

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Week ending Friday, May 9, 2025

By Steve Newman

Bird Decline

Scientists say that 75% of bird species in North America are declining, especially in areas where they were once most abundant.

Writing in the journal *Science*, a team from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology analyzed 36 million bird observations and found steep population losses in grasslands, wetlands and the Arctic.

The declines are driven by habitat loss, climate change and other environmental pressures.

Despite the trend, the study also found small regions where bird populations are stable or growing.

These local increases could help identify where conservation efforts are working and point the way to more effectively restoring bird habitats.

Earthquakes

Far western Texas and southeastern New Mexico were rocked by an unusually strong quake.

- Earth movements were also felt in southern Mexico, the southern tip of Chile and Argentina, central Morocco, central India, Indonesia's Sulawesi Island and Taiwan.

Rodent Carriers

A new study finds that urban rats can carry and spread a potentially fatal disease, known as leptospirosis, as they migrate through cities.

Researchers at Tufts University, Northern Arizona University, the USDA and the CDC conclude that the bacteria, spread through rat urine, can contaminate soil and water, potentially leading to serious liver and kidney damage in humans.

In Boston, scientists found that distinct rat populations harbor different strains of the bacteria, which they carry with them as they move across the city or are displaced by construction.

The researchers conclude that total rat extermination is not realistic, but a better understanding of rat movements and resulting bacterial transmission could help reduce public health risks.

Scorpion Surge

There has been an alarming rise in the number of people being stung by scorpions in Brazil, with reported cases soaring by 250% between 2014 and 2023.

There were more than 1.1 million reported stings during the period, mainly attributed to rapid urbanization and climate change.

Researchers say unplanned city growth, poor sanitation and warmer, wetter conditions have created ideal habitats for the scorpions, especially in sewers and debris-filled areas.

Brazil's highly poisonous yellow scorpion is said to be driving the increase.

Avian Amity

New research shows that birds may form friendships surprisingly similar to those of humans.

After analyzing 20 years of behavioral and genetic data from superb starlings in East Africa, scientists found that these birds not only help close relatives raise their chicks, but they also return favors to unrelated birds who once helped them.

In some cases, these relationships lasted for years, suggesting long-term bonds built on mutual support.

Some birds were seen to choose specific individuals for help, even when relatives were available.



Stings from Brazil's yellow scorpion resulted in 152 deaths across the country last year. Photo: Hamilton Coimbra Carvalho/University of São Paulo

Home Pollution

Nearly 200 different pesticides were found in dust samples collected from homes in 10 European countries, according to the largest study of its kind. More than 40% of the contaminants are linked to serious health issues, including cancer and hormone disruption.

Researchers say pesticides are brought indoors via shoes, pets and household products like flea treatments — sometimes lingering for decades after being banned, as with DDT.

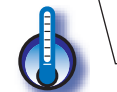
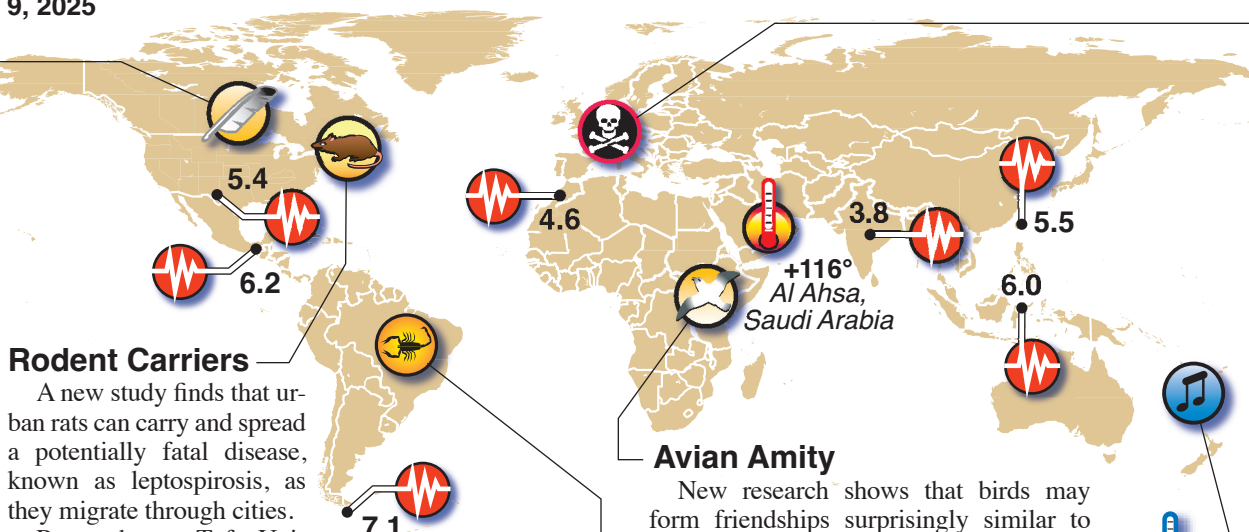
Becoming Music

A new international study suggests that when we listen to music, something much deeper happens than just hearing a tune — we actually “become” the music.

Researchers found that our brains and bodies naturally sync up with rhythms and harmonies, helping explain why music can make us feel emotions, tap our feet or move to the beat.

The study concludes that the findings could lead to better music-based therapies for conditions like Parkinson's, stroke recovery and depression.

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