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[Linkage 3/25: Giant Bunnies, Religious Obesity, and Kin Selection Kerfuffle](#)

Posted at 10:06 am CT on March 25, 2011



Illustration by Meike Köhler/Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology

Just in time for Easter, a team of scientists digging on a Spanish island have discovered the fossils of a [prehistoric rabbit of unusual size](#): 26 pounds, more than six times the size of today's bunnies. Called *Nuralagus rex* - the "king of the hares" - the big guy [definitely did not hop](#) when it lived 5 million years ago. While it might resemble more of a rodent than a rabbit to the untrained eye (and its discoverers originally thought it was a tortoise?), experts in the field are convinced that it's an ancestral figure in the line. "Really, this is a rather typical rabbit head [albeit large] stuck on an atypical rabbit body," Brian Kraatz, an expert in rabbit evolution at the Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona, told National Geographic. (Kraatz seems like a funny guy - he also told [Discovery News](#) "It's unclear whether their feet would have been decent good luck charms."). Oh and before you start writing that giant bunny horror movie script, [Brian Switek reminds us](#) that it's already been done.

Scientists in England find they can change the sexual preference of male mice by deleting genes related to the neurotransmitter serotonin. As you might expect, the study has led to [some interesting headlines](#). For a more thoughtful take, [science writer Ed Yong asks](#) whether they are truly affecting sexual preference or whether they are merely making indiscriminately friskier mice.

Are people with strong religious beliefs at higher risk for obesity? A [study by our friends at Northwestern University](#) suggest that's the case, finding a correlation between obesity and attendance at religious activities when other factors (such as age, race, sex, education, and more) are controlled for. One interesting take-home message from, suggested by the Medical Center's [Daniel Sulmasy](#) in [a HealthDay News article](#), is that religious activities might be a good place for potential anti-obesity interventions to take hold. No more donuts after Sunday services, bummer.

A scientific skirmish has erupted over a paper by co-authored by famed biologist E.O. Wilson disputing the existence of kin selection, an extension of Darwin's theory of natural selection that has helped scientists explain the evolution of everything from homosexuality to child-rearing to altruism. Kin selection is the idea that an individual will help protect and nourish relatives beyond their direct offspring because even nieces, nephews, and cousins share some a significant portion of an individual's genetic background. As recapped by [Carl Zimmer](#), the current debate began with the publication of [Wilson's paper questioning the evidence of this process by Nature last August](#), a paper that was roundly criticized by the evolutionary biology community (my favorite quote Zimmer received for [his original article](#): "This paper, far from showing shortcomings in inclusive fitness theory, shows the shortcomings of the authors." Zing!). This week, Nature published several rebuttals to the original paper - [one signed by 137 scientists](#) - and [the authors' re-rebuttal](#). Jerry Coyne, one of [the original critics of the paper](#) on his blog, [examines the latest salvos](#) in the argument and what it says about the role of professional reputation in

scientific publication.

The nuclear reactor situation in Japan appears to have fortunately become less alarming this week. But just in case you are still concerned about radiation traveling over thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean to the United States, [here are reassuring comments](#) from [David Grdina](#), professor of radiation and cellular oncology at the Medical Center, given to Fox Chicago News. Also, to put reports on the amount of radiation being measured from [Japan](#) to [O'Hare Airport](#) into perspective, keep [this awesome chart](#) from science comic [xkcd](#) handy.

Posted by - Rob Mitchum

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