

September 23, 2015

Mummies know best. They are giving up the secrets of heart disease three thousand years ago. [Financial Gazette](#) has the story.

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From [Discovery](#) we're treated to a photo of a seal surfing on the back of a whale. Robyn Malcolm was on a whale-watching boat off the coast of Eden in southern New South Wales when the boat came upon a pod of humpback whales and other marine mammals feeding on small baitfish.

*Malcolm told [Fairfax Media](#) in a [interview](#) that she saw amazing whales coming out of the water as they were feeding. There was a lot of activity and everything was happening so quickly that Malcolm didn't realize what she'd photographed until later.*

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According to an article in Smithsonian, cypress trees can help suppress wildfires. *It's been a brutal summer for wildfires in the American West. In the hottest year to date, flames are bearing down on northern California, western Washington has scorched, and more than 5 million acres burned across Alaska.*

*As the wildfires smolder, across the pond, researchers from Italy and Spain are looking at a particular tree's natural resistance to fires, and how that might be used to temper these disasters. They have found that cypress trees ignite seven times slower than other tree species that are native to the same area.*

*"The peculiar flammability traits of cypress are not a real mystery," says Gianni Della Rocca, the lead author on the study published in the Journal of Environmental Management. "The physical, chemical and biological characteristic of this species makes it not immediately prone to fire. It means that cypress burns, but it takes longer to catch fire than other Mediterranean species."*

*The group conducted a series of tests on the Cupressus sempervirens species, which is native to the Mediterranean. In a lab, at the particle level, Della Rocca says, "a wide set of bench-scale calorimetry techniques were used to test the flammability parameters of live crowns and litter samples." Then, in the field, they planted live green barriers. They will test the barrier's fire resistance as soon as the trees mature, to see if what they found in the lab holds up in the wild.*

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Statistically speaking, Five Thirty Eight says movies are about to get good again. *The end of September is approaching, which is fantastic news for moviegoers: It's the season of good, Oscar-worthy films.*

*The Hollywood calendar isn't really rocket science. Summer is the time to put out blockbusters (or blockbuster wannabes). Studios release movies that could potentially score awards — "Oscar bait" — toward the end of the year, so the films are fresh in awards voters' minds. And typically, the holiday season is also ripe for a few big movies — recently the preferred release time for big-budget fantasy films, such as "The Hobbit" and other "Lord of the Rings" movies, or sci-fi films such as "Avatar" and the forthcoming "Star Wars" reboot.*

*Unfortunately, that means studios fill in the rest of the year with the movies that aren't such certain bets — aka mostly schlock. The first four months of the year, January through April, see undependable weather conditions in major population centers that could force people indoors and away from theaters. September is the worst financial month of the year for studios, on average. That probably has something to do with school starting up again; the Motion Picture Association of America reported that, in 2014, 42 percent of tickets were sold to people 24 and younger.*

*This can be observed by simply plotting out box office receipts per month as a percentage of the yearly total, like so:*

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## Financial Gazette

### Mummies know best: the pharaohs giving up their secrets about heart disease

*Egyptian mummies showed clear signs of fatty buildup in their arteries.*



IN 2008, Greg Thomas, a cardiologist from California, was in Cairo for work. While there, he visited the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities with another cardiologist, Adel Allam of Al Azhar University in Cairo.

They came across the mummy of King Merneptah, a pharaoh who lived 3,200 years ago. The description on Merneptah's case said he had suffered from atherosclerosis, the buildup of plaque on artery walls. Both men were sure this must be wrong. How could an ancient Egyptian have had heart disease, when most of the risk factors for the disease – obesity, unhealthy diet, smoking and lack of exercise – did not then exist? But could they prove it?

Thomas, a professor at the University of California, Irvine and Allam discussed how they could find out more about Merneptah's arteries. They theorised that any arterial plaques might still be visible on a CT scan, a computerised x-ray technology that produces 3D images. Plaques contain calcium, which degrades slowly – a key reason that bones endure for so long.

