagrantly used by birds, insects, and countless other creatures.

Bluebirds are the classic example. As their feathers grow, cells in the vanes form strands of keratin. The dry, mature feathers contain a sponge-like mix of keratin and air pockets that have just the right dimensions to strongly scatter blue light. Because the keratin and air are arranged in a rather disordered array, termed “quasi-ordered,” the color is scattered similarly in all directions. A layer of melanin under the keratin guarantees the purity of bluebird blue.

Some damselflies also use quasi-ordered clusters of particles in their epidermis to coherently scatter powdery blue or green coloration. Other damselflies take this a step further, creating photonic multilayers in the cuticle—their outermost covering—that reflect iridescent blue, green, or gold. Such iridescent colors are brilliant when seen from the right position. Butterflies also specialize in iridescence, frequently developing photonic structures to make stunning colors. A famous example is the blue morpho butterfly, whose wings are coated with sculpted photonic scales. The ridges on these scales look like Christmas trees when viewed in cross section using an electron microscope. This structure reflects a deep blue blaze almost entirely in one direction that flashes as the butterfly beats its wings. The signal is visible from hundreds of yards away, an important use of color for the butterflies and now also useful in our own medical world (see page 262).

Hummingbirds are also masters of iridescence. The colors of the male's throat (or gorget) are famous for their jewel-like brilliance when seen at a certain angle. In fact, most feathers on hummingbirds contain photonic crystals based on layers of flat, hollow structures. Even the green females have iridescent feathers, glistening in the sun.

Structures producing iridescence exist throughout living things, ranging from bristle worms, spiders, beetles, and bees to squid, fish, and many other kinds of animals and even plants. Animals often exploit them to make brilliant, highly directional, pure-colored signals that can be aimed at any desired viewer.

## Structural colors in primates

A memorable sight on an African safari is a retreating male vervet monkey. Against its gray fur, its strikingly blue testicles are unmissable. How can a mammal produce such an uncommon color?

After all, mammals are not typically colorful creatures. The yellow stripes of tigers and red coats of foxes blend into nearby vegetation when viewed by their mammalian prey. But among primates there are golden tamarins, ruddy orangutans, red howler monkeys, blushing macaques, and dramatically red-faced uakaris. Any red skin patches are due to a plentiful blood supply, while the reddish or golden pelts probably result from deposits of pheomelanin (the same thing that gives rise to red hair in people).

Blue patches occur on bare skin in male vervets, male mandrills, and golden snub-nosed monkeys. No non-primate mammal uses pure blue coloration—blue whales are really blue-gray. The fine hairs of some populations of wildebeests and of the Maltese tiger can take on a bluish sheen; this is probably due to weak diffraction of blue light. Ironically, the actual blue monkey is only faintly blue in certain lights, probably for the same reason.

So, how does a primate become blue? And why? Just like the blue of a bluebird, the blue of a primate is a structural color. The mechanism is analogous to that producing blue feathers in bluebirds—quasi-ordered arrays of tissue. In the case of primates, the array consists of parallel collagen fibers in the dermis layer of the skin. This structure coherently

OPPOSITE: Rear view of a male black-faced vervet monkey (*Mandrillus sphinx*), showing its blue testicles colored by coherently scattered light.







ABOVE: The blue face of a male mandrill (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*). The hue is a structural color produced by coherent scattering.

OPPOSITE: The male cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius*) advertises his presence in the rainforests of Australia with a head of contrasting colors. The blue is made by a structural light scattering mechanism similar to the mandrill.

scatters blue light. Since the array is not a true photonic crystal, being rather disordered, the color is not iridescent, appearing the same from any direction.

We can only surmise why this happens, which is that it is likely a strong sexual signal in male mandrills, with their blue patches on the face and rump. The same probably holds for vervets. In the snub-nosed monkeys it seems to be a species characteristic, since all individuals have the same appearance.

Primates have the best color vision of all mammals, which surely explains their frequent use of bright colors as signals. Our own primate vision lets us experience these colors just as they appear to our near cousins.

