

A DIARY OF THE PLANET

EARTHWEEK

WEEK ENDING AUG. 19



Rock snot spreads

A slimy yellow-brown freshwater algae that was once native to only a few stretches of rivers on Canada's Vancouver Island has inexplicably begun to spread to new habitats around the world. Rock snot, or didymo, has now reached the waters of New Zealand, Iceland, Alberta and Atlantic Canada. Starting around 1990, it underwent large blooms that caused it to spread across Vancouver Island. In subsequent years, it started to invade rivers around the world, according to aquatic invasive species expert Matthias Herborg. While it appears to be more of an aesthetic issue than a human health or wildlife problem, marine biologists are concerned it could alter food webs in rivers. When dried, didymo has the appearance of soiled toilet paper, causing some to think there's a sewage problem in the river. Experts believe it's spread by recreational fishermen on the soles of their felt-bottom waders. At least one manufacturer has begun to phase them out, while some U.S. states have banned their use.



North Sea spill

The largest spill in the oil fields off Britain in over a decade leaked more than 200 tons of oil into the North Sea. The initial leak was capped within a day, but reports soon emerged that a smaller flow from the same source was still polluting the sea. Royal Dutch Shell said the leak was in an "awkward" place surrounded by marine growth. The resulting oil slick was reported to be moving west toward the Scottish coast, but Shell said it should disperse naturally before reaching land. Greenpeace and other environmental groups slammed the Anglo-Dutch oil company for not informing the public about the spill until 48 hours after it started.



Vampire bat rabies

The first documented fatality in the United States from rabies linked to a vampire bat attack was revealed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The victim was a 19-year-old migrant worker who was bitten on the heel in his native Mexican state of Michoacan last summer. The CDC's Morbidity and Mortality weekly report said the man was later hospitalized after falling ill while working at a sugar cane plantation in Louisiana. "During the next several days, the patient became gradually less responsive to external stimuli, developed fixed and dilated pupils, and began having episodes of bradycardia (slow heartbeat) and hypothermia," the CDC said. The young man died shortly after his family ordered him taken off life support. While the range of the vampire bats is currently limited to Latin America, the CDC warned that it might be expanding toward the United States due to climate change.



Tropical storms

Tropical Storm Gert brought gales and rain to Bermuda as it passed just east of the Atlantic island. Tropical Storm Franklin took a more northerly course across the Atlantic, off Canada's Maritime Provinces.

■ Tropical Storm Fernanda formed about midway between Mexico and Hawaii. Hurricane Greg emerged off Mexico's Pacific coast.



Earthquakes

At least 21 people were injured by a sharp quake centered in northwest China's Xinjiang region on Aug. 11. The 5.8 magnitude shaking also wrecked more than 300 buildings.

■ Tokyo and surrounding areas were shaken by a mild quake centered just north of the Japanese capital.



Aleutian rumbings

Alaska's Cleveland volcano was put on orange alert status after satellite observations indicated magma was pushing up the lava dome, possibly leading to an explosive eruption. The dome at the summit has been expanding in diameter over much of the summer. Should Cleveland send an ash cloud soaring above the Aleutian Islands, as it has in the past, key international air routes could be affected. The volcano covers about half of the uninhabited Chuginadak Island.



Birds of a feather

Another example has been found of same-gender creatures that are just as attached and faithful to each other as those paired with members of the opposite gender. University of California, Berkeley neuroscience and psychology researcher Julie Elie uncovered the behavior while studying zebra finches. After raising young finches in the absence of females, more than half of the males paired, eventually singing and preening each other as if they were a breeding pair. Once female finches were introduced into the mix, five of the eight males involved in same-gender pair bonds ignored the females and retained the bond with their male partner. Elie wrote in the journal Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology that "relationships in animals can be more complicated than just a male and a female who meet and reproduce, even in birds." There have been several other examples of same-gender bonding observed in the avian world, including female gull and albatross couples that raise their young after brief mating encounters with males.

Distributed by: Universal Uclick
www.earthweek.com
© MMXI Earth Environment Service



