

News in brief



A TROVE OF BAT CORONAVIRUSES

Bats in the province of Yunnan in southern China have yielded yet more coronaviruses closely related to the pandemic virus.

Weifeng Shi at the Shandong First Medical University & Shandong Academy of Medical Sciences in Taian, China, and his colleagues studied 302 samples of faeces and urine and 109 mouth swabs taken from 342 live bats between May 2019 and November 2020 (H. Zhou *et al.* Preprint at bioRxiv <https://doi.org/gh73mk>; 2021). The researchers trapped and released all the bats, which represented nearly two dozen species, in an area covering roughly 1,100 hectares – less than one-tenth the size of San Francisco, California.

From the samples, the team sequenced 24 coronavirus genomes, of which 4 were new viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2. One of the viruses isolated from a *Rhinolophus pusillus* bat shared 94.5% of its genome with the pandemic virus, making it the second-closest known relative to SARS-CoV-2. The closest known relative is a coronavirus called RATG13, which shares 96% of its genome with SARS-CoV-2 and was isolated from a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat in Yunnan in 2013.

The results suggest that viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 continue to circulate in bats and are highly prevalent in some regions.

VIRAL VARIANT CAUSES DEADLIER FORM OF COVID

People infected with a coronavirus variant called B.1.1.7 are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 than are those infected with other circulating variants, regardless of their age, sex and pre-existing health problems.

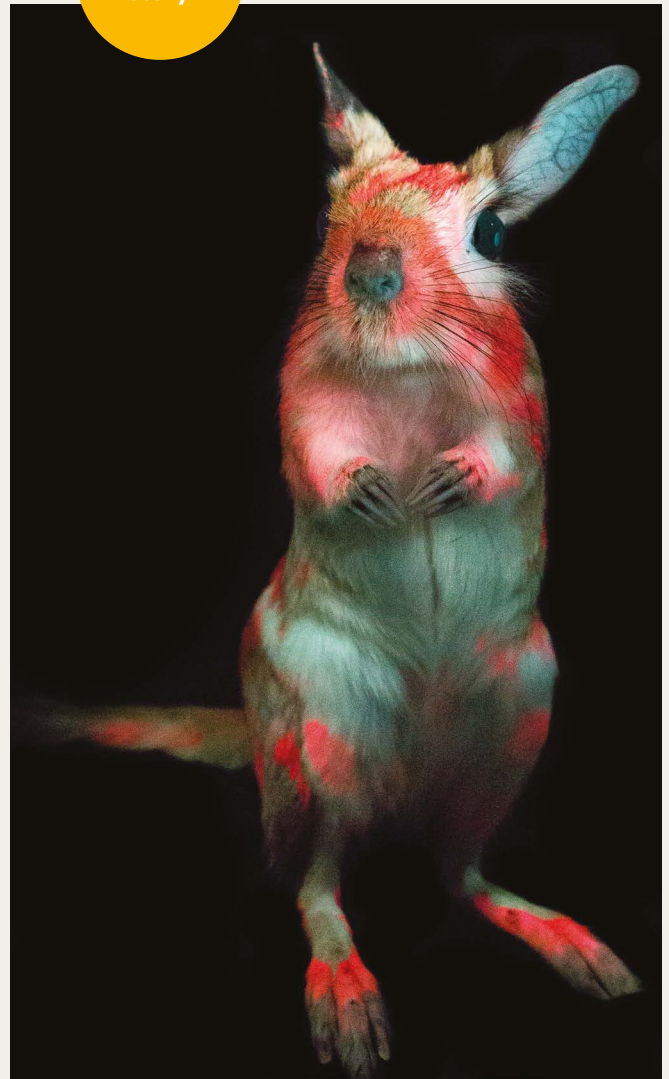
Daniel Grint at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and his colleagues studied the health records of 184,786 people in England who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 between 16 November 2020 and 11 January 2021. Of these individuals, 867 had died by 5 February 2021 (D. Grint *et al.* Preprint at medRxiv <https://doi.org/fzqw>; 2021).

The researchers found that, for every three people who died within a month of testing positive for a previously circulating viral variant, around five died after testing positive for B.1.1.7. The risk of death increases with age and the presence of pre-existing health problems, and men are at higher risk of dying than women.

First detected in the United Kingdom, B.1.1.7 is now the dominant variant there, and is spreading widely across Europe. Without control measures and vaccines, the variant could be more deadly than previously circulating versions of the virus, the researchers say.



Picture story



Disco hare

Researchers have found that the South African springhare (*Pedetes capensis*) fluoresces hot pink under ultraviolet light. The animals join wombats and platypuses in an expanding gang of glow-in-the-dark creatures. But the springhare's striking patterning and intense colour – described in *Scientific Reports* on 18 February (E. R. Olson *et al. Sci. Rep.* **11**, 4125; 2021) – are unique among known biofluorescent mammals, and their function remains a mystery.