

News in brief



FUR-FARM ANIMAL CAN SPREAD THE CORONAVIRUS

The small, fox-like animals called raccoon dogs (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*) can be infected with SARS-CoV-2, and can spread it among themselves.

Conrad Freuling at the Friedrich Loeffler Institute in Greifswald–Isle of Riems, Germany, and his colleagues deliberately infected nine raccoon dogs with the new coronavirus (C. M. Freuling *et al. Emerg. Infect. Dis.* <https://doi.org/10.1093/eid/ciaa111>; 2020). Six of the animals began shedding the virus from their noses and throats several days later. When three uninfected animals were put in cages next to the infected ones, two became infected. None of the animals became visibly ill, but some were slightly lethargic.

These findings suggest that SARS-CoV-2 could spread undetected in fur farms in China, where more than 14 million raccoon dogs live in captivity. The coronavirus that caused the epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2002–04 was also isolated in raccoon dogs, and could have first jumped to people from the canids.

CLIMATE SCIENTISTS ARE THE FREQUENT FLYERS OF RESEARCH

Many climate scientists have begun trying to cut their carbon footprints by reducing air travel. But an analysis suggests that climate researchers travel and fly more than other scholars.

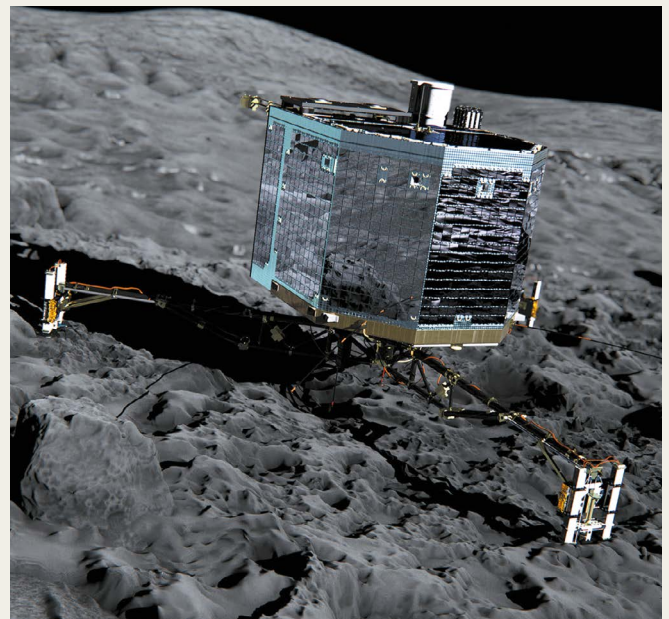
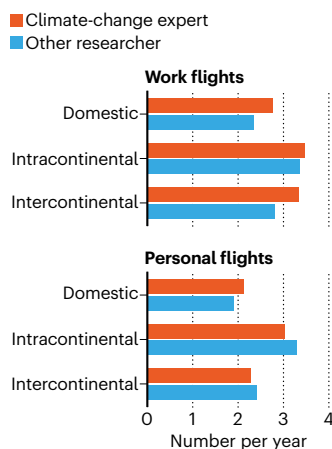
The study asked more than 1,400 scientists from 59 countries how often they fly (L. Whitmarsh *et al. Glob. Environ. Change* **65**, 102184; 2020). The surveys were conducted in 2017, before the coronavirus pandemic caused widespread travel restrictions.

Climate experts – who accounted for about 17% of respondents – take 5 flights per year on average, the study found, whereas researchers in other fields take 4. Climate scientists also fly more often for work, but take fewer international flights for personal reasons.

It adds up to a “colossal amount of flying”, says Lorraine Whitmarsh, an environmental psychologist at the University of Bath, UK, who led the study. “These figures are really quite stark, I think, and should be a wake-up call for all of science.”

JET-SETTERS

A survey found that scientists who study climate change fly more often, and travel more for work, than do researchers from other disciplines.



Philae's landing chaos

The chaotic crash-landing of a robotic spacecraft called Philae has yielded serendipitous insights into the softness of comets.

In 2014, the pioneering European Space Agency (ESA) lander touched down on comet 67P/Churyumov–Gerasimenko, after a ten-year journey. But rather than fix itself to the surface, Philae bounced twice and ended up on its side under a shady overhang, cutting its mission short.

After a meticulous search, an ESA team has now discovered the previously unknown site of Philae's second touchdown – and with it an imprint that the craft left in comet ice that is billions of years old.

The imprint has allowed the researchers to measure the strength of ice beneath the comet's surface – and they discovered that it is exceptionally soft. “It's softer than the lightest snow, the froth on your cappuccino or even the bubbles in your bubble bath,” says Laurence O'Rourke, an ESA scientist at the European Space Astronomy Centre in Madrid, who led a search to locate the wayward lander, which was found in 2016.

This is “a wonderful piece of detective work”, says Jessica Sunshine, who studies comets at the University of Maryland in College Park. It suggests comet ice could be retrieved and studied in future, she says. The findings were published on 28 October (L. O'Rourke *et al. Nature* **586**, 697–701; 2020).

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