

they inhibited these genes in developing chicken eggs — making the expression pattern more like that of reptiles and other vertebrates — the premaxillae were separate and much shorter in some chicken embryos than in others. (None was allowed to hatch.)

X-ray scans of the embryonic skulls showed that they more closely resembled the bones of early birds and dinosaurs than those of modern chickens.

**Evolution** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/evo.12684> (2015)

## ENTOMOLOGY

## Ants dig differently depending on dirt

Fire ants adjust their digging behaviour when building underground nests, depending on the size and dampness of the material they are working with.

Daniel Goldman and his colleagues at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta studied fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta*; pictured) as they constructed tunnel networks in silica particles designed to mimic soil of varying moisture levels and particle size. Using X-ray imaging, the team found that up to a point, ants dug deeper tunnels through clay-like and fine-grained particles as the moisture content increased, using the growing stickiness of the particles. When digging, the ants either carried individual grains away if they were large, or gathered and compressed smaller particles into a pellet.

The authors say that this adaptability could help to explain how this species has successfully colonized large

parts of North America. **J. Exp. Biol.** 218, 1295–1305 (2015)

## ASTROPHYSICS

## Farthest galaxy measured

Astronomers have observed a distant galaxy as it looked just 650 million years after the Big Bang, making it the farthest galaxy to have its distance reliably measured.

Pascal Oesch at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and his colleagues used a telescope at the W. M. Keck Observatory in Hawaii to study the galaxy EGS-zs8-1. To gauge its age, they measured how much its light had been stretched, or redshifted, as the light travelled across the expanding Universe. They found that the object is surprisingly bright and massive for such a young galaxy — a sign of rapid star formation.

Their analysis adds weight to a theory that the peculiar colours of early galaxies, compared to later objects, may be the result of interaction between these rapidly forming stars and the gas around them.

**Astrophys. J. Lett.** 804, L30 (2015)

## INFECTIOUS DISEASE

## Silenced gene keeps malaria out

Researchers have uncovered a possible target for anti-malarial therapies by suppressing gene expression in blood stem cells.

Malaria-causing parasites attack mature red blood cells, which lack DNA, making it hard to test which genes make the cells vulnerable to malaria infection. Manoj Duraisingh at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts, and his colleagues have sidestepped this problem by studying the stem cells that develop into red blood cells and contain DNA.

They used RNA molecules to knock down gene activity in the stem cells, induced them to develop into red blood cells and then exposed them to

## SOCIAL SELECTION

Popular articles on social media

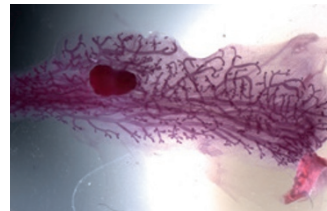
## Mystery of telescope signals solved

A report on the surprising origins of rogue signals picked up by a radio telescope has been simmering on social media. After more than four years, researchers using the Parkes radio telescope in New South Wales, Australia, have identified the source of the mysterious signals: a microwave oven in the facility's break room. The news quickly spread on Twitter. "And the result of the story: don't use microwaves next to radio telescopes!" tweeted Karina Voggel, an astronomy PhD student at the European Southern Observatory in Garching, Germany. "A nice reminder that not all radio transients are microwave ovens — even if some are," tweeted Chris Lintott, an astrophysicist at the University of Oxford, UK. <http://arXiv.org/abs/1504.02165v1> (2015)



Based on data from altmetric.com. Altmetric is supported by Macmillan Science and Education, which owns Nature Publishing Group.

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*Plasmodium falciparum* — the most deadly malaria pathogen.

They found that the parasite binds to a cell-surface protein called CD55 and could not infect cells that did not produce it. Red blood cells can function normally without CD55, suggesting that the protein could be a therapeutic target. **Science** 348, 711–714 (2015)

## EPIGENETICS

## Mammary cells have a memory

Specific DNA changes make the mammary glands in pregnant mice gear up for milk production faster if the animals have been pregnant before.

Many women report that breast-feeding becomes easier with each pregnancy. To find out why, Gregory Hannon at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York and his colleagues gave pregnancy

hormones to female mice and monitored changes in their mammary glands over time.

In mice that had been pregnant once before, the milk-producing ducts expanded in number more quickly (pictured, right) and generated milk proteins sooner than the ducts of mice that were first-time mothers (pictured, left). Genetic analysis of mammary-gland cells after the animals had stopped lactating showed that a previous pregnancy resulted in a long-term loss of methyl groups from DNA in genes that are activated during lactation.

This epigenetic 'memory' primes these genes for fast reactivation in a subsequent pregnancy, the authors say. **Cell Rep.** <http://doi.org/4j2> (2015)

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