

The World Around Us



"Foreign Correspondent"
Michael Ludwig reports on interesting news from the natural world.

Communications

We all make body movements or gestures to help communicate. We wave a hand to say "hello" and "goodbye" shrug our shoulders to say "I don't know" or shake our head to say "No". For those who cannot hear, sign language is even more important for communicating because it replaces the spoken word.



Humans however are not the only creatures to use gestures to communicate. Researchers at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland studied chimpanzees interactions over time. They filmed 3,400 of the interactions, during which 4,500 gestures were made. By studying the gestures and when they were made, for example during play time, meal time or bed time, they were able to build up a 'dictionary' of meanings. Some of the gestures and their meanings were: slapping

an object meant "move away"; touching an arm meant "scratch me"; a mother showing the sole of her foot to her baby meant she wanted the baby to climb up on her.

Catching a Comet!

In August of this year, after a remarkable 10-year journey, 'Rosetta', a spacecraft from the European Space Agency (ESA), finally caught up with Comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko some 405 million kilometres from Earth. The comet orbits our Sun every 6.5 years, passing through the orbits of Jupiter and Earth as it does so - Earth orbits the Sun every 365 days, while Jupiter orbits the Sun every 11.86 of our years. Catching up with and travelling alongside a comet as it heads into the inner Solar System, is a feat which has never been achieved before. A lot of manoeuvring was involved to get Rosetta into position and it will stay alongside old 67P for one year on its orbit of the Sun. The ESA hope to put a small lander, known as 'Philae', onto the comet on 12th November to find out what it is made of. They hope that by studying the comet, particularly as it is reacts to the heat of the sun, many questions will be answered about the beginnings of the Solar System.



Image courtesy of US Geological Survey

Eyes in the Sky!

With Climate Change causing polar ice melting, polar bear habitat is shrinking and the bears are in danger. So, it is important to keep track of the population to understand the impact the changes are causing. The usual way of surveying polar bears is by aerial surveillance - flying over their habitat and counting each bear. This is time consuming and not easy. So, US Geological Survey and other researchers are shifting to using Satellite pictures. A very high-tech solution, with much better results! One advantage of this type of surveying is that it does not disturb the polar bears. Another is that large areas are quickly scanned.

Yawning

Warning: This story may make you yawn. That's because yawning is highly contagious. Even reading about it, much less seeing or hearing someone yawn, is enough to make you yawn. Yawning in a group will lead to others in the group yawning also. Thus: contagious yawning. And, it can occur in other animals as well. Scientists have found contagious yawning among wolves and monkeys. Reporting that the more time wolves spend together in a pack, the more likely it will happen. There have already been studies that have found contagious yawning occurs with monkeys. So, start a yawn event and laugh!