## FLUORESCENCE

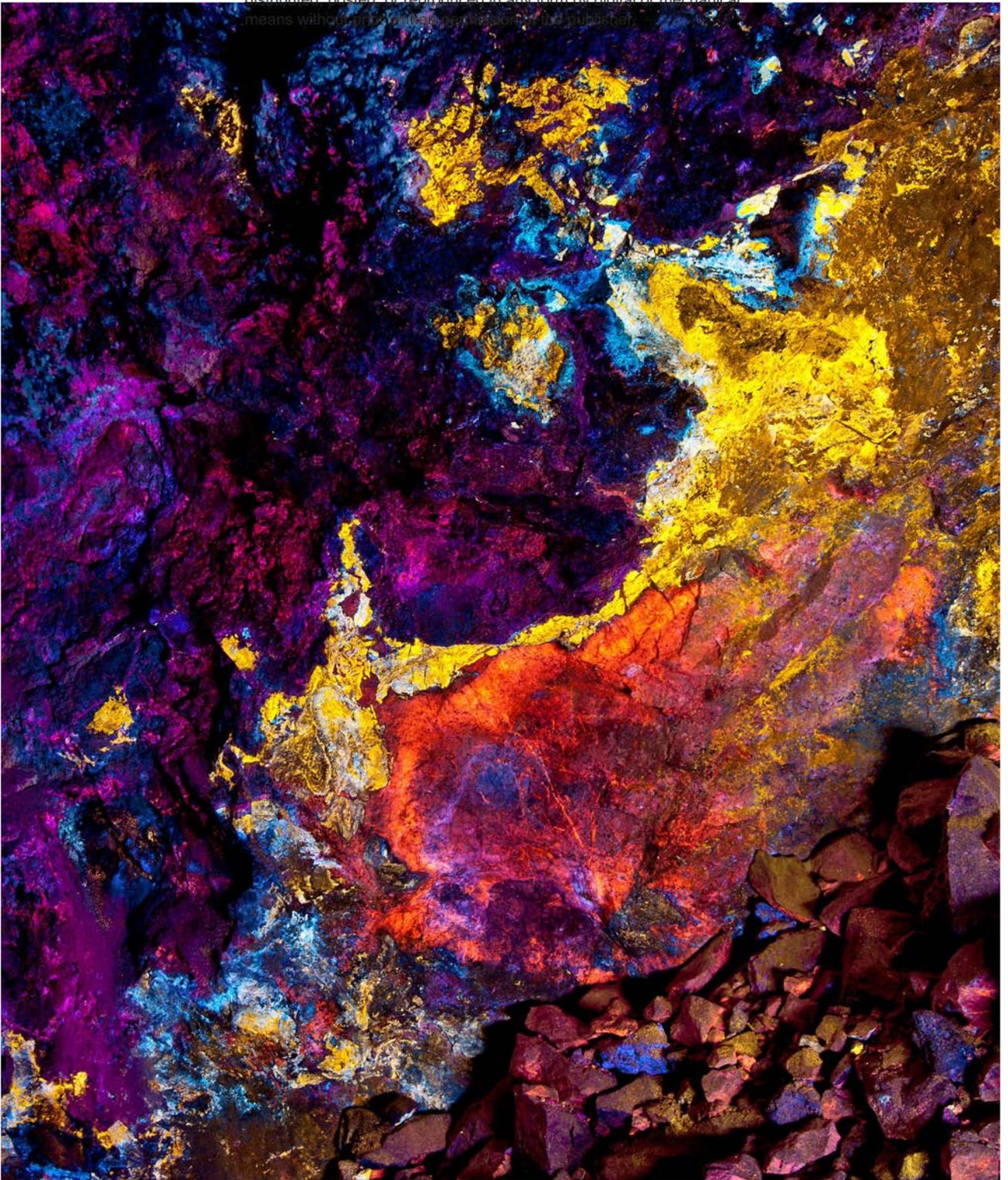
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To humans, fluorescence can look as if a material is glowing. The color you see may not be what you would expect, however, and certainly never very bright.

With the exceptions of some rare (and dramatic) conversions between energy and matter, energy is turned into other forms of energy. In the case of pigments, this means that all light that is absorbed by the surface of a colored organism is converted to other forms of energy.