After months of negotiation with officials, the pair began scanning the museum's mummies (ironically, Merneptah was excluded, as Egyptian archaeological officials ruled that royal mummies could not be part of the project). What they found surprised them: many showed clear signs of fatty buildup in their arteries. When the results are adjusted for age (pre-modern people had shorter life-spans, so most of the remains are of people who died in their 40s or younger), the rate of atherosclerosis was about the same as it is for people in modern society, around 40%.

Until then, most researchers had believed that atherosclerosis was largely caused by modern lifestyles. The solution had seemed clear: if we moved more, ate more vegetables and fewer doughnuts, and quit smoking, we would significantly reduce the buildup of the plaques that are a key cause of heart disease.

Thomas and Allam's results call that view into question. "The evidence that's emerging is remarkable," says Thomas. "These results challenge our understanding of the fundamental causes of atherosclerosis." Since that first study, they have expanded their research, measuring plaque levels in ancient arteries all over the globe – from Egypt, Peru, Mongolia, the American southwest and the Aleutian Islands in the northern Pacific Ocean. All 14 of their "paleocardiology" studies so far have shown that atherosclerosis was common among pre-modern people.

"This work points out that we have had this problem for millennia," says George Martin, a pathologist from the University of Washington. "So diet and lifestyle may not contribute as much as we thought. That's a new idea."

Caleb Finch, a biologist from the University of Southern California, who has also worked on the project, agrees. "Researchers have been confident about the causes of atherosclerosis. Our work suggests we should be less confident." He says the results suggest that the general process of ageing has more to do with atherosclerosis than previously realised.

Finch is one of more than a dozen collaborators involved in what has become known as the Horus study (the name refers to a major ancient Egyptian deity). The group's members come from all over the world, and include cardiologists, radiologists, molecular biologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and geneticists. Each week, they gather via conference call to discuss new results and future plans. "It's a dream team of researchers who really like to push boundaries," says Thomas. "We're all doing this for the fun of discovery."

Since 2008, they have scanned more than 130 bodies. They are now in the midst of scanning remains in Mongolia, and, in a few weeks, will begin looking at Egyptian mummies from the Neues Museum in Berlin. Over the past two years, they have also travelled to the Bolivian Amazon, where they are giving CT scans to members of the Tsimane tribe, a group of largely pre-modern hunter gatherers. Thomas and his colleagues want to gauge atherosclerosis levels among this group, whose way of life likely bears a closer resemblance to that of ancient Egyptians and Peruvians than to people in developed countries. "They are contemporary people living an ancient lifestyle," Thomas says.

The research is not simply academic – it has significant public health implications.

Atherosclerosis is a major factor in cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death in the UK and worldwide; about 73,000 Britons die from it every year, and more than twice that many have heart attacks.

As they continue to expand their work, the Horus researchers emphasise that many key questions remain unanswered – including the origin of the mummies' atherosclerosis. Thomas and Finch suspect that pre-modern heart disease was caused not simply by genes or ageing, but by another risk factor, one that modern societies no longer face: widespread chronic infection. From tests on tissue samples, they know that many mummies typically had one or more chronic infections, including malaria, tuberculosis, worms or other microbes. One teenage Egyptian mummy had four serious parasites – a level of disease that would be astonishing today.

Such infections can significantly increase levels of inflammation in the body – and, in recent years, researchers have increasingly realised that inflammation can damage the cardiovascular system. In fact, inflammation appears to be the same mechanism through which obesity, unhealthy diet, and sedentary living also cause heart problems. On top of this, pre-modern people probably faced another serious trigger for inflammation: smoke from wood fires used for cooking, heating and lighting. So it is possible that ancient Egyptians, Peruvians, and others had



the same illness as modern people – inflammation-induced heart disease – but with different root causes.

Beyond that, Thomas and Finch agree that there are likely to be as-yet-undiscovered reasons behind both pre-modern and modern heart disease, which they are working to discover. “I think there’s something that we’re missing, that could really change our understanding of this disease,” says Thomas. “That’s what is so exciting about this. We could really make a difference.”

