

FEATURES

COVER STORY

28 A CITY'S BURIED SECRETS

Peeling Back a City's Layers

Archaeologists rarely get to dig in urban areas, so subterranean transportation projects provide the perfect chance — if time doesn't run out first.

BY JENNIFER HATTAM

46

Something in the Air

Getting some air is generally a good thing, but in one community, it could lead to genetic changes for the worse. BY MELISSA PANDIKA

52 BRAIN SCAN BREAKTHROUGH

Broken Cables

A nearly fatal fall. A battered body. But no visible brain damage? Now, new imaging could help doctors pinpoint hard-to-spot injuries in the brain and give one man the answers he's been seeking. BY BIJAL P. TRIVEDI

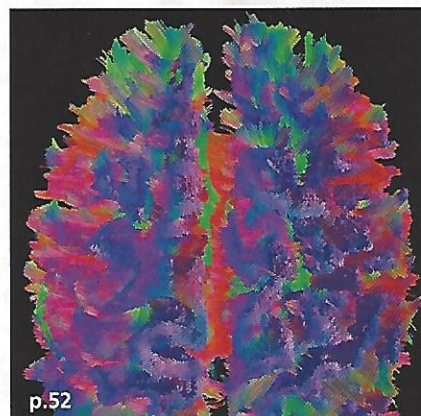
60 DNA'S ORIGIN STORY

Genes Before DNA

What is life? Or rather, what are life's building blocks? In his famous lecture-turned-book, Erwin Schrödinger tried to answer that question by drawing on work from geneticists across the globe. BY MATTHEW COBB



p.28



p.52

COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

6 EDITOR'S NOTE

Moment of Wonder

An instant of science discovery can leave a lifetime impression.

7 THE CRUX

Peek inside the hangar of a forgotten Soviet shuttle program, see what happens when two cultures switch diets, get personal with protective primates, updates on the insanity virus and more.

20 BIG IDEA

STEM CELL CANCER FIGHTERS

Tomorrow's Cancer Treatment?

Why this method just might be the best way to target and destroy diseased cells for good. BY ELIE DOLGIN

22 MIND OVER MATTER

VOICES IN OUR HEADS

Talking Heads

The little voice in your brain — if you're the only one who hears it, how can scientists truly study it?

BY CASSANDRA WILLYARD

26 VITAL SIGNS

Clear the Air

A patient stumbles into the ER clutching his throat, barely croaking out a cry for help. With his oxygen levels plummeting, his doctor must act swiftly to save his life. BY TONY DAJER

66 ORIGIN STORY

Gut Reaction

What do fossilized feces and dental plaque from the deceased have in

common? Both could help paint a picture of the intestinal bacteria our ancestors harbored. BY ADAM HADHAZY

70 HISTORY LESSONS

Revelations From a Frozen Virus

Tucked away in a research lab freezer, a batch of blood from the 1950s helps reveal the mysterious past of a recently discovered infectious disease.

BY JESSICA WAPNER

74 20 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT ...

The Human Voice

Think "anemone" and "Worcestershire" are mouthfuls to say? Try your tongue at speaking !Xóó. And if you're having trouble speaking, try singing.