When the light is extremely bright—for example, a laser—its energy can partially be turned into sound, ringing the tissue like a bell. For the most part though, the light is converted into heat. This is why black shirts and cars get hot on a sunny day, and why cell phones get so hot in the sun that they shut down. However, in certain cases, some of the light energy that is absorbed by a pigment is actually re-emitted as light. When the light is re-emitted so slowly that it lasts for many minutes after the original light has been shut off, it is referred to as phosphorescence. This is what may make your watch dial, the stick-on stars on a child's bedroom ceiling, and the eerie fungus glowing in the forest all glow in the dark (see page 155).

Fluorescence is when some light is re-emitted but only when the original light is present. Fluorescence has a number of special properties. One is that because only part of the energy of the original light—the excitation—is re-emitted, it must only contain colors (wavelengths) that have less energy. This means that fluorescence is always towards the red end of the spectrum than the excitation light; typically it is just one color away, so ultraviolet excitation typically leads to blue fluorescence, blue leads to green, and green leads to red. However, it can sometimes be very far from the color of the excitation light. Secondly, fluorescence is typically not what is called an “efficient” process. This means that it is normally much dimmer than the excitation, sometimes 50 to 100 times dimmer. For this reason, we can usually only see it if the excitation light is blocked with a filter. With this light blocked, however, fluorescence can make it appear that the substance is glowing, which can be quite beautiful.



Minerals fluorescing in a tunnel lit by UV light: sphalerite is yellow, calcite is red, hydrozincite is white. Photographed at the Copper Queen Mine in Bisbee, Arizona.



## Discoveries in fluorescence

Recent advances in fluorescent imaging, which shine a bright UV or blue light on an object and then block the eye from seeing that light, have shown that fluorescence is common in nature. It is seen in many minerals, especially the mineral fluorite, which is named for its strong and beautiful fluorescence under UV light. Fluorite's fluorescence is usually a deep blue, but can be nearly every color of the rainbow, depending on the impurities within the mineral. The geology sections in many museums contain exhibits of fluorescent rocks, where the light emission is triggered by a button that turns on a UV or deep blue light.

OPPOSITE: Desert hairy scorpion (*Hadrurus spadix*) in eastern Oregon, USA, fluorescing under UV light.

Fluorescence in biological tissue is a more recent discovery, and is common wherever pigments are used. This is because pigments absorb light, which is the first step in creating fluorescence. Certain common and important biological molecules fluoresce. For example, the keratin that makes up our hair, fingernails, and parts of our skin fluoresces green, while chlorophyll, which is found in nearly every plant and a number of other organisms, fluoresces red. Indeed, almost every major group of animals and plants have fluorescent pigments. Scorpions strongly emit blue-green light when excited by UV light, which has been used to find them at night, but is almost certainly not useful for the animals themselves. The common nature of fluorescence has also generated a fair bit of excitement among scientists and has led to the hypothesis that fluorescence serves a visual purpose.

We must be careful, however, in ascribing a function to a given example of fluorescence. As discussed, fluorescence tends to be weak. It also often requires excitation from parts of the sun's spectrum that are not very bright to begin with, such as the UV region. For these reasons, fluorescence is usually much harder to see under natural lighting conditions than it is in a laboratory, or at night where very bright excitation lights can be used together with filters to maximize the effect. The glow from scorpions, for example, which is so striking under UV lamps at night, is not even noticeable during the day, because even though more UV light is present, the blue emission is overwhelmed by the natural blue daylight.

## INDEX

- accessory pigments 50, 53, 54  
aequorin 142, 218  
airglow 32  
algae 36, 40, 48, 50, 206, 270  
alizarin 234  
aluminum oxide 39  
amphibians 124, 128  
analogous colors 23, 238  
anglerfish 154, 158  
animals 12–15  
    color patterning 259  
    eyes 73, 74–9  
    how animals see color 70–119  
    how they make color 44–9  
    light manipulation 238, 262  
    night vision 32, 86, 89  
    pigments 47, 48  
    spectral sensitivity 84, 85  
    structural colors in 62–5  
    *see also individual species*  
anolis lizards 125  
anomalous trichromats 100  
anthocyanins 47–8, 54  
aposematic colors 108, 161, 183, 189, 195  
aqueous humor 77  
Arctic fox 137  
art, color in 244–59  
a'strict 250  
atmosphere 31  
augmented reality (AR) 250  
aurora 32  
Australian giant cuttlefish 176  
  
