

Fur factor



SHELLEY MAYS / STAFF
Nashville resident Heather Whiteside shows off some of the costumes she has made. Whiteside is one of the members of the local furry community who likes the costuming aspect of the culture.

—Related stories—

- [Fur factor](#)
- [A furry glossary](#)
- [Anthropomorphic animals through history](#)

By IAN DEMSKY
Staff Writer

In this age of ever-important self-awareness, there are those among us who revel in the ability to unleash their animal instincts

Two wolves, a leopard and a white tiger walk into a coffee shop. Soon they are joined by a bunny, a 6-foot tall osprey and a pair of dragons.

It sounds like the start of a bad joke, but these eight creatures came to Nashville's Cafe Coco to clear the air of misconceptions we may have about them.

Except for the osprey, who jokingly wore a leopard tail, they were dressed much like the cafe's other patrons. They could have easily been taken for a book club, writers group or, perhaps, science-fiction fans.

However, while it is true that the *Lord of the Rings* movies have elevated fantasy fandom to popular acceptance and millions of die-hard Trekkies still enjoy a certain level of social acceptance — telling people your alter-ego howls once in a while can invite disastrous misunderstandings.

To understand what belonging to this group is really all about, think of your favorite animal, suggests 26-year-old James Rabioloa, whose white tiger persona is named Sethor. "Almost everyone has one."

A favorite animal, that is.

What are the qualities of that animal that you admire or see reflected in yourself? Perhaps the grace of a cat? The prowess and strength of a lion? The cunningness of a wolf?

Those who take it one step further, celebrating and identifying with a particular animal — often collecting pictures and artwork of that animal and even developing an animal persona — call themselves furies, furfens — which means fur fans — or sometimes just furs.

The furry phenomenon spans genres, attracting interest from followers of science fiction, fantasy, anime cartoons and online role-playing games called MUDs (multi-user domains) or MUCKs (multi-user creature kingdoms).

Furies are the latest manifestation of an impulse as old as human civilization, the furs say. One can look back to the animal-human hybrids painted on caves in Australia more than 10,000 years ago, to the gods of the Egyptian pantheon, to the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh or the centaurs, the human-torsoed horses of Greek mythology. Even Jesus Christ was referred to as the "lion of Judah" and "lamb of God," evoking animal symbolism. The Christlike figure of renowned Christian scholar and writer C.S. Lewis' *Chronicals of Namia* books was a lion named Aslan.

Still, the furry aspects of their personalities usually are shared only with other furs.

"I don't meow at people at work," Sethor says.

When they are together, furs can really let their hair down and be themselves.

"For example, canid furs" — those with "fursonas" among the Canidae family, which includes foxes, wolves, dogs, jackals and coyotes — "may eat their steak a little rarer and like to lay together touching in fur piles," says Gareth Bleddynn, 29, a wolf. This trait is common among pack animals, he says.

Many furies have been reluctant to talk to the press about their group because media attention over the past few years — including a *Vanity Fair* article, an MTV special and even a C.S.I. episode — has focused almost exclusively on the sexual aspects of their subculture, says Matthew Ebel, a 24-year-old Web designer, writer and musician whose fursona is Hali, the aforementioned avian.

"You can understand why we're paranoid," he says.

He doesn't deny the truth of those reports, but he says that while there are some "furverts" who like to get together in their "fursuits" and "yiff," focusing too much that aspect would be like thinking everyone who rides a motorcycle is a Hell's Angel.

The eight gathered in the cafe live in Nashville and elsewhere in Middle Tennessee. They stress that there is a wide variety of interests and beliefs within the subculture, which has been drawing an ever-broadening fan base. A Yahoo online community dedicated to Tennessee furies has more than 100 members, and the largest furry conventions throughout the country draw thousands of participants.

Finding their fur

There is a distinction, they say, between the people who enjoy the costuming aspects of the culture and "lifestylers," who incorporate their animals into their lives in a more spiritual way.

Rabioloa, aka Sethor, was a black panther until close to the end of 2002, when he evolved into a white tiger.

"I didn't choose it," Rabioloa says. "It happened naturally."

The transformation was part of a larger spiritual journey that grew out of a chaotic period in his life, he says.

"I have always felt an affinity for felines, even as a young child, so as I found my own pagan spiritual path, animals were always an important part of it to me," he says. "Black panther is a master of shadows, of hoarding your strength when you must, and being strong, yet unseen. I do not feel panther has ever left, as he is always in the shadows. But now that it is time for me to come into my own and be more open, out, and forward, the strength and wisdom of tiger now represents my ideals now."

Sethor discovered the furry phenomenon when he went online to find pictures, music and other people who shared his interest in Disney's *The Lion King*.

"I found furs and furry, and have been a fur ever since," he says.

Leopard Jarrod Henry, 25, also discovered the fur culture through his interest in *The Lion King*.