BY JIM SULLIVAN

Stem Cell
Cancer Fighters p.20

SPACE
Lost Soviet Shuttles p.8

MIND
Voices in Our Heads p.22

Discover

September 2015

A City's Buried Secrets

- Ancient Seaports
- Royal Relics
- Mass Graves p.28

PLUS

Hunting for
Habitable Worlds p.38

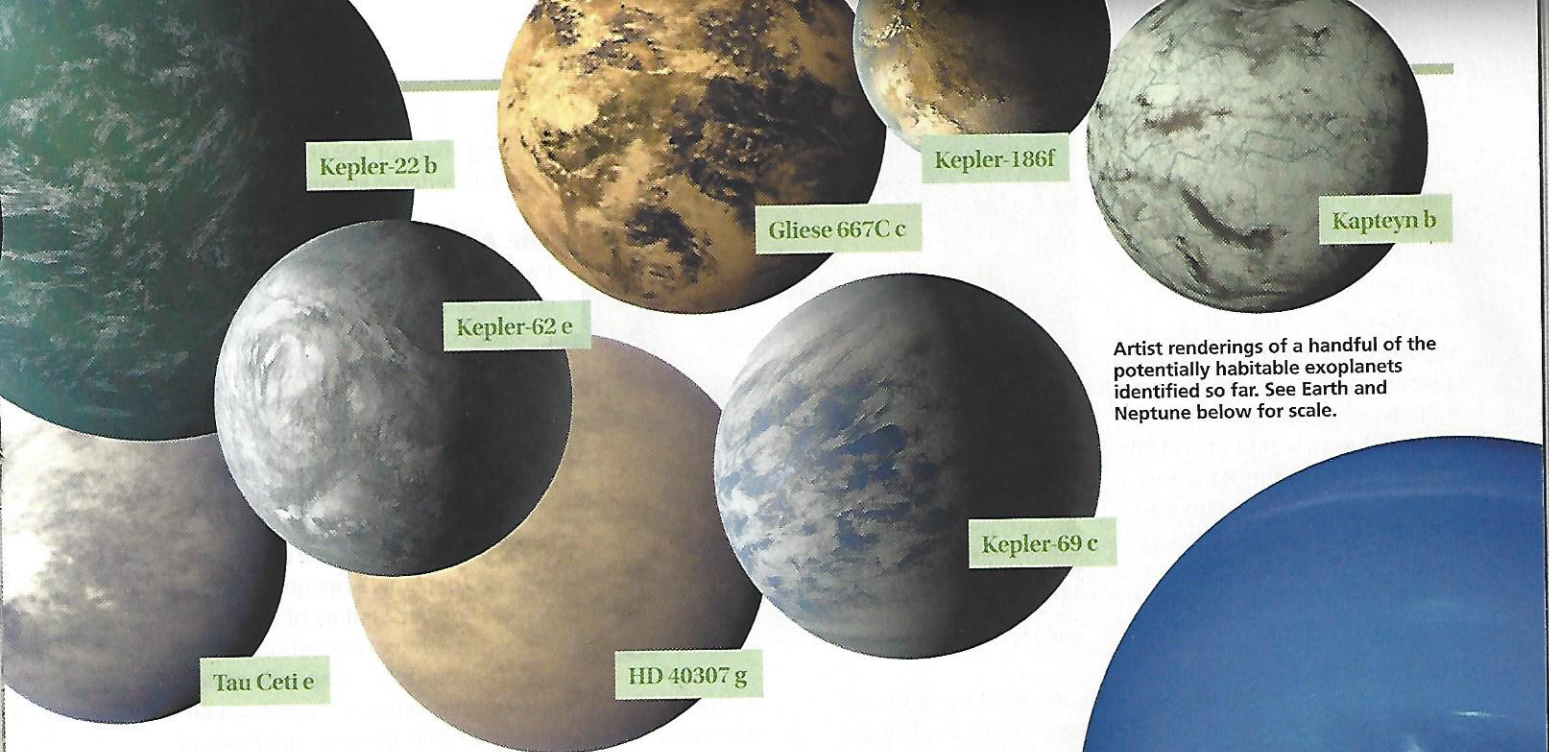
Brain Scan
Breakthrough p.52

DNA's Origin Story p.60

One of 3,000 skeletons found
during a London railway dig.

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Artist renderings of a handful of the potentially habitable exoplanets identified so far. See Earth and Neptune below for scale.

Buoyed, astronomers began planning for the planet-harvesting mission that would launch 14 years later as Kepler. Over the space telescope's first run, cut short due to a component failure in spring 2013, Kepler patiently stared at 150,000 stars, looking for the tiniest of flickers as planets crossed their faces — so-called “transits.” These crossings not only betray an exoplanet's presence but also reveal its size, based on how much starlight the world blocks.

In 1999, while writing up the Kepler proposal, Sasselov wondered if we might find bigger versions of Earth. For lack of a better term, he blurted out “super-Earth.” “I said at the time, ‘I don’t necessarily want to use that word, so if you have a better option. ...’” Sasselov recalls. “But people started using it, and now it’s become so entrenched.”

For years afterward, though, even as scores of hot Jupiters piled up, super-Earths remained elusive. Nevertheless, Sasselov, his student Diana Valencia and their colleague Richard O’Connell went out on a limb. In 2004 they submitted a paper speculating on theoretical super-Earths’ interior structures. The concepts were so unheard of that the journal editor struggled to drum up peer reviewers with relevant expertise.

A year later, these stabs in the dark paid off when researchers proved super-Earths are not just a funky phenomenon around pulsars. Prior scrutiny of the typical star Gliese 876 had rustled up two Jupiter-size companions, and further research revealed a third body, dubbed Gliese 876 d, pegged at 7.5 Earth-masses — the smallest-mass exoplanet then known.

“Gliese 876 d was really an important threshold event,” says Sasselov. The long-in-limbo interior structure paper he co-authored with O’Connell and Valencia was finally published in the journal *Icarus* in 2006, and super-Earth science was born.

For Valencia, this finding came in the nick of time. A

SUPER-EARTHS

are loosely defined as having up to 10 times Earth’s mass and fall into the size and mass gap between Earth and Neptune or Uranus.



EARTH



NEPTUNE

physicist from Colombia, she was captivated by the idea of super-Earths, but “there was no data,” says Valencia, now an assistant professor of physics at the University of Toronto Scarborough. A colleague “teased me that I was studying imaginary planets.” Seeking a potential backup plan, Valencia took a summer seismology internship at Shell Oil. She was planning to return to Harvard, but the Gliese 876 d discovery sealed the deal. She left the oil industry and returned to her passion, never looking back. “I was lucky,” Valencia says. “The stars aligned.”

WHAT ARE YE?

Valencia’s excitement proved justified, as ecstatic planet hunters added more super-Earths to the rolls. Yet for several years, scientists knew nothing else about these worlds except their masses. Without a direct analog in the solar system, no one could guess if these newfangled planets were predominantly rocky (Earth-like), gassy (Neptune-like), something in between (water worlds?) or all of the above.