



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Skeptical News

by John Blanton

The daily news is a constant source of amusement for skeptics. Here are some excerpts in no particular order.

Praying for rain: New Braunfels residents look to higher power

The story came out on the local news.

<http://www.kens5.com/news/local/New-Braunfels-residents-turning-to-higher-power-for-rain--128647923.html>

Unless you spent the whole summer watching Russia from the Alaskan shore, you may have noticed this has been a warm season. Forget about global warming. You should worry about having to move to Texas.

Texans, however, know how to deal with reality. Take the people of New Braunfels:

Monday had a little feel of Sunday in New Braunfels as residents decided to meet in the city's central plaza to pray for rain. Church leaders from all over the community and residents of mixed religions gathered to pray for the one thing that's been hurting everyone in Texas.

Now I never claimed my fellow Texans are rocket scientists. As I have often said, "If you don't set your expectations too high you will never be disappointed." Texans have never disappointed me.

We skeptics, of course, know better. Praying for something is not the way to make it happen. What these people really need to do is change the water temperature over the eastern Pacific Ocean. You see, when the equatorial water temperature there drops a bit, things start to happen in the atmosphere. The result for us this year has been a high pressure region over Texas that has not budged since May. No cool air comes in, and no rain comes down. It's simple science.

Not so fast, you skeptics:

EVENTS CALENDAR

September Program

Saturday, September 17,
at 2:00 p.m.

Center for Community Cooperation

2900 Live Oak St.
Dallas

Skepticality is the official pod cast of Skeptic Magazine and the Skeptic Society. Derek Colanduno is the skeptical host, and Robynn "Swoopy" McCarthy is skeptical of many things, mostly Derek.

Our September program will be a Skype presentation by Derek and Swoopy.

Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, September 24,
at 7:00 p.m.

Venezia Italian Cafe
908 Audelia Rd, #500
Richardson, TX 75081

<http://ntskeptics.org/>

214-335-9248

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Residents said the last time they gathered to pray for rain was two years ago. And it worked. They said two inches fell shortly after.

And Michael Jackson died.

A load off my mind

Space.com has the story:

Nemesis No More? Comet-Hurling 'Death Star' Most Likely a Myth

By SPACE.com Staff
Tue, Aug 9, 2011

There is no so-called "death star" lurking at the outer reaches of the solar system, flinging dangerous comets at Earth on a periodic basis, a new study finds.

The news so elated me I was kind to children and small animals for the rest of the day.

Some crazy religious zealots (but then, I repeat myself) are out to kill us, the economy is tanking along with my 401-K (it's now a 305-K) and our creationist governor is going to run for president. But the threat of the Death Star was what keeps me awake at night.

For a long time we all knew that the star, "known as Nemesis," comes around regularly, disturbing comets in the Oort Cloud, causing them to veer toward the sun, and us. The result has been periodic mass extinctions.

However, those killjoy scientists at NASA did the numbers (finally?) and concluded mass extinctions have not snagged us with any regularity, regularity being the chief benefactor of the Death Star theory.

"There is a tendency for people to find patterns in nature that do not exist," said study author Coryn Bailer-Jones, of the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy in Heidelberg, Germany, in a statement. "Unfortunately, in certain situations traditional statistics plays to that particular weakness."

The scientists employed Bayesian analysis, which uses Bayes' theorem, to conclude the hypothesis for cyclic comet bombardment of Earth is weak, based on the given evidence. See the references for a discussion of this useful mathematical tool.

In conclusion:

It's still possible that the sun could have an undiscovered large companion lurking far away, perhaps a red dwarf star or an odd failed star known as a brown dwarf. But it's not likely that such a companion has wreaked havoc on Earth, according to the study.

Anything to make my life less interesting than it already is.

References:

More on Nemesis here:

<http://news.yahoo.com/nemesis-no-more-comet-hurling-death-star-most-123802889.html>

Wikipedia gives a nice explanation of Bayesian analysis. To make a short story of it, what is the likelihood your hypothesis is true, given that something else is

true for sure? An example is the case of false positives in medical tests. If the probability a random patient has meningitis is very low, and the test for meningitis is correct only 90% of the time, then a patient off the street who tests positive is still likely not to have the disease. The hypothesis that the patient has the disease is most likely wrong even if he tests positive.

