RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by JOCELYN KAISER

Aussie Rabbit Virus Causes Ruckus

Australian scientists are struggling to rid their country of a plague of alien rabbits that have wrecked the ecosystem and cause $100 million in farming losses each year. To begin restoring the balance, they hoped to deploy a virus to kill rabbits in a limited range. But in field tests on an island this month, the virus temporarily escaped, thanks to an unforeseen vector—bushflies.

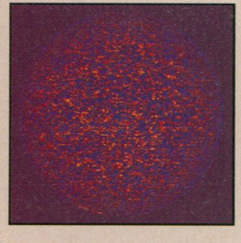
Wild European rabbits have overrun Australia's natural, marsupial-laden ecosystem with one dominated by rabbits, cats, and foxes. A myxoma virus was tried starting in 1950 as a control scheme, but it didn't always work. Rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD), from China, was the next great hope. RCD kills in 36 hours, so it seemed ideal for limited, quick-kill strikes. Such strikes were desirable because cats and foxes might further decimate native species if their staple diet—rabbits—was removed too rapidly.

Scientists with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation released the virus among rabbits in a quarantine enclosure on Wardang Island off South Australia last March. At first nothing much happened, but as the weather turned warm in early October, the virus killed 80% of the animals within a few days.

Then the experiment started going awry. Virus-killed rabbits turned up outside the enclosure, and two soon were found on the adjacent mainland near Point Pearce. Scientists now suspect bushflies, says project director Nicholas Newlands. "We noticed ... there were bushflies active in the warrens back in April," he says. The flies may have fed on sick rabbits in the enclosure, then crossed 5 kilometers of sea to infect mainland rabbits.

After a frenetic week destroying rabbits on the island and around Point Pearce, scientists think they have doused the epidemic, although some conservationists are still concerned. Australian officials want further public discussion before RCD is unleashed on the mainland. The virus could prove more potent than a limited strike weapon, because in spring and summer, bushflies are thicker than rabbits in Australia.

GONG Show



This image, showing the velocities of sound waves crossing the surface of the sun, is a glimpse of things to come from a worldwide network of solar detectors, switched on this month.

The Global Oscillation Network Group (GONG)—six observation stations in California, Hawaii, Australia, India, the Canary Islands, and Chile—is measuring these velocities every 60 seconds. The waves are thought to be caused when boiling gases create vibrations that propagate through the sun, causing it to "ring" like a bell. Comparisons of oscillation frequencies of waves passing through different portions of the sphere will yield details on the sun's internal temperature, interior motion, and chemical composition, much as seismic waves on Earth reveal the density and composition of our planet.

Previously, scientists have followed these oscillations for short periods as the sun passed over individual sites, but the global network will produce continuous data. "This will provide 100,000 times more information, with much better resolution throughout the sun," says John Leibacher at the National Solar Observatory in Tucson, Arizona, lead scientist for the project. Some of the initial findings will be published in *Science* next spring. In the meantime, the GONG World Wide Web site at **http://helios.tuc.noao.edu** will carry updates and images.

ODP

Survivor. *JOIDES Resolution.*

Rough Seas For Ocean Drilling

"When you're out at the edge of the envelope trying to do science, sometimes you get bitten," observes Jeffrey Fox, director of the international Ocean Drilling Program (ODP). And sometimes you get beaten. Fox should know: Early this month a huge storm off Greenland battered ODP's 143-meter ship, the only deep-sea scientific drilling vessel in the world, crippling its navigation, accessory propulsion, and communication systems. The ship limped into port, but researchers have lost time, money, and perhaps some future drilling opportunities.

ODP, at $45 million per year the largest ongoing earth sciences program, has been venturing into higher, more dangerous latitudes since the *JOIDES Resolution* replaced the smaller *Glomar Challenger* in 1985. Off southeast Greenland a few weeks ago, 50 shipboard scientists were going after volcanic crustal rocks spewed when Greenland and Europe ripped apart 60 million years ago.

Those plans changed abruptly when a storm predicted to be of modest intensity whipped itself into hurricane-force winds with gusts up to 190 kilometers per hour. Two 30-meter waves smashed a window and flooded the bridge, damaging the ship's communication and navigation systems. Two of the 70-ton thrusters that keep the ship positioned over a drill hole also took hard hits. "Everyone feels lucky to be alive after those 26 hours," says marine geologist Robert Duncan of Oregon State University, a co-chief scientist on the cruise.

The ship struggled into Halifax, Nova Scotia, where it is now undergoing repairs. Meanwhile, the program is tallying its losses: a repair bill of perhaps several hundred thousand dollars—although insurance will pay some costs—plus almost a month of lost days at sea that run $60,000 a day.

Fox says he's hopeful the ship will be ready for the next cruise by 1 November. ODP will now be considering just how late to work into the summer drilling season, he says. But he insists "we won't be shrinking from drilling in high latitudes."

Tech Help for Schools

While high-tech education visionaries are issuing apocalyptic warnings about the fate of the allegedly backward U.S. school system, a privately sponsored group has launched a Peace Corps–style initiative to ease schools into the 21st century.

The Massachusetts-based Tech Corps, which recruits volunteers to help schools harness computers and telecommunications technology, announced last month that it is going national. The corps, whose chief sponsor is the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association, will hold a conference in Washington, D.C., on 30 October where people can learn how to start state chapters. Founded by Gary J. Beach, chief executive officer of Computerworld Inc., the corps last year recruited 300 volunteers through the magazine *Computerworld* who have been working in 12 school districts throughout Massachusetts.

Karen Smith, Tech Corps' national director, says the response to the call for volunteers, from people in industry, government agencies, and private consulting firms, has been "incredible." They help school districts in any way they are asked—such as by installing wiring, training teachers, persuading local industry to donate hardware, and helping schools to construct World Wide Web home pages.

Interested parties can reach Tech Corps' own Web pages at **http://www.ustc.org/**.