## Discovery

### Seal Hitches Ride on Whale's Back

by Tracy Staedter



*Australian photographer Robyn Malcolm inadvertently captured a rare sight — a fur seal riding on the back of a humpback whale.*

Robyn Malcolm was on a whale-watching boat off the coast of Eden in southern New South Wales when the boat came upon a pod of humpback whales and other marine mammals feeding on small baitfish.

Malcolm told [Fairfax Media in a interview](#) that she saw amazing whales coming out of the water as they were feeding. There was a lot of activity and everything was happening so quickly that Malcolm didn't realize what she'd photographed until later.

“It was when I went back through the photos that I realized that I’d actually captured the seal on top of the whale,” she said.

NSW National Parks and Wildlife whale expert Geoff Ross told the Brisbane Times that the last time he heard of such an unusual coupling was when a seal was trying to get away from a killer whale. “...the seal hopped on the back of the pectoral fins of a humpback whale,” he said.

Malcolm also captured something else in her images that is highly unusual. The humpback whales are using a technique called bubble-net feeding, which scientists thought only occurred in colder waters.

With this method, whales coordinate with each other beneath a school of fish, circling them from below. As the whales rise, they blow bubbles, creating a wall of confusion that contains the fish.

In a separate interview, Ross told The Sydney Morning Herald, “That’s the first time I’ve seen that happen in NSW waters.”

For the untrained eye, however, the seal on the back of the whale is enough. It reminds us of other animals who’ve paired up to get from point A to point B, like the [raccoon that rode a crocodile like a water ferry](#) or the baby weasel that [piggybacked on a woodpecker in flight](#).

Malcolm assured the Fairfax Media reporter that the image was not photoshopped, either. “I’m positive, because I don’t know how to use PhotoShop. And I do still have it on the camera so I can prove it.”

## The Atlantic

### A Brief History of Levees

***Manmade embankments are an ancient technology, modeled from nature.***

by Adrienne Lafrance



The levee is a technology fundamental to human civilization. Artificial embankments were designed for the earliest cities, along with the first known draining systems and wells. In the ruins of great Bronze Age civilizations, lost now for thousands of years, the imprints of advanced networks of raised earth can still be traced.

Artificial levees in America predate the founding of the United States itself. Before European colonization, Native Americans made raised-earth structures along the banks of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

Levees can be made of mere mud and sand, yet still bedevil today's engineers. They have been in use for millennia, yet still they fail. And in many ways, the story of the levee's design and failure is a parable about the eternal battle between technology and nature.

Two of the best-remembered levee disasters in the United States both decimated New Orleans, once after the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and again after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. (The former was immortalized in a 1929 blues tune, "[When the Levee Breaks](#)," that was covered and popularized by Led Zeppelin four decades later.) Local history, though, reveals a much longer record of levee failures; the region has always known anxiety about the integrity of manmade embankments.

Newspaper archives are filled with accounts of surging waters, submerged plantations, quicksand, and [close calls](#). In the Great October Storm of 1893, women were saved from drowning, [the story goes](#), only when their long hair wrapped around tree limbs. "Down the bayou we are used to dealing with sudden adversity," the poet Martha Serpas [wrote in 2010](#). "We calibrate history by big hurricanes."

The word "levee" comes from the region, too—from the French *lever*, to rise—but the technology itself comes from nature.

Natural levees form gradually in response to floods. When high waters recede, they leave sediment on the banks. Those mud and sand deposits gradually build up into a buffer against subsequent floods. The idea behind manmade levees works the same way: They provide extra protection in areas prone to flood.

Today's levees are designed to meet meticulous engineering standards. Inspection guidelines by the Army Corps of Engineers specify that urban levees should be built high enough to handle a 10-year flood, that is, a flood with a 10 percent probability of occurring in a given year.

But height, while critically important, is just one dimension of a technology that hasn't ultimately changed that much over the millennia. Levee inspectors also look for signs of erosion, rutting or other pits that might indicate drainage problems. They look for cracking, slope stability, and signs of unwanted vegetation or animal burrowing. "Levee systems are complex because their successful performance relies on many different aspects working in conjunction with each other," said Tammy L. Conforti, the Levee Safety program manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in a statement provided by a spokesman.