See a discussion of Bayesian analysis here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayesian_inference

There is a nice video here:

<http://www.space.com/12564-days-2012-nasa-scientist.html>

Live Science gives a overview of mass extinctions here:

<http://www.livescience.com/8557-mass-extinction-threat-earth-verge-huge-reset-button.html>

Space.com discusses close encounters:

<http://www.space.com/11801-amazing-comet-encounters-robot-spacecraft.html>

The story of the planet Nibiru, that will destroy the world, is here:

<http://www.lifescience.com/comet-elenin-planet-nibiru-doomsday-2012-1833/>

More links:

End of the World? Top Doomsday Fears

<http://www.livescience.com/14173-doomsday-scenarios-apocalypse-2012.html>

End of Days in 2012? NASA Scientist Says No

<http://www.space.com/12564-days-2012-nasa-scientist.html>

Latest News for Nibiru in 2012 and Planet X

<http://www.space.com/topics/latest-news-for-nibiru-2012-and-planet-x/>

Skepticism and politics

An election year is looming, and our thoughts again turn to politics. Also skepticism.

A few weeks back I had a little fun with presidential candidate Michele Bachman, tagging her as the creationist candidate. We wasted our ammunition.

Texas governor Rick Perry has now jumped into race, and our amusement grows. Where to start?

The *Texas Tribune* has the lead story.

Perry Claims Texas Teaches Creationism in Public Schools

Gov. Rick Perry told a child questioner in New Hampshire today that Texas public schools teach creationism alongside evolution — a statement that state education experts are refuting in varying degrees.

The boy's mother had told him to ask about creationism.

Perry, and apparently some of his advisers, are unaware that creationism is not (legally) taught in Texas public schools. Neither are they aware that by law creationism cannot be taught in public schools in the United States. The Supreme Court ruling in the 1987 case *Edwards v. Aguillard* determined that creationism, and variants of it, are religious doctrine without scientific merit. Promoting creationism is equivalent to advancing a particular religious belief, something prohibited by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

In taking my previous swing at Michele Bachman, I hinted that the Republican Party was on its way to being the party of creationism. I could have been wrong.

Jon Huntsman is former governor of Utah and Ambassador to China. If you have not already guessed, he is a political conservative and a Mormon. After Perry's public gaffe, Huntsman was not slow to respond:

... Jon Huntsman, another contender for the GOP presidential nomination, took to Twitter almost instantly, seeming to mock Perry for the creationism comment, as well as for his recent statements on climate change: "To be clear. I believe in evolution and trust scientists on global warming. Call me crazy."

Considering his political aspirations, I might call him crazy for making that statement. I would also call him cool and smart. He had more to say:

"When you make comments that fly in the face of what 98 out of 100 climate scientists have said, when you call into question the science of evolution, all I'm saying is that, in order for the Republican Party to win, we can't run from science," Huntsman said during the debate at the Reagan Presidential Library in California.

The *Austin American Statesman* has more:

Perry and Clayton Williams at odds over creationism

Williams, a wealthy Midland oil man, wrote to Perry as the State Board of Education was starting the debate over new science curriculum standards. He warned Perry to stop any effort by the board to include creationism or intelligent design in those standards.

"If Texas enters into a debate on the teaching of fundamental religious beliefs in public schools, it will tarnish our strong academic reputation, set our ability to attract top science and engineering talent to Texas back decades and severely impact our reputation as a national

and global leader in energy, space, medicine and other high tech fields," Williams wrote.

This was a few years back.

While famous for throwing away his run for governor of Texas in 1990 through a series campaign miscues, Williams is now coming off as the more sensible Republican politician. It has gotten that bad for the party.

Paul Krugman has some comments on the topic in *The New York Times*:

Jon Huntsman Jr, a former Utah governor and ambassador to China, isn't a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination. And that's too bad, because Mr Huntsman has been willing to say the unsayable about the Republican party in the United States, namely, that it is becoming the "anti-science party". This is an enormously important development. And it should terrify us.

Besides dishing it out to Perry for his misstatements on the science behind global warming, Krugman has some choice words for top-tier candidate Mitt Romney. The once top candidate previously endorsed the idea that climate change is a serious threat that requires action. Maybe not so much anymore.

Of course, we know what's motivating Mr Romney's sudden lack of conviction. According to Public Policy Polling, only 21% of Republican voters in Iowa believe in global warming (and only 35% believe in evolution). Within the Republican party, wilful ignorance has become a litmus test for candidates, one that Mr Romney is determined to pass at all costs.

