

Were women the masterminds behind hunting with weapons?

Women could have been the first humans to use weapons to hunt. An analysis of spear-wielding chimps, most of which are females, suggests the idea may not be as eccentric as it might sound.

In 2007, Jill Pruetz from Iowa State University in Ames discovered that chimps in Fongoli, Senegal, [thrust sharpened sticks into nest holes in trees](#) to stab or club small, nocturnal primates called bushbabies. Pruetz and her team observed 308 such hunts up until 2014. Females carried out 61 per cent of them, despite making up only 39 per cent of the chimps in hunting parties.

The Fongoli chimps are still the only ones known to use weapons to kill or wound prey, even though chimps elsewhere in Africa – again mainly females – use tools to get at termites and tubers. Pruetz suspects that may be because the Fongoli band is much more cooperative than most, so female hunters are less likely to lose their kill to a bigger male. “There’s no incentive to hunt if you’re going to have your prey stolen,” she says.

The relative lack of prey at Fongoli’s savannah habitat may have made chimps there more inventive in their quest for meat, says Travis Pickering of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. If female chimps initiated the use of weapons to hunt, the same might have been true of the [earliest humans](#), Pruetz suggests. “Maybe it should cause people to rethink the old premise of man the hunter,” she says.

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