New Orleans now claims to have the best flood protection of any coastal community in the United States. "Today's levee system is a far cry from the flawed structures that failed during Hurricane Katrina, devastating much of the region and killing hundreds of people," the *Times-Picayune* [wrote](#) in 2013. "The new system was designed using better engineering, more advanced computer modeling and better construction materials. Just as important, it was designed to be a true system, and not just a system in name only as its predecessor."



That may be true. It's also been claimed before. "We have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to protect ourselves from water," Louisiana Governor John McKeithen said in 1965, in the months before Hurricane Betsy devastated New Orleans, according to Craig Colten in his book, [Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs](#). "We have built levees up and down the Mississippi," McKeithen said. "We feel like now we are almost completely protected."

They weren't.

And the city still wasn't protected half a century later. When dozens of levees catastrophically failed throughout New Orleans in 2005, the strength of the storm surge was only partly to blame. It wasn't just that water flowed over the tops of levees; the levees themselves disintegrated and in some cases shifted suddenly in huge sections. "Think of a layer cake," Thomas Zimmie, a civil engineer at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, [told the Times-Picayune](#) in the weeks after the storm. "In the middle I've got my icing. All of a sudden, I push on the top of my piece of cake, and what it's moving on is this weak, slick icing. The whole thing moves."

Katrina left some 80 percent of the city flooded, with sections of New Orleans under 20 feet of water or more. The American Society of Civil Engineers [called it](#) "the worst engineering catastrophe in U.S. history."

[An independent report](#) led by engineers at the University of California at Berkeley found several serious design flaws. Some levees were constructed atop too-weak soil, others contained too much sand and other "highly erodable material" that washed away in the storm surge.

"[It] should never have been used in a levee," Raymond Seed, the author of the report, [said in 2006](#). "A lot of that material is still in the levee, and if it didn't fail during Katrina, it will fail next time."

Great floods, like so many calamities, have a way of returning once they've been forgotten.

In the late 1960s, archaeologists [began to worry](#) about their ability to continue excavations at the site of the Indus Valley civilization, in what is now western India and Pakistan, where the world's oldest known levees had been found. A shift in the Indus River had created a rising table of underground water. Which meant that the remains of an ancient civilization known for its sophistication in handling water—not only advanced embankments but also waste-water drainage systems, sanitation, and wells—would soon be wiped out by it. Groundwater was seeping up from below, carrying with it concentrated minerals that ate away at ancient structures, salty earth turning artifacts to powder almost instantly on contact. In another irony, some scientists [now believe](#) it was drought—not flooding, for which the Indus appeared to have been prepared—that ultimately destroyed the early civilization. [An earlier theory](#) was that slowly rising waters weakened the ancient city's levees until they failed, and the people drowned in mud.

At the same time as archaeologists raced to preserve Indus Valley ruins, engineers in Louisiana gathered to discuss the threat to their own city. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy had slammed into the Gulf Coast, killing 81 people and destroying much of New Orleans. "I am here," President Lyndon Johnson said from a storm-battered New Orleans tarmac, according to an account in Paul Martin Lester's 2010 book, *On Floods and Photo Ops*, "because I wanted to see with my own eyes what the unhappy alliance of wind and water have done to this land and its people."

What the president saw with his own eyes was utter desolation. Betsy prompted Congress to authorize a new ring of levees around the city. But half a century later, after Katrina, it became clear that those levees were not enough.

Today, along with structural fixes to existing embankments and new computer modeling to better understand and address vulnerabilities in New Orleans, some engineers believe more levees don't always offer better protection. In some areas, opting for natural levees instead of manmade levees would actually decrease a storm surge, according to [a 2013 study](#) by researchers at Notre Dame and published in the *Journal of Waterway, Port, Coastal and Ocean Engineering*.

"Historically, the design of Southeast Louisiana's hurricane-flood-risk reduction system has hinged on raising and adding levees in response to river or hurricane events that impact the region," wrote William G. Gilroy, a university spokesman, of the research when it was published. "Now, it may be time to think and build smarter."

The nagging question about any levee is always the same: Will it be enough? The hope is that the question never has to be answered, that the true test of such technology remains theoretical.