These issues are a topic of discussion among those concerned with the politics of science in this country. We wonder what things will be like when popular thinking gets translated into public law. Krugman wonders, as well:

Now, we don't know who will win next year's presidential election. But the odds are that one of these years the world's greatest nation will find itself ruled by a party that is aggressively anti-science, indeed anti-knowledge. And, in a time of severe challenges – environmental, economic, and more – that's a terrifying prospect.

We have seen some of that in recent years. We may need to get ready for more.

References:

The *Texas Tribune* story is here.

<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-people/rick-perry/video-perry-answers-childs-question-about-evolution/>

Huntsman's other comments are from E² Wire at <http://thehill.com/blogs/e2-wire/677-e2-wire/180137-perry-invokes-galileo-in-defending-climate-doubts->

Krugman's comments are posted here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/04/evolution-climate-republicans-president>

Welcome to the 21st century

It's hard to believe that just a few hundred years ago people accepted as true witchcraft, magic potions and spells. And fortune telling.

Well maybe not that hard to believe because they still do. The Associated Press has the story.

Florida family charged in \$40 million psychic scam

<http://news.yahoo.com/florida-family-charged-40-million-psychic-scam-185046142.html>

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Rose Marks and her family of fortunetellers offered hope, but prosecutors said it came with a steep price.

The Florida family claimed to confer with gods, spirits and even Michael the Archangel to cure diseases and break curses, asking for and accepting jewelry, gold coins and luxury cars in return.

According to writer Kelli Kennedy the clan earned \$40 million over the past 20 years practicing their trade.

They are Gypsies, and they believe they can heal through their psychic powers. They also believe their business is on the up and up. They apparently did not explain why it was necessary to tell their clients they "would contract terrible diseases, suffer horrible financial hardships, and endure terrible catastrophes" if they did not pay up.

One client handed over \$400,000 in gold coins to get relief from imaginary voices. The client demanded the coins be returned when the voices persisted, but was told the coins were in a cemetery, and "only Michael the Archangel knew the exact location."

All of this is according to a criminal indictment that has been filed against family members.

In all, authorities seized Tiffany and Cartier diamond rings and watches, \$1.8 million in gold coins, Harley Davidson motorcycles, several luxury cars, including a red Ferrari and a white Rolls Royce, as well as two South Florida properties.

The family's lawyer noted the family's business has a city license, and he proclaimed "Fortune telling is a protected activity."

As a side note, I observe that owning a handgun is also a protected activity, but armed robbery is not. Neither is fraud.

The problem, we have noted often, is not with people like the Marks family. It's with people like us, who buy into their foolishness. Is there any cure for it? Possibly not. Telling people there is no such thing as ghosts and explaining the scientific approach to evaluating oddball beliefs may not be sufficient. Failing this, it was hoped that cultural change with time would bring these shortcomings into wider disfavor. As noted before, it's the twenty-first century, and the Marks clan has drawn \$40 million from true believers.

Budd Hopkins

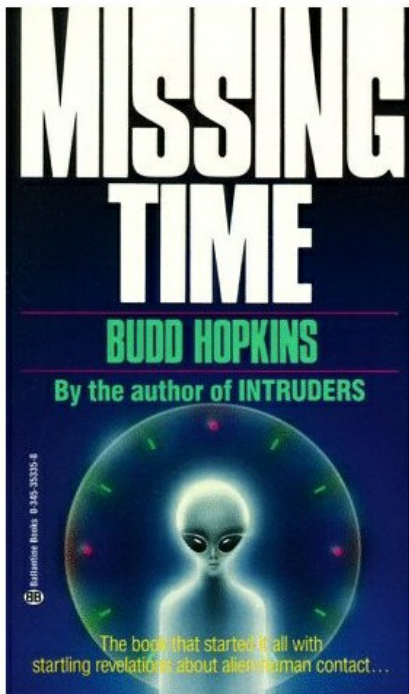
One of the world's most famous UFOlogists has died. Budd Hopkins was the author of a number of books with an alien abduction theme. He had a U.F.O. sighting in 1964 and began

to research stories about people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens from outer space.

Notable works include the following:

Witnessed: The True Story of the Brooklyn Bridge UFO Abductions by Budd Hopkins and Bud Hopkins (Aug 31, 1996)

Sight Unseen: Science, UFO Invisibility and Transgenic Beings by Budd Hopkins and Carol Rainey (Sep 28, 2004)



Missing Time by Budd Hopkins (Mar 12, 1988)

Missing Time: A Documented Study of UFO Abductions by Budd Hopkins and A. Clamar (Jun 1981)

The New York Times had this note:

As the first person to collect and publish such stories in quantity, Mr. Hopkins is widely credited with having begun the alien-abduction movement, a subgenre of U.F.O. studies. Later high-profile writers on the subject, including Whitley Strieber and the Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, credited him with having ignited their interest in the field.