Around the time the movie came out, his grandfather died and his father remarried.

"A lot of lessons in that movie took root in me," he says. "After that, it wasn't a matter of how I came to find furs. Furs are everywhere."

Still, on the whole, furies tend to be young, and they count large percentages of homosexuals, bisexuals and pagans among their numbers — people already leading alternative lifestyles, Bleddynn says.

Among the group at the cafe, even those who had informed their parents of alternative sexual preferences or religious beliefs say they didn't think their parents would "get" the whole furry thing.

A spiritual connection

Some furies even have fursonas based on mythical creatures, such as 27-year-old Nathan McCrum, and his girlfriend, 27-year-old Vanessa Craddock, who are both dragons.

McCrums, whose friends call him by his dragon name Khinsah, says it took him years to be at peace with his Draconian nature.

Raised in a conservative Christian home, it wasn't until Khinsah was in his late teens that he allowed himself to explore the history of the creatures that had always fascinated him.

"I started collecting pictures and reading stories about dragons on the Internet," he says. Soon he found others who had Web sites devoted to dragons and developed relationships with these people.

He explored the Western and Eastern traditions of dragons.

"In the West, they're winged, fire-breathing, damsel-stealing monsters," he says. "In the Eastern tradition, they are more balanced and majestic."

Khinsah says that if you were to take a snapshot of his spiritual image, a dragon is what you'd see.

"It's just something that hit me one day," he says. "It almost felt like I had a flashback of a past life, where I saw myself and I saw other dragons. Since then, I have had these 'faded memories' a few other times.

"I've asked myself, 'Am I crazy, or is this the real deal?'"

He sees his dragon nature and his Christian beliefs to be in harmony, he says citing Psalms 148:7, which states: Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps.

"I try to take the Bible and use it for wisdom and insight on leading a good life," he says.

Several non-furry people have told him he reminds them of a dragon.

"I've always seen myself as scaly, and I love to fly," he says.

How does being a dragon affect his life? There's not any one single way, he says. Mostly, it's an attitude, a way of looking at the world. A way of being.

Sean Nordell, whose totem is a wolf, uses the strength of his animal to conquer difficult situations and as a

guiding influence in other aspects of his life.

Nordell, who is nicknamed Black Thome, has a tattoo of a blue koy — a Japanese symbol of good fortune — on his left shoulder.

"Like the wolf, it shows a mythical connection," says Nordell, a 30-year-old who also enjoys hunting and fishing, Japanese anime and studying history, including building models of civil war ships.

Turning fur into art

For Hali, his furry side and his creativity are linked in the deepest parts of his personality.

As a kid growing up in the suburbs of Spokane, Wash., he used to run his dog, Muffin, down to the woods and back every night.

On one of these walks, his overactive imagination and talkativeness came together one day when he struck up a conversation with an invisible osprey he named Fazaar.

The two talked about pretty much everything a junior high kid is concerned with: school, parents, people he liked and didn't like.

"That's when I started to wonder where Fazaar went when he wasn't with me," he says. "I started asking him about his home, his family and such. The more he answered, the more I figured that I needed to write this all down."

At the age of 16, he began writing a novel about Fazaar's world and culture. And shortly thereafter, he incorporated Fazaar into an autobiographical musical called *Imaginary Friends*.

Over the next several years, the still-untitled book fleshed out more of his relationship with Fazaar. In the book, Hali is Fazaar's brother, though not by birth.

While still in junior high, Hali also discovered a text-based cyberspace world called FurryMUCK, where people play animal characters.

From there Hali found a plethora of Internet resources for furies.

"I found a lot of artists' sites, some porn and a lot of stories," he says. "Since I dreamed of being a bird — literally, and quite frequently — I really clicked with these animal people."

Today, as he continues to express himself in writing and music, that imaginary world is very much alive for him.

"I'm in no hurry to get rid of Fazaar or any of the other friends I've got upstairs, but I'm focusing a lot of energy into making the reality available to anyone else who wants to keep it alive."

Getting together

Along with cyber connections, furies, like many other groups, get together at conferences, common in the sci-fi community and known as "cons," where they can frolic among their own.

The annual Labor Day get together in Memphis, known as the Mephit Furmeet, or MFM, is will celebrate its eighth year, says organizer Christopher "Tyger" Rother.

What started out as a pizza party drew a crowd of more than 400 last year, which is small compared to other fur cons that draw thousands from throughout the world.

"For many of us, MFM is a family reunion," Tyger says. "A gathering of our friends. During the course of Labor Day Weekend, we have panels on writing, costuming, drawing. We have a video room, gaming, and an Internet room."

Part of MFM's program includes an auction and donations, which benefit Tiger Haven, a sanctuary just outside Knoxville. In the past four years, the group has raised more than \$30,000 for the organization, Tyger says. The \$12,000 raised at last year's convention was the largest charity amount raised at a furry convention, he says.