But in Louisiana, people know—from survival, from a history calibrated by big hurricanes—they will again be tested.

Or, in the case of New Orleans, as John M. Barry, the author of the book *Rising Tide*, [put it in \*The New York Times\*](#): "The question is whether the ocean will engulf the city—whether the city can continue to exist."

## Smithsonian

### [Can Cypress Trees Help Suppress Wildfires?](#)

***Researchers in Italy and Spain suspect that cypress tree barriers could diffuse forest fires***

by Heather Hansman

It's been a brutal summer for wildfires in the American West. In the [hottest year](#) to date, flames are bearing down on northern California, western Washington has scorched, and more than 5 million acres burned across Alaska.

As the wildfires smolder, across the pond, researchers from Italy and Spain are looking at a particular tree's natural resistance to fires, and how that might be used to temper these disasters. They have found that cypress trees ignite seven times slower than other tree species that are native to the same area.

"The peculiar flammability traits of cypress are not a real mystery," says Gianni Della Rocca, the lead author on the [study](#) published in the *Journal of Environmental Management*. "The physical, chemical and biological characteristic of this species makes it not immediately prone to fire. It means that cypress burns, but it takes longer to catch fire than other Mediterranean species."

The group conducted a series of tests on the [\*Cupressus sempervirens\*](#) species, which is native to the Mediterranean. In a lab, at the particle level, Della Rocca says, “a wide set of bench-scale calorimetry techniques were used to test the flammability parameters of live crowns and litter samples.” Then, in the field, they planted live green barriers. They will test the barrier's fire resistance as soon as the trees mature, to see if what they found in the lab holds up in the wild.

Across the board, all the characteristics they saw in the cypress trees indicate that they'd help fight wildfires of moderate intensity. The tree's needles and dead litter that falls to the ground are spongy and hold water for a long time, for one. The widely-spaced structure of the tree's crown slows down air circulation, and the space between its branches reduces the speed at which a fire spreads. Cypress sap also happens to be less flammable than the resin from other trees.

The scientists started the research project after a destructive large-scale [fire](#) in Valencia, Spain, in 2012. That fire burned almost 50,000 acres, but less than 2 percent of the cypress trees in the region burned.

The trees are resilient and can grow in a range of soils, so Della Rocca and his colleagues suspect that they could be used to slow down and diffuse fires in a variety of settings. It might make sense to plant the conifers in California and other high and dry places that have been experiencing periodic fires, because the trees are hardy and can grow at altitude. It's not as simple as planting seedlings in sensitive areas though. Anytime you introduce a non-native plant you risk damaging the native ecosystem. The species of cypress the group looked at is native to the Mediterranean, but Della Rocca says his team is doing additional tests to study the trees' effects in non-native regions.

To avoid crowding out native species and breeding unhealthy trees, cypress trees can be planted as a barrier along roads and properties or on the edges of urban areas, but Della Rocca says it's important how you plant. He wants to be clear that they're not advocating for shrubs or neat hedges of cypress trees. For the trees to be effective, they have to grow at random as they normally would in the wild, so they can develop crown structure and litter piles in the same way. They're experimenting now with how to grow these barriers.

“When we consider the cypress trees as a potential barrier able to reduce or slow down the fire initiation risk, we're referring to multiple-row plantations with homogenous structure made by selected healthy and vigorous plants,” Della Rocca says.