baboons 15, 220  
background matching/mimicry 186  
bacteria 154  
badgers 195  
barber-pole effect 195  
bats 134, 150, 170  
  
bees 6, 54, 99, 117  
    color vision 84, 85, 102, 105  
    finding food 170  
    iridescence 62  
    ultraviolet (UV) 6, 10, 72, 124  
beetles 7, 105, 150  
    bio-inspiration 267  
    bioluminescence 161  
    camouflage 201  
    eyes 78  
    infrared (IR) 10  
    iridescence 62  
    sexual dimorphism 176  
    toxic colors 183  
biliverdin 48  
bio-fluorescent animals 142  
bio-inspiration 262–7  
bioluminescence 26, 28, 47, 84, 108, 122, 146, 147, 154–61, 168, 169, 202  
biomimicry 218  
biophilic design movement 238–43  
biotechnology 23  
birds: bio-inspiration 267  
    color categorization 114  
    color vision 6, 89, 166  
    fighting functions of color 180  
    fluorescence 140, 141  
    iridescent colors 62  
    mate choice 6, 128–31, 164, 166, 167, 229, 241  
    nectar-feeding 54  
    photoreceptors 12, 15, 89, 102, 110, 127, 173  
    plumage 6, 48, 130–1, 166, 176, 180, 229, 241, 267  
    sexual dimorphism 128, 176  
    structural colors in 61–2  
    ultraviolet (UV) 6, 10, 72, 122, 124, 128, 130–1, 134  
    *see also individual species*  
  
birds of paradise 89, 238, 241, 267  
black: in animals 48  
    associations with 222, 223  
    bio-inspiration 267  
    name 226  
    pigments 244  
    in plants 47  
black-body radiator 28  
blacksaddle filefish 189  
blue 10, 15, 16, 26  
    associations with 20, 220, 224, 250  
    Cerulean Blue 230  
    pigments 244  
    structural colors 48  
    symbolism 20  
blue butterfly 176  
blue-ringed octopus 108, 164, 189  
blue whales 62  
bluebirds 58, 61, 62  
blushing macques 62  
boron 39  
bowerbirds 241  
the brain 16, 19, 76, 78, 96, 99, 114–19  
brands 229  
budgerigars 85, 140, 141  
butterflies 54, 189  
    bio-inspiration 262–5  
    camouflage 201  
    color vision 15, 74, 83, 110  
    eyes 78  
    sexual dimorphism 176  
    structural colors in 60, 61  
    ultraviolet (UV) 126, 128  
    *see also individual species*  
  
camouflage 10, 15, 89, 158, 164, 186–205, 206, 210  
    bioluminescence as 202  
    coral reefs 209, 210