(24 August 2011)

Without the UFO angle, Hopkins would have been better known as an abstract expressionist painter and sculptor. His works are available for view at the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where he lived since his graduation from Oberlin College in 1953.

He died in Manhattan on 21 August of complications from cancer. He was 80 years old.

Links to some books by Budd Hopkins:

Witnessed: The True Story of the Brooklyn Bridge UFO Abductions

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B000H2N33M/thenorthtexaske>

Sight Unseen: Science, UFO Invisibility and Transgenic Beings

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0743412192/thenorthtexaske>

Missing Time

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0345353358/thenorthtexaske>

Missing Time: A Documented Study of UFO Abductions

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0399901027/thenorthtexaske>

UFO abductee dies mysteriously

Some people call us skeptical, but certain things cannot be ignored. We would rather be safe than sorry.

As reported previously, UFO abduction author Budd Hopkins died last month. Now we learn the alien conspiracy has claimed another victim.

Reuters has the story:

Mississippi man who said he was abducted by aliens dies

Charles Hickson, the Mississippi man who claimed he was abducted and probed by aliens while he was fishing with a friend in 1973 and never backed off the story despite the ridicule he endured, has died.

The story goes on to make the claim that Mr. Hickson died of a heart attack, but we know better. Jesus Christ, the man was only 80 years old! Who are they trying to fool?

We all know the story. In 1973 Hickson was fishing on a pier in Mississippi when alien in a spacecraft pulled them inside. The aliens examined the two men and subsequently released them, certainly with the warning: "Ha! Nobody will ever believe you."

And some people didn't. But others did:

They weren't lying," the chief investigator for the Jackson County Sheriff's Department told reporters at the time. "Whatever it was, it was real to them."

At first the men were concerned they had been exposed to radiation, and they were taken to a local hospital, but the hospital claimed not to have facilities for testing them. Next they went to Keesler Air Force Base, where a number of doctors examined them. These doctors worked for the government, and the results of their examinations have not been made available to me. It is doubtful if I will ever know what went on in those private examinations.

By this point many people still doubted the men's story, even though a polygraph examination convinced the operator that Hickson was truthful in saying he believed his own story.

Notorious UFO skeptic Phillip Klass professed reasons to doubt the tale. His contention is that the polygraph examiner was inexperienced and not certified. Klass also pointed out the men turned down a free offer of a polygraph examination administered by an experienced professional at the local Mobile Police Department. So concerned were they with getting the truth out that the men and their lawyer brought in a (less experienced) operator from New Orleans, over 100 miles away.

If not to some, their story was real to others. Despite what I am sure was a concerted effort by the government to hush it up, the story would not stay hidden. The word got out eventually, and fearless members of the media picked up the news, after which, I am sure they fairly threw it in the face of doubting skeptics.

The men's vindication came when they appeared on the Dick Cavett Show and other national venues to reveal their ordeal to an astonished public.

Ten years after his frightful experience, Hickson wrote a book about the episode. The title is *UFO Contact at Pascagoula*. I am sure it is a gripping tale, and its honesty will be obvious to all who read.

You can get the book on Amazon. Here is the link:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0960855866/thenorthtexasske>

Efforts to suppress the book have made it expensive, but that should not deter the true believer. Amazon lists three new copies starting at \$123.94. Used copies can be had for as little as \$118.28. Of course, supplies are limited.

References:

Wikipedia has much information on the story at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascagoula_Abduction

The Reuters story is here:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/13/us-ufo-captive-idUSTRE78C66R20110913>

What's new

by Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.bobpark.org>. Following are some clippings of interest.

Evolution: Texas school board backs evolution 8- 0.

The Friday votes of the board were a victory for science and the students of Texas, defeating the far-right's two-year campaign to dumb down instruction on evolution in Texas schools. Because of the size of the Texas market, the decision has implications nationwide.

xkcd: Is this the end of the great cell-phone scare?