## **Five Thirty Eight** **[Movies Are About To Get Good Again](#)** by Walt Hickey

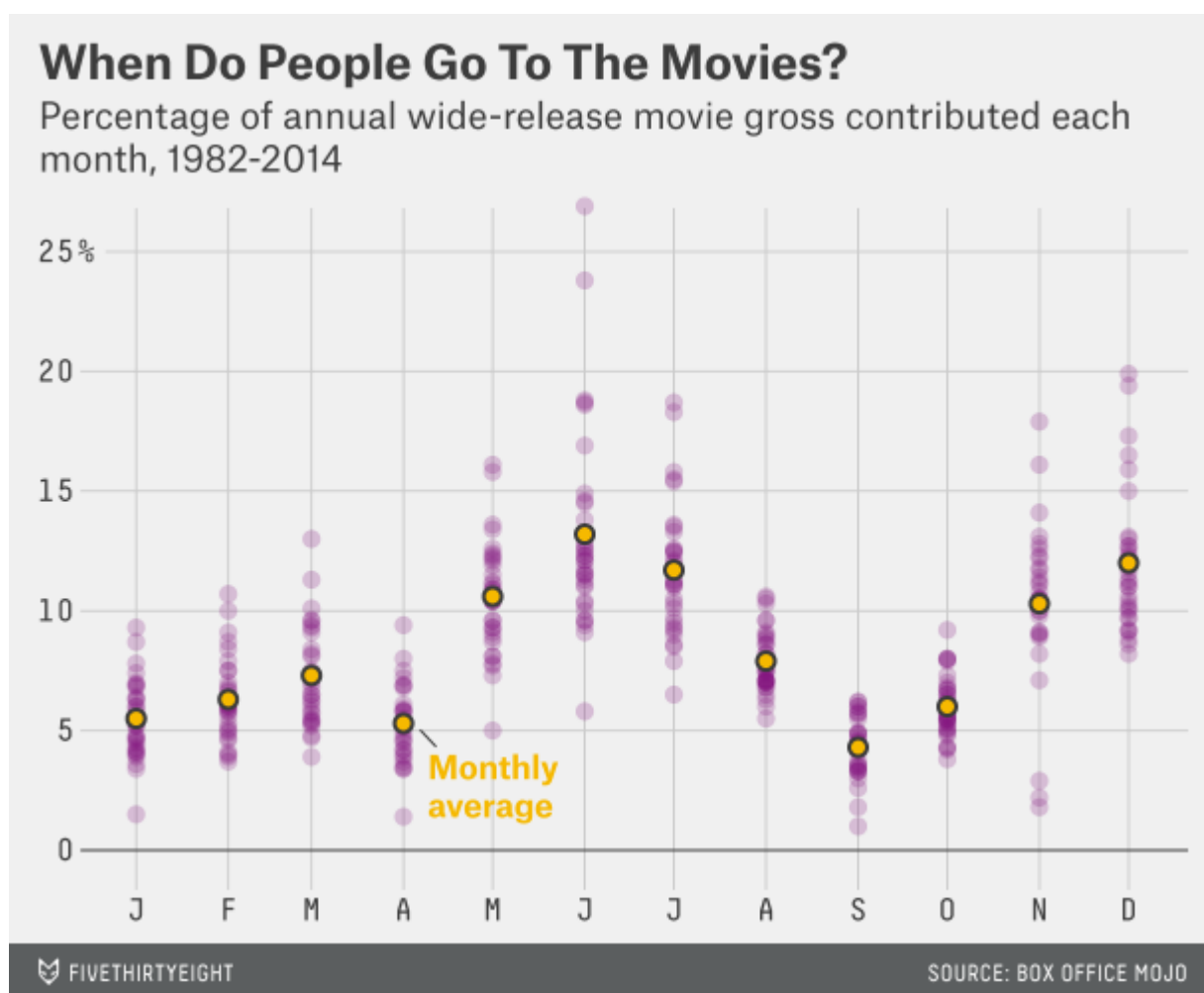
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The Hollywood calendar isn't really rocket science. Summer is the time to put out blockbusters (or blockbuster wannabes). Studios release movies that could potentially score awards —

“Oscar bait” — toward the end of the year, so the films are fresh in awards voters’ minds. And typically, the holiday season is also ripe for a few big movies — [recently the preferred release time](#) for big-budget fantasy films, such as “The Hobbit” and other “Lord of the Rings” movies, or sci-fi films such as “Avatar” and the forthcoming “Star Wars” reboot.

Unfortunately, that means studios fill in the rest of the year with the movies that aren’t such certain bets — aka mostly schlock. The first four months of the year, January through April, see undependable weather conditions in major population centers that could force people indoors and away from theaters. September is the worst financial month of the year for studios, on average. That probably has something to do with school starting up again; the Motion Picture Association of America reported that, in 2014, [42 percent of tickets](#) were sold to people 24 and younger.

