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Letters

Name games

I was saddened to read that the obscene naming of fruit fly mutants is on the wane ("Mutant Monikers," SN: 1/12/91, p.30). As geneticist Tom Kaufman's first graduate student, I recall inserting several pages of fly pornography into a manuscript, just to see if Tom was on his toes.

One correction to an article that otherwise brought back wonderful scatological memories: The mutant fly missing larval body segments is fushi tarazu, not tatazu. I was there at its christening.

Ricki Lewis
Albany, N.Y.

The story of the genetic name game left me in stitches. I'd like to address a minor issue, though. Rick Weiss writes parenthetically that "strictly speaking, only one phenotype is 'normal.'" The word normal carries pejorative connotations, and even if custom dictates its use, it shouldn't be highlighted when issues are inherently generalizable. Think of the species

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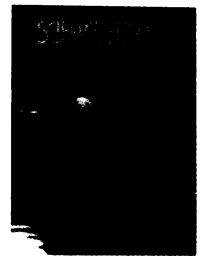
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- 152 Mercurial Risks From Acid's Reign

Cover: Something fishy — and toxic — may lurk within seemingly pristine waters such as this lake in the Adirondack wilderness. Underwater chemical reactions in certain lakes fed by acid rain can transform airborne traces of mercury — the legacy of upwind combustion sources — into methylmercury, a potent neurotoxic agent that accumulates in the flesh of fish. Frequent consumption of contaminated fish threatens anglers, as well as wildlife such as loons and mink, with a risk of methylmercury poisoning. Researchers are investigating the factors that predispose some freshwater lakes to methylmercury hazards and are seeking remedies for this apparently growing scourge. (Illustration: Detail from painting "Night Loon" by Taylor Oughton, 1984)



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we are most familiar with. Are we to say that tongue rollers are normal or abnormal? What about ear wigglers and those "monocular" eyebrow raisers?

Sometimes only one allele/phenotype may dominate more than 99 percent of frequency occurrences, and since fruit fly geneticists deal with lab-bred bugs, they may see this more often due to the founder effect. Some genes considered "normal" in laboratory populations may in fact be somewhat rare in wild populations.

To consider one configuration as normal is a subtle legacy of the Platonic concept of ideal: the ideal chair, ideal person, ideal fruit fly. Experimental philosophy — through the legacy of Darwin's work, for example — has clearly discarded that type of conceptualizing from our dealings with reality. Yet old habits die hard, and metaphysics still slips in.

Jamie Hook
Dewitt, N.Y.

Skinny shafts

In "Gearing Down" (SN: 1/12/91, p.26), you state: "The shaft hole in the smaller [micro-

gears] spans about 50 microns, too small for a strand of human hair to fit through."

Attached is a 35-micron-diameter hair, yanked out of my head. Either your statement isn't correct, or I am not human.

Robert Erck
Argonne, Ill.

My analogy was a generalization, and it should have included the word "average." The hair sample you kindly yanked out of your head, measured, and then sent our way does indeed look thin enough to pass through the shaft hole of a microgear. That's just an eyeball measurement, mind you. A quick survey — again by eyeball — of hair diameter among SCIENCE NEWS staff also suggests that your hair sample may be about 50 percent thinner than average. But rest assured, you could still very well be human. — I. Amato

CORRECTION

The name of the UCLA cardiologist cited in "The Safer Sex?" (SN: 1/19/91, p.40) was misspelled in several places. The correct spelling is Steven S. Khan.

MARCH 9, 1991

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