- counterillumination 202  
disruptive coloration and razzle-dazzle 192  
mimicry 189  
mirrors 201  
octopuses 7, 108  
red colors 15  
stripes for attack and defense 195  
transparency as 198  
carbon 36, 47  
cardinal birds 15  
carmine 244  
carnivores 170  
carnivorous plants 140  
carotenoids 47, 48, 53, 54, 82–3, 114  
carotenoproteins 48  
caterpillars 186  
catfish 149  
cats 134  
cave paintings 244  
cell phones 15, 66, 210, 218  
cephalopods 108, 157, 158  
Cerulean Blue 230  
chlorophyll: in leaves and plants 26, 40, 44, 47, 48, 50–7, 69, 140, 206  
stoplight loosejaw dragonfish 146, 147  
in water 36, 149  
chloroplasts 53  
ChromaFlair metallic paint 218  
chromatic aberration 138  
chromatic contrast 257, 259  
chromium 39  
chromophores 80, 81, 82  
cichlids 92, 93  
cis and trans conformation 82  
cleaner animals 213  
climate change 50, 270–5  
clothes 234–7  
clouds 31  
clownfish 180  
coastal waters 29, 36, 40, 149  
cochineal insect 244  
cold climates 238  
color constancy 19, 98–9, 247, 258, 259, 268–9, 273  
color vision 15, 83  
building blocks of 84–5  
changes during life 92  
evolution of 89  
number of photoreceptors and 110–13  
variety in 86–95  
*see also individual species*  
color wheel 23  
colorblindness 12, 19, 100, 102, 108, 164  
colors: definition of 24–69  
color naming 6, 10, 226–9  
color preference 220–5  
evolution of 162–215  
hidden color 120–61  
how color begins 28–35  
how to see 83  
interaction with each other 23  
painting color and light 254–9  
communication 20, 89, 122, 132, 209, 234  
complementary colors 23, 238  
compound eyes 78–9, 117, 170  
cones 19, 74, 76, 77–8, 80, 86, 87, 89, 96, 97, 99–100  
cone-opponent contrast mechanism 96, 224, 257  
cookiecutter sharks 158  
copepods 158  
coral reefs 47, 183  
bleaching of 270–3  
camouflage on 198  
colors on 206–15  
fluorescence 142  
ultraviolet (UV) 132  
coral trout 213  
CoralWatch 270  
cornea 74, 76, 77, 127  
counterillumination 202  
cows 108  
crow butterfly 201  
crustaceans 48, 117  
bioluminescence 157  
eyes 74, 78  
ultraviolet (UV) 122, 124, 132  
cuttlefish 108, 176  
damselfish 132, 133  
damselfies 61  
Darwin, Charles 6, 12  
daylight 84, 89, 268  
changes in natural 18  
color constancy and 98–9  
interiors 238  
painting in art 247  
deciduous trees 40  
deep sea 26, 40, 84, 149  
bioluminescence 146, 147, 154, 157–8  
and ultraviolet (UV) 132  
deep-sea squid 108  
deer 195  
defense, bioluminescence and 157  
dendrobatids 183  
deserts 40  
dewlaps 125  
diamonds 39  
dichromatism 83, 89, 92, 100, 108, 127, 134, 173  
digital art 250  
disguise/mimicry 186  
disruptive coloration 192  
dogs 12, 85, 108, 134

- dolphins 173  
dragonfish 146, 147, 158  
dyes 26, 234
- eastern coral snake 189  
eels 149  
electromagnetic radiation 29  
emotions 229  
    Emotion Wheel 222  
    emotional heft of color 223  
Eurasian siskins 180  
excitation light 66, 69  
eyes: anatomy of 74–9  
    animal eyes 73, 74–9  
    compound eyes 78–9, 117, 170  
    human eyes 19, 76, 77–8, 96  
    invertebrate eyes 78  
    mantis shrimp 113  
    photoreceptors 12, 74, 76, 77–8  
    vertebrate eyes 77–8  
    visual ecology 166–9
- fang blennies 213  
far-red light 122, 149, 150  
fashion 20, 23, 234–7  
fat-tailed dunnarts 173  
fighting prowess, color and 180–5  
fire chaser beetles 150  
fireflies 158, 161, 168, 169  
fish: bioluminescence 154, 157, 158, 202  
    blue colors 213  
    camouflage 192, 198, 201, 202, 209, 210  
    cleaner fish 213  
    colors on coral reefs 206–15, 238  
    eyes 77  
    far-red light 146, 147–9  
    fighting functions of color 180  
    iridescence 62  
    opsins 86  
    photophores 157  
    photoreceptors 74, 127  
    pigments 48  
    sex change 176  
    sexual dimorphism 102, 176  
    toxic colors 183  
    ultraviolet (UV) 122, 124, 128, 132, 180  
    vision changes 92  
    *see also individual species*  
    flamingos 89  
    flavonoids 47  
    flies 110, 127, 186, 267  
    flowers 54, 170  
        attracting pollinators 105, 164, 170  
        ultraviolet (UV) 54, 123, 132, 170  
    fluorescence 47, 66–9, 122  
        discoveries in 69  
        hunting in the twilight zone 142  
        and sex 140–5  
        use in neuroscience 218  
    fluorite 69  
    fovea 96  
    foxes 62  
    freshwater 36, 149  
    Frisch, Karl von 117  
    frogs 48, 142, 161  
        camouflage 186, 198  
        evolution of color vision 89  
        toxic colors 183  
        ultraviolet (UV) 138  
    frontal lobes 114, 117  
    fruits, and primates 173  
    fungi 47, 154  
    geckos 32, 89  
    gemstones 36, 39  
    geraniums 54  
    girls, and the color pink 224  
    glaucoma 262  
    glowworms 161  
    gneiss rock 39  
    gobies 213  
    Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 247  
    golden poison frog 183  
    golden snub-nosed monkeys 62, 65  
    golden tamarins 62  
    goldfish 99, 149  
    granite 39–40  
    grasshoppers 186  
    gray, associations with 222, 223  
    Greeks, ancient 10, 244  
    green 15, 26  
        associations with 223, 250  
        name 226  
        pigments 48  
    grey speckled moth 186  
    grouper 132, 213  
    hamsters 134  
    Hazda 224  
    heat detection 150  
    hemoglobin 44, 48  
    hidden color 120–61  
    Himba 223  
    Hinduism 20  
    honey possums 173  
    honeycreepers 54  
    Hope diamond 39  
    hot climates 238  
    house sparrows 180  
    humans: color in human life 16–19, 216–75  
        color meaning for 20–3  
        color vision 12, 15, 19, 89, 96–101, 102, 114  
        conceiving color 97, 98  
        descriptions of colors 10  
        evolution of color vision 89  
        eyes 19, 76, 77–8, 96  
        infrared (IR) 122, 146  
        spectral sensitivity 84, 85  
        ultraviolet (UV) 72, 122, 124, 127, 132, 137, 138  
    hummingbirds 54, 62  
    hunting in the twilight zone 142  
    hydrangeas 54  
    Iliad 226  
    immersive art 250  
    indigo 47, 234, 244

