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Research Notebook

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-- **Compiled by Richard L. Hill**

than it looks in the movies. Despite old action movies that show quicksand slowly sucking bad guys to their doom, a study shows it's tough for a person to get completely pulled under in the muck.

Daniel Bonn of the University of Amsterdam and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and his colleagues say a person can easily sink into quicksand and it's very difficult to escape.

The researchers simulating the way the mixture of fine sand, clay and salt water behaves found that quicksand liquefies when perturbed. Moving too much only makes things worse because the quicksand becomes even more liquid and helps you sink in deeper.

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Once the quicksand has liquefied, the sand settles at the bottom, making it so dense that it is impossible for material of the same density as a human to become completely submerged.

"Any unfortunate victim should sink halfway into the quicksand," the researchers say in the current issue of *Nature*, "but could then take solace from the knowledge that there would be no risk of being sucked beneath the surface."

But this reassurance comes at a price: pulling out a foot takes a force equivalent to that needed to lift a medium-sized car.

Fickle swallows follow red

down the path to romance Forget personality. The female North American barn swallow judges guy birds by their looks, especially the reddish color of the feathers on the males' breasts and bellies.

Even after they have paired with a male, the female barn swallow still comparison shops. If the male's red breast is not as dark as other males, the female is more likely to leave him and secretly copulate with another, according to a Cornell University study described in the current issue of the journal *Science*.

Half of all male barn swallows typically care for at least one young chick that was actually fathered by another bird. Sometimes a male will even rear an entire nest of illegitimate young.

"The bad news for male swallows is the mating game is never over," said researcher Rebecca Safran.

Parents' behavior key to

children's smoking habits Children whose parents smoked were more than two times as likely to begin smoking cigarettes daily between the ages of 13 and 21 than were children whose parents didn't use tobacco, a study has found.

Parental behavior -- not attitudes -- about smoking is the key factor in delaying the onset of daily smoking, according to Karl Hill, director of the University of Washington's Seattle Social Development Project.

The project is tracking the development of positive and antisocial behaviors among 808 individuals. They were recruited as fifth-grade students from elementary schools in high-crime Seattle neighborhoods. They were interviewed at ages 13, 14, 15, 16, 18 and 21.

By the time they were 21 years old, 37 percent reported daily smoking.

Scientists see gorillas use

sticks as tools in the wild Scientists for the first time have observed wild gorillas using tools, according to a study by the Wildlife Conservation Society and other organizations.

On two separate occasions in the northern rain forests of the Republic of Congo, researchers saw and photographed individual western gorillas using sticks as tools.

The first occurred when a female gorilla nicknamed Leah tried to wade through a pool of water created by elephants, but found herself waist deep after only a few steps. Climbing out of the pool, Leah retrieved a straight branch from a nearby dead tree and used it to test the depth of the water. Keeping her upper body above water, she moved some 10 meters out into the pool before returning to shore and her wailing infant.

Another female gorilla named Efi used a detached trunk to support herself with one hand while digging for herbs with the other. She also used the stick for one last job, a bridge over a muddy patch of ground. Gorillas have been observed using tools in zoos, but not in the wild.

The study is described in the journal *PLoS Biology*. %%byline%% -- Compiled by Richard L. Hill %%endby%% %%bodybegins%%