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Cover: Researchers are uncovering the role of genes and tutors in the making of master songsters. Some migratory birds, such as this Puget Sound white-crowned sparrow, have a genetic predisposition to learn more songs than more sedentary members of their species. (Photo: Douglas Nelson)

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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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## Letters

### False positives on HIV tests?

Regarding "DNA vaccine set to tackle HIV infection" (SN: 2/17/96, p. 100), won't the uninfected volunteers test positive in the standard blood tests if the experiment is successful?

Glenn Davis  
Menlo Park, Calif.

David Weiner, one of the researchers working on the DNA vaccine, says that this particular vaccine should not create a false positive on current AIDS tests. The vaccine generates an immune response to an HIV surface protein; the tests look for an antibody response to a core protein. Weiner says that a DNA vaccine that uses genes for more than one HIV protein might indeed confuse AIDS blood tests. — J. Travis

### Unfriendly fungi

"Discovering the sexy side of valued fungi" (SN: 2/24/96, p. 118) mentions the use of enzymes from fungi of the genus *Trichoderma*

in stone-washed denim and laundry detergents. This is somewhat ominous, since *Trichoderma* produces a toxin (trichodermol) belonging to the class of microcyclic trichothecenes, some of the most toxic compounds known in nature.

I find stone-washed denim items intensely irritating, and I've spoken with a worker in the garment industry who says that, on the days they are sewing stone-washed fabric, many people in the shop are sick. People have been forced to abandon homes contaminated with *Stachybotris*, a fungus that produces a trichothecene toxin nearly identical to trichodermol.

Fungi are not necessarily our friends.

Patricia P. Wilcox  
Delaware, Ohio

### A matter of quarks

In "A hint of particles within quarks" (SN: 2/17/96, p. 102), there is an underlying thread of surprise that new experimental evidence raises the possibility that quarks may be

made up of still smaller particles.

Why do we more readily accept the idea that the universe may be infinitely large than small?

Isn't it possible that the "smallest" particle is defined by the amount of energy that can be applied to the breaking down of matter and that, as we improve our ability to apply larger amounts of energy, we will continue to find smaller particles?

Rubin Boxer  
Santa Barbara, Calif.

### With apologies to Jonathan Swift:

If big quarks have little quarks  
Within them causing scatter,  
And little quarks have lesser quarks  
And so on; what is matter?

Stephen Baird  
San Diego, Calif.

**"Radiation Damages Chernobyl Children"** (SN: 4/27/96, p. 260) was written by Steve Sternberg.