- infrared (IR) 10, 29, 83, 122, 146–53
- insects 48, 105, 262
- camouflage 186, 198
  - color processing 114, 117
  - eyes 74, 78
  - iridescence 61, 218
  - structural colors in 61–2
  - ultraviolet (UV) 72, 78, 122, 124, 127
- interior design 20, 238–43
- invertebrates 117
- eyes 74, 78
  - ultraviolet (UV) 124, 128
- iridescence 26, 44, 61, 62, 58, 218, 262
- iris 77
- iron 39, 44
- iron oxide 244
- isoprenes 47
- Jastrow, Joseph 220, 224
- jellyfish 142, 154, 198, 218
- kelp beds 47
- keratin 61, 69
- Krishna 20
- lanternfish 158
- lapis lazuli 244
- leaf insect 192
- leaves 26, 50–7
- LEDs 262
- lemon damselfish 132
- lens 74, 76, 77, 78, 127
- lichens 137
- light 26, 29, 47, 66, 84
- chlorophyll and 40
  - light manipulation 238, 262
  - light scattering 26, 44, 58, 84, 267
  - moonlight 32, 254
  - painting color and light 254–9
  - reflection 44, 47
  - and spatial color design 238
  - and structural colors 58
  - sunlight 28, 29, 31, 84, 247, 254
  - transmission 44, 47
  - what light is 28
- lizards 192
- lobster 48
- longtail glasswing butterfly 262
- Lorenz, Conrad 214
- love, language of in hidden colors 126
- Lubbock, Sir John 124
- luciferase 154
- luciferins 154
- magnesium 39, 44, 47, 50
- malachite 244
- mallows 54
- malvidin 54
- mammals 86, 134
- camouflage 195
  - color vision 89, 134–5, 173
  - ultraviolet (UV) 122, 124, 134
  - see also individual species*
- mandrills 62, 65, 195
- mantis shrimp: color vision 7, 15, 83, 85, 99, 110, 113, 117
- eyes 78, 113
  - ultraviolet (UV) 127
- marigolds 54
- Marshmallow Laser Feast 250
- marsupials 134, 173
- Mayans 244
- melanins 47, 48, 61
- men 19, 100
- millipedes 154
- mimicry 186, 189
- minerals 69
- mirrors 201
- mole rats 173
- moles 134
- monarch butterfly 48, 189
- Mondrian, Piet 257–9
- Mondrian stimuli 258, 259
- Monet, Claude 247
- monkey beetles 176
- monkeys 89, 173
- mood 218, 226, 229
- moonlight 32, 254
- morpho butterfly 61, 262
- moths 32, 186, 192
- Munch, Edvard 255–7
- mushroom bodies 117
- Nabokov, Dimitri 260
- names, color 6, 226–9
- Neo-Plasticism 257
- neurodegenerative diseases 262
- neurons 218
- neuropils 117
- neuroscience 218
- Newton, Sir Isaac 23, 26
- night vision 32, 86, 89
- nitrogen 39, 47
- northern cardinal 167
- nudibranchs 164, 183, 189
- oceans: bioluminescence 154
- color of 36, 39
  - light penetration in 29
  - warming of 270, 273
- ochre 244
- octopuses 85, 102, 189
- camouflage 7, 108, 198
  - colorblindness 164
  - eyes 74
- ocular media 127, 134, 137
- Odyssey 226
- offense, bioluminescence and 158
- ommatidia 78
- ommochromes 48
- opal 61
- opponent processing 19
- opsins 80, 81, 82, 86, 88, 89, 100, 202
- optic nerve 76, 96
- optic neuropils 117
- orange 223, 226
- owls 86, 102
- packaging 229
- paint 26, 218, 267
- painting color and light 254–9

