

## Whales stranded during military test

A puzzling episode of whale strandings along the western coast of Greece might have resulted from military tests of sonar going on at the time, speculates a Greek researcher.

On May 12 and 13, 1996, 12 Cuvier's beaked whales ran aground along the Kyparissiakos Gulf, where they eventually died. Two weeks later, another dead whale was discovered on the same stretch of coast.

Mass strandings of this species are "very, very, very rare," says Alexandros Frantzis of the University of Athens. Searching through worldwide records going back to 1963, he found only seven incidents in which more than four of these whales ran aground at the same time.

His autopsies on the whales stranded in 1996 revealed "no apparent abnormalities or wounds," he reports in the March 5 NATURE.

Frantzis points out, however, that the NATO research vessel *Alliance* was testing the experimental Low Frequency Active Sonar system in the region from May 11 to May 15. "Although pure coincidence cannot be excluded, it seems improbable that the two events were independent," he says.

Captain David Barron, spokesman for NATO's Allied Command Atlantic headquarters in Norfolk, Va., calls for more rigorous research on the proposed link. "The article does not establish any scientific cause and effect," he points out.

The idea that low-frequency sonar both-



U.S. Dept. of Interior

*Cuvier's beaked whales rarely run aground in groups, so a mass stranding in 1996 has scientists puzzled.*

ered beaked whales sounds a little surprising to Robert Gisiner, who runs the marine mammal science program at the Office of Naval Research in Arlington, Va. Gisiner says he wouldn't expect beaked whales to respond to a low frequency because of the anatomy of their ears. —S.M.

## Eating seeds shifts ant sex ratios

Researchers have new details on why ants plant flowers.

Ants play a major role in dispersing seeds of such woodland delights as trilliums, violets, spring beauties, bloodroot, and hepatica. The seeds release a chemical that interests ants, who will lug home even lumps of Teflon coated with the attractant. The ants pull nutritious outer tidbits off the seeds and throw away—that is, plant—the part with the embryo. A nutrient-rich ant garbage pile offers a great place for a plant to start new roots. Seeds collected by ants also escape the sharp teeth of foraging mice.

This ant-plant tale is an old standby in discussions of mutualisms, relationships that confer reproductive advantages on both partners. Nonetheless, the story troubled E. Raymond Heithaus of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Studies had documented the benefits to plants but not the benefits to ants, he says.

To see whether the alleged mutualism was just a trick on the ants, Heithaus and Manuel A. Morales compared 24 ant colonies satiated with bloodroot seeds to 27 colonies deprived of seeds. In the March ECOLOGY, the researchers report that the seed-fed colonies did not grow unusually big, but they did have 3.5 times as many reproductive females, a clear benefit for producing offspring in later generations.

"I almost wish it had come out the other way," Heithaus says. He's still crusading for a tougher look at alleged mutualisms. —S.M.

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