"There is a very tight bond between everyone at MFM," he says. "It's something that, no matter where everyone is from, the first thing they hear at opening ceremonies is 'welcome home.'"

This sharing of a common culture outside the mainstream is also one of the qualities most people involved in sci-fi and fantasy groups share. They are a way for people from across the spectrum of races, ages, backgrounds, body types and you name it to find an unusual equality and egalitarianism.

While the conferences can get wild and crazy, Hali says it's no different than the behavior you'd see at a convention of doctors, lawyers or plumbers.

Dressing up

Conventions are where Heather Whiteside, a 43-year-old library assistant at Vanderbilt's School of Law, gets to shine. She is known in the local community as a premier costume maker.

A bit outside the furry norm, proudly calling herself a "greymuzzle," she also points out she is an atypical fur, being female and a parent.

Whiteside, who is also sometimes called by the aliases Clovrr and Bunnidoll, is very happy to see a growing presence of female furies.

These conventions often share the hotel with other, less-fuzzy groups, which can lead to interesting encounters.

In the hotel's lobby, many children are unable to keep from attaching themselves to the legs or tail of a costumed fur, they say. Usually, that inspires embarrassment, frustration or sometimes fear in the onlooking

parents.

Etiquette dictates that furies act in the same friendly way a sports mascot or Disneyland character would, they say. At one convention, Bunnidoll dressed in a leopard costume, was waiting for an elevator in the hotel's lobby.

Seeing her, a mother dragged her child away from the elevator frowning. However, another woman from a simultaneous church convention chose to share the elevator with her.

"That costume's the bomb," the woman leaned over and said.

Her college-age daughter is not a fur but is fur-friendly, Bunnidoll said — it's just Mom, playing dress up and being weird.

Furriness is not something Bunnidoll hides from others, but she doesn't go around advertising it either.

Once, a law student caught a glimpse of her tattoos, which offer a pictorial journey through her life and feature lots of anthropomorphic images from a sphinx to a minotaur, carousel horses, an iguana, her Bunnidoll character, a wasp woman, a beast paw holding a rose and a mermaid portrait of her daughter. The law student asked, "You're not one of those weird furry people, are you?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly.

"Good, because I am, too," the student replied.

Bunnidoll was influenced early on by a love of mythology and fairy tales, especially those involving magical animals and transformation.

"I'm the 'serial fursona' type," she wrote when sharing her story with the local Yahoo group dedicated to furs. "And it's usually tied to a costume character. My first furry was Gynxfever, a winged leopardess/sphinx. Then was Oatmeal, my first bunny fursuit. Then Prynne, a Clydesdale mare. Then Bunnidoll, my perky goth bunny. Most recently was Posey Pockets, plague rat."

Custom-made costumes can run into the hundreds and even up to thousands of dollars.

"I mostly just make costumes for my own amusement, but I have done a fair amount of custom work for others," Bunnidoll says. "Some of it was your basic tail and ears sets, some more complicated projects, like partial fursuits, and lately I've been getting into wig design."

She discovered furies through costuming panel discussions at a 1998 sci-fi convention in St. Louis and found furry art online around the same time.

Sitting together around the table at the cafe, the furs say the one thing they want to convey to non-furs is that they're really no different than anyone else who is part of a group or has a special interest or hobby.

"There's no danger in trying to understand, to listen," Henry said.

On the Web

- www.anthrocon.org links to the world's largest annual anthropomorphics convention, in Philadelphia.
- ww.captainpackrat.com has a wide assortment of information about furies.
- www.furhid.ws is an Internet auction site where you can bid on all things furry, including fursuits.
- www.furry.com is the Web site for the FurryMUCK online text-based role-playing game.
- www.fursuit.org is dedicated to information on furry costuming.
- ww.mephitfumeet.org contains information about the annual Labor Day Weekend furry convention in Memphis.
- www.verf.com is a family-friendly anthropomorphic, or humanlike, animal art site.

Furries' favorite flicks and shows

Movies: The Lion King, Brother Bear, Disney's Robin Hood, The Great Mouse Detective, Winnie the Pooh, The Howling, An American Werewolf in London, The Rescuers, The Rescuers Down Under, The Jungle Book, The Secret of Nimh, Ice Age, Monsters Inc., Lilo & Stitch, Passion in the Desert, Tank Girl, The Island of Dr. Moreau, Jean Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast, Catpeople (1942), The Company of Wolves, Pom Poko (a.k.a. The Great Raccoon War), Watership Down, Dragonheart.

Television shows: Shirt Tales, Muppet Babies, Thundercats, Pandemonium, Mighty Mouse, Scooby-Doo, Yogi Bear, Looney Toons, Beauty and the Beast.