- Pantone 6, 230, 231  
 paper wasps 180  
 parasites 213  
 parrotfish 210  
 parrots 12, 48, 89, 102, 138, 140  
 patterns 195, 234, 259  
 peacock spider 164  
 peacocks 12, 164  
 pelargonidin 54  
 penguins 102  
 peonidin 54  
 peonies 54  
 peppered moths 192  
 perception, color 19  
     color constancy 19, 98–9, 247, 258, 259, 268–9, 273  
 phaeomelanin 48, 62  
 Phoenicians 226  
 phosphorescence 47, 66  
 photocytes 154  
 photography, color 268–9, 273  
 photonic crystals 44, 58, 61, 62  
 photons 58, 83, 140, 267  
 photophores 146, 147, 154, 158, 202  
 photoreception 74, 76, 77–8, 80–113  
 photosynthesis 47, 53, 80, 270  
 phototransduction cascade 80  
 phytochromes 47  
 pigeons 99  
 pigments 26, 44, 262  
     chlorophyll 50–7  
     development of 244  
     diversity of 47–8  
     and light 66, 69  
     natural pigments 218, 234, 244  
     synthetic 20, 23, 44  
 pink 16  
     associations with 224  
     millennial pink 230  
     name 226  
 pit vipers 85, 122, 150  
 pitcher plants 140  
 plants 238  
     chlorophyll in 26, 40, 44, 47, 48, 50–7, 69, 140, 206  
     colors of 40–1, 53  
     fluorescence 140  
     how they make color 44–9  
     pigments and diversity in plants 47–8  
 Pointillism 210  
 poison arrow frogs 183  
 polar icecaps 40  
 pollinators 54, 105, 117, 164, 170  
 polyps 206, 270  
 Pop Art 230  
 porphyrin 44, 47, 50  
 poster colors 214–15  
 preference, color 220–5  
 primary colors 255, 257  
 primates 96, 100, 173, 195  
     color processing 114, 117  
     structural colors in 62–5  
 Princess of Burundi cichlid fish 180  
 psittacofulvins 48  
 psychochromoesthesia 260  
 pufferfish 183, 189  
 purple 226  
 pygmy seahorse 15  
  
 quasi-ordered arrays 61, 62, 65  
  
 rainbows 31  
 raindrops 31  
 rattlesnakes 150  
 razzle-dazzle 192  
 red 15, 16, 26  
     associations with 220, 222, 223, 224  
     dyes and pigments 234, 244  
 red-faced uakaris 62  
 red howler monkeys 62  
 red light, depth and 92  
 red-winged blackbird 48  
 reef fish 92, 206–15, 238  
 reindeer, and ultraviolet (UV) 134, 137, 138  
 Rembrandt van Rijn 254  
 reproduction 15, 176–9  
     and bioluminescence 158, 161  
     fireflies 168, 169  
     and fluorescence 140–5  
     mate choice 6, 128–31, 164, 166, 167, 229, 241  
 reptiles 48, 124, 128  
 retina 19, 74, 76, 77, 78, 96, 97, 99, 110, 117, 127, 138  
 RGB system 15, 96, 102  
 rhabdomeres 74, 78, 79, 80, 113  
 rhodopsin 86, 89  
 Roberts, Andres 250  
 robins 229  
 rocks, colors of 39–40  
 rods 74, 76, 77, 78, 80, 86, 87, 89, 97  
 Romans, ancient 244  
 rose madder 234  
 rubies 39  
 ruddy orangutans 62  
  