There are five-billion cell phones in use worldwide according to industry figures, and yet there is not a single verified case of cancer being caused by cell phone radiation. The science that explains why cell phone radiation can't cause cancer is more than 100 years old <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN11/wn010111.html> . Nevertheless, the Environmental Health Trust, founded by Devra Davis, exists solely to warn the public about the nonexistent cancer hazard of cell phones, and perhaps sell a few copies of her book. On the other side is the webcomic xkcd. Go to <http://xkcd.com/925/> .

Hackers: Climategate revisited.

Two years ago, e-mail files of the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia were hacked and selectively posted on the web. Rupert Murdoch newspapers, including the Wall Street Journal, expressed shock at the "criminal conspiracy" and "scientific blacklisting" <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN09/wn120409.html>. The "gate" suffix was added to invite comparison with the infamous break-in at the Watergate by Nixon's goons, but the climategate burglars were treated as heroes. There was not one line of criticism about the only criminal offense in the whole sordid climategate affair of hacking into private files. It is ironic that hacking by the Murdoch papers is now threatening the Murdoch empire.

Cell phones: evidence "increasingly against" cancer risk.

Saturday, a major review by a committee of experts from Britain, the United States and Sweden concluded there is no convincing evidence connecting cell phone use to cancer, and no established biological mechanism by which microwaves

Skeptic Ink – by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2011. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



might trigger cancer. Their conclusion is, of course, correct. So why am I troubled? Some of you must recall the virulently anti-science postmodern movement. About 15 years ago it was argued that there is no such thing as objective truth: Science is a product of the power structure it serves, and scientific “laws” would come out differently in a different culture. It pictured scientists sitting around a table voting on the truth. Does that seem uncomfortably close to where we are on cell phone/cancer issue?

Homeopathy: the dilution limit and the culture of credulity.

Based in France, Boiron, a huge multinational maker of homeopathic-remedies, is suing an Italian blogger, Samuele Riva, for saying *oscillococcinum*, the company’s featured flu medication, has no active ingredient. Congratulations Sam, I gave up trying to get Boiron to sue me, years ago but the Center for Inquiry, of which I’m a member, is pleading with Boiron to sue us. “*Anas barbariae hepatis et cordis extractum*,” is listed as the active ingredient by the company. It’s prepared at a concentration of 200CK HPUS from the liver of the Barbary duck. The 200CK means the solution has been diluted 1 part in 100, shaken, and repeated sequentially 200 times. HPUS means the medication is listed in the Homeopathic Pharmacopeia of the United States, and prepared according to 1938 federal guidelines. It’s a national disgrace that the antiquated law sanctioning homeopathy, introduced by Sen. Royal Copeland, himself a homeopathist, is still be on the books. The dilution claim is totally meaningless. Somewhere around the 30th of the 200 sequential dilutions, the dilution limit of Earth would be reached, with the entire Earth becoming the solute. That is, the possibility of even one molecule of the duck-liver extract remaining in the solution beyond that point would be negligible. Long before the 200th dilution, the dilution limit of the entire visible universe would have been reached. This is all quite meaningless. Astronomers put the number of atoms in the visible universe at about 10 to the 80th power. It would take many universes to get to a dilution of 200 C.

First Amendment: Texas governor convenes a Christian revival.

Rick Perry led a prayer meeting of 30,000 evangelical Christians in a Houston football stadium last month, calling on Jesus to guide us out of our national travail. It was billed as non-political. I suppose that’s possible; under the First Amendment God is not excluded from politics, but if Perry wants to be President he’s got to be able to negotiate at every level. The big question then is, how did God respond? It didn’t take long to get an answer. The crowd had scarcely left the stadium when God set Texas on fire. It’s still burning. In fact, when God sent Tropical Storm Lee ashore he had it dump record rains on the other Gulf states, while leaving Texas parched. This is not a good sign.

Earthquacks: it's time to stop behaving like animals.

At the urging of a 5.8-magnitude earthquake centered in Northern Virginia, thousands of books in the University of Maryland Library sought a lower energy configuration, moving from the bookshelves to the floor. Meanwhile, according to the *Washington Post*, ABC, and NBC, high-strung inmates at the National Zoo like orangutans began to screech and scramble to higher perches “minutes before” seismographs sensed anything. Like maybe they had some special sense that humans don’t? Or so the media reported. Were reporters already at the zoo waiting for a quake? Zoos are always in turmoil. Inmates chase each other, fornicate and have food fights, except the laid-back types like pandas that just sit on their ass through it all munching bamboo.

Bob Park can be reached via email at whatsnew@bobpark.org

[Editor’s note: Bob Park is from Texas.]

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