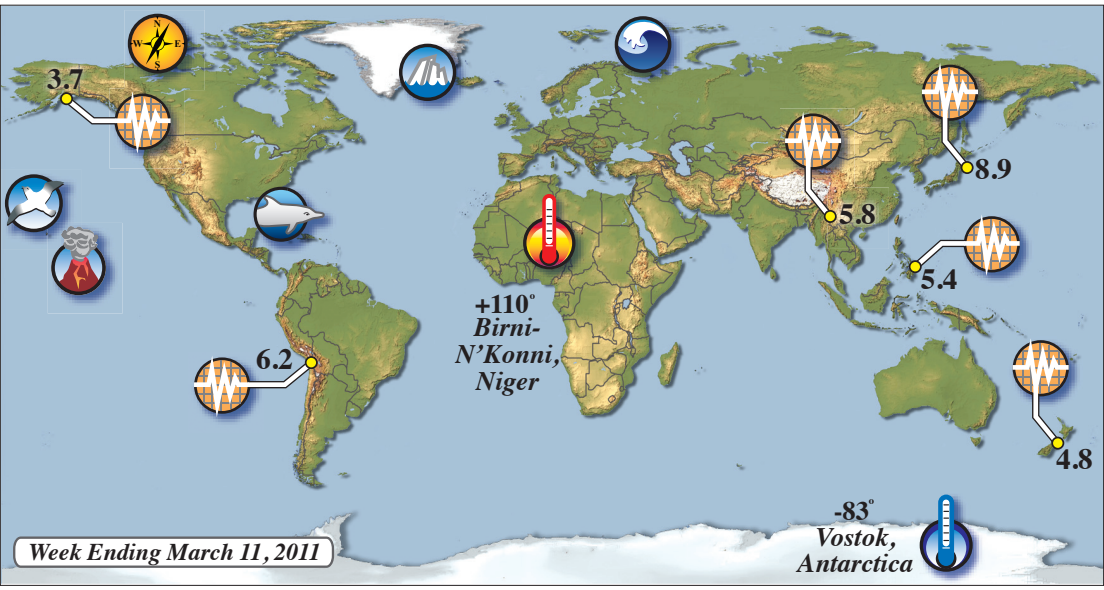
Earthweek: A Diary of the Planet

By Steve Newman



Long-Haul Veteran

The oldest known wild bird in the United States has given birth once again at the golden age of at least 60, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While no spring chicken, the Laysan albatross named Wisdom is currently raising a chick at the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in the Pacific Islands. The bird has worn out five bird bands since the first one was placed on her while incubating an egg in 1956. Since she needed to be at least 5 years old at that time in order to have bred, wildlife experts believe she is likely to be in her early 60s. Wisdom has probably raised at least 30 to 35 chicks during her life, according to Bruce Peterjohn, the chief of the North American Bird Banding Program at the U.S. Geological Survey. And since the long-haul species log about 50,000 miles of flight per year as adults, Wisdom has probably flown 2 to 3 million miles since she was first banded.

Quickening Melt

Vast ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica are melting much more rapidly than predicted by climate models, according to scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. Their NASA-funded study used two separate satellite observation systems over the past 20 years and found that the melting is accelerating. Writing in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*, researcher Eric Rignot says the Greenland-Antarctica melt is overtaking ice loss from mountain glaciers and other ice caps as the dominant influence on sea level rise. He adds that if the ice cap melting trend continues unabated, it could add 5.9 inches to the already predicted 6.6 inches of rise in global sea level by 2050 due to other climate change influences.

Early Blooming

Tiny plants that provide the base of the marine food chain are blooming up to 50 days earlier each springtime in some areas around the North Pole, researches say. Scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography found that the early blossoming has occurred roughly where recent record melting of sea ice has created large gaps for sunlight to reach the phytoplankton. Writing in *Global Change Biology*, the researchers wrote that the "spring bloom provides a major source of food for zooplankton, fish and bottom-dwelling animals." They add: "The trend towards earlier phytoplankton blooms can expand into other areas of the Arctic Ocean and impact the whole food chain."

Earthquakes

One of the world's worst quakes on record rocked Japan and sent devastating tsunamis sweeping inland along the country's northeastern coast. The 8.9 magnitude temblor was preceded and followed by other strong quakes.

• At least 25 people perished in a strong quake centered near China's border with Myanmar.

• Earth movements were also felt in the southern Philippines, New Zealand's South Island, far northern Chile and Anchorage, Alaska.

Hawaiian Lava

The floor of the Pu'u O'o crater at Hawaii's Kilauea volcano collapsed, sending fountains of lava shooting up to 65 feet into the air. Scientists at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory said the floor of the crater dropped 377 feet, cracking open a fissure and allowing the lava to spew. Kilauea has been in a constant state of eruption since 1983, but such surges of lava are rare.

Magnetic Shift

Earth's Magnetic North Pole is shifting from its current location in northern Canada at a faster rate than has ever before been observed. The movement could have significant impact for both aircraft navigation and some types of migratory wildlife in the decades ahead, experts warn. Hundreds of miles south of the geographic North Pole, the location of the Magnetic North Pole was first determined in 1833. It seemed to barely move until about 1904, when its position began to track northeastward about nine miles per year. The speed began to increase significantly in a northwesterly direction about 1998, and now averages about 37 miles each year. This means the pole will be located in northern Russia later this century if the movement and speed don't change.

Dolphins Save Dog

A Doberman pinscher near Naples, Fla., that became stranded on a sandbar owes its life to a group of dolphins that alerted nearby humans of its plight. Vacationers Audrey D'Alessandro and her husband, Sam, saw splashes and heard a "big commotion" when they walked outside near a canal where the dog was half submerged in a rising tide. The exhausted dog had gone missing 15 hours earlier and was unable to scale the tall seawall he had apparently fallen or jumped off. The D'Alessandros called 911 and jumped in the water to save the nearly drowned dog. Owner Cindy Burnett of Marco Island said 11-year-old "Turbo" was recovering, and apparently had been watched over by the dolphins during most of his ordeal.

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