



The World Around Us



"Foreign Correspondent"
Michael Ludwig reports on some strange goings on in the natural world.

Charles Darwin's 200th Birthday!

The British scientist Charles Darwin was born 200 years ago, on 12th February 1809. He was always very interested in natural history and at the age of 22, instead of becoming a doctor or a clergyman, he abandoned his studies and joined a 5-year round-the-world voyage onboard a ship called the "Beagle". During the trip the ship visited the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of Ecuador, South America. There Darwin observed a remarkable population of animals and plants living in isolation from their relatives on the mainland. He saw that the animals and plants species differed from those relatives and even from island to island having adapted to the local conditions. He was particularly interested in how certain bird species had adapted. Darwin began to understand the way living things evolve and adapt to their environment. From his observations, Darwin concluded that organisms best suited to their environment are more likely to survive and their adaptations would be passed down to their future generations. Those organisms that do not adapt to their environment, die out. After spending many years studying these adaptations and fossils of very old organisms, he wrote his famous book "On The Origin of Species", explaining his theory of evolution and the idea of "survival of the fittest".



Neema, the new baby giraffe in Dublin Zoo

Dublin Zoo celebrated the birth of a baby giraffe calf on 4th January. Following a nationwide competition, "Neema", a Swahili word meaning "prosperous" was chosen as the calf's name. It was submitted by six-year-old Lucy Blacker from Swords in Co. Dublin. Neema is thriving and in the middle of February already measured 2 metres high and weighed 50 kilograms. Neema is one of the seven members of the giraffe herd at the zoo.

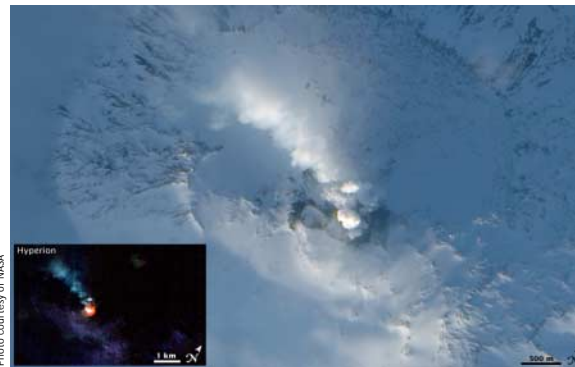
Are Great-spotted Woodpeckers breeding in Ireland?

Though found in the UK and in the rest of Europe, one bird that is not resident in Ireland is the woodpecker. A small number of Great-spotted Woodpeckers have been seen here, when the lack of winter food sources in Northern Europe drives them south. However, in recent years sightings have increased in many parts of Ireland and those that are visiting seem to be staying for longer periods. Following the discovery of some juvenile birds in south Co Dublin, it is believed that they may even be breeding in Ireland as well.



World's biggest snake was longer than a bus!

In a mine in Columbia, South America, paleontologists Carlos Jaramillo and Jonathan Bloch discovered the partial skeletal remains of the largest snake ever known. The boa constrictor-like snake, named "Titanoboa" lived 60 million years ago. It measured 13 metres (42 feet) in length - longer than a city bus - and at 1,135kg (2,500 lbs), heavier than a car!



Volcanic activity on Antarctica

When we think of Antarctica, we think of ice but did you know that underneath the glaciers there is an active volcano, known as Mount Erebus. It was erupting when the British explorer Captain James Ross visited the continent in 1841 (naming the volcano after one of his ships) and since 1972 it has had continuous lava lake activity. Recent thermal imaging from NASA highlights the volcano's activity.