 saffron 47, 234  
 salmon 149  
 Sanctuary of the Unseen Forest 250  
 sands 40  
 sapphires 39  
 satellites 113  
 scarlet king snake 189  
 sclera 76, 77  
 scorpions 69  
 sea slugs 164, 183, 189  
 sea snails 226  
 seaweed 36  
 self-expression, color as 23  
 serpin 48  
 Seurat, Georges 210  
 sex, and color 140–5, 176–9  
 sexual dimorphism 102, 128, 176  
 sharks 142, 158  
 shrimp 7, 132, 154, 157, 158, 213  
 Signac, Paul 210  
 silvery orb-weaver spider 201  
 skunks 195  
 sloths 48

- snakes 7, 10, 122, 150, 189, 192  
snow 137  
solar panels 262  
spectral sensitivity 84, 85  
sperm whales 173  
spider monkeys 173  
spiders 15, 110, 117  
    camouflage 201  
    eyes 74, 78  
    iridescence 62  
    ultraviolet (UV) 128  
spook-fish 157  
sports 229  
squid 62, 74, 78, 108, 198  
stars 32  
stoplight loosejaw dragonfish 146, 147  
straight-lined sulphur butterfly 126  
stripes 195  
structural color 44, 48, 58–65  
summer tanager 166  
sunlight 28, 29, 31, 50, 84, 247, 254  
Symbolism 20, 255  
synesthesia 260
- tetrachromacy 83, 89, 92, 100, 102, 127, 173  
textiles, pigments 47  
thermal categories 223  
thermal-sensor designs 262  
thermoreceptors 150  
thin film interference 26  
Tiffany & Co. 229  
tigers 62, 195  
toxic colors 183  
transparency, as camouflage 198  
trends, color 23, 230–3  
trichromacy 83, 92, 96, 100, 102, 105, 134, 173  
Turner, J.M.W. 247  
twilight zone 140, 142  
Tyrian purple 226
- ultramarine 244  
ultraviolet (UV) 10, 29, 47, 80, 83, 122, 124–39  
    animals and 72  
    depth and 92  
    flowers 54, 170  
    fluorescence and 69  
    how to see 127  
    humans and 72, 122, 124, 127, 132, 137, 138  
    insensitivity to 138  
    and mate choice 128–31  
    protection against 132  
    and social status 180  
    underwater 132–3  
Ulysses 262
- Valentin's sharpnose puffer 189  
Van Noten, Dries 234  
vegetarian food, finding 170–5  
velvet belly lanternsharks 157  
vermilion 244  
vertebrates 74, 76, 77–8, 86, 87, 88, 114, 117, 124  
vervet monkeys 62, 65  
viceroxy butterfly 189  
virtual reality (VR) 250  
vision, color 15, 83  
    building blocks of 84–5  
    changes during life 92  
    evolution of 89  
    number of photoreceptors and 110–13  
    variety in 86–95  
    *see also individual species*  
visual cortex 96, 98, 114, 117  
visual ecology 166–9  
visual identity 230  
visual pigments 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 110  
    color-deficient mammals 134, 137  
    compound eyes 78  
    deep-sea animals 146  
    fish species 92, 93, 146  
    freshwater animals 149  
    red sensitivity 146  
    ultraviolet (UV) 127, 134  
vitamin A 82  
Vogelkop bowerbird 241
- Wallace, Alfred 6, 12  
warning colors 15  
wasps 180  
water: camouflage underwater 198  
    colors of 36, 39  
    light and 29, 92, 157  
    ultraviolet (UV) 132–3  
    underwater photography 268  
whales 89, 173  
white, bio-inspiration 267  
white balance 268, 269, 273  
white light 28  
wildebeests 62  
woad 244  
worms 113, 154, 198  
wrasse 210, 213
- xanthophylls 53
- Yali 224  
yellow 26, 209, 223
- zebra finches 114, 128  
zebras 192, 195, 202, 267