This can be observed by simply plotting out box office receipts per month as a percentage of the yearly total, like so:

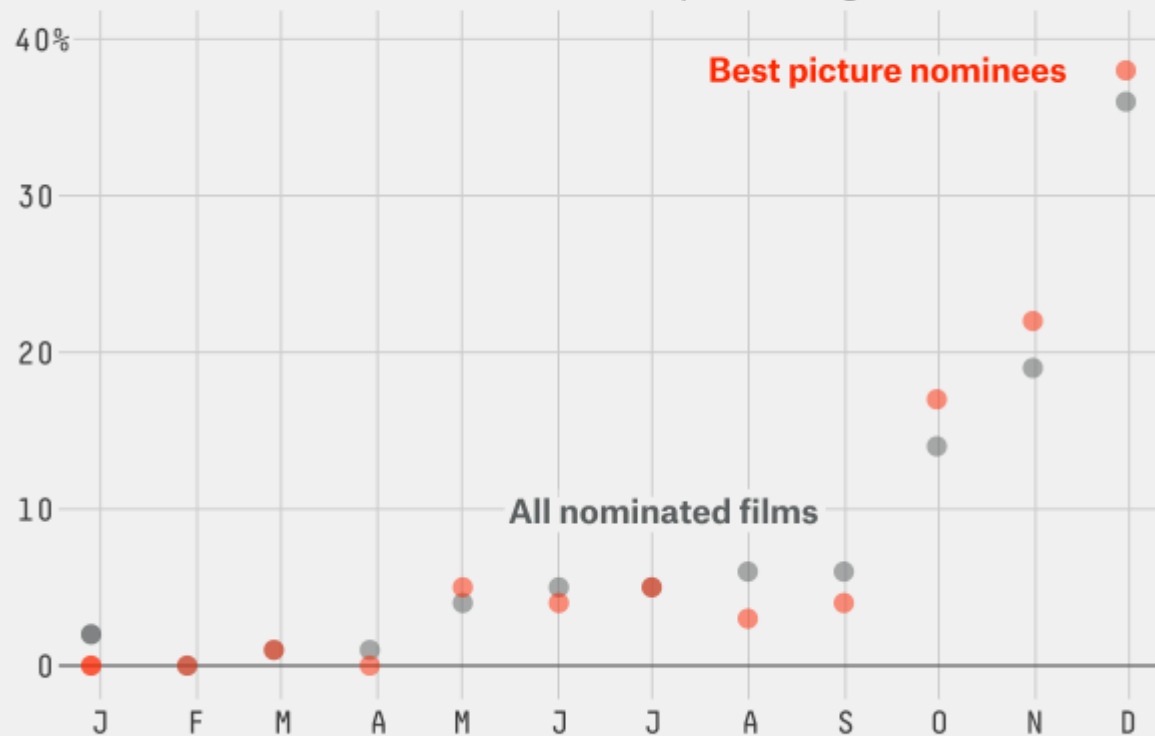


But it’s about to be October! That means not only that studios will make a little more money, but also that the really good movies — the kind that win Oscars — are about to come out.

I looked at every film since 2001 that was nominated for the Academy Award for best picture, as well as every film that had a contributor receive a best director, best actor, best actress, best supporting actress or best supporting actor nomination. That’s 215 unique films, with 95 nominees for best picture among them. Here’s the share of those released in each month:

## It's Oscar Bait Season!

Release month of films nominated in top six categories since 2001



FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

SOURCE: BOX OFFICE MOJO

Things will really pick up in November and December, but October's haul is nothing to sniff at. Recent best picture winners "The Departed," "Birdman" and "12 Years A Slave" all came out in October, and 19 of the 95 films nominated for the top honor since 2001 came out in October.

Still, there may be some best picture nominees among us already, if the historical precedent holds. By the end of September, we'd typically expect about 23 percent of the year's best picture nominees (about two films) to have been released, as well as 28 percent of films that garner any nominations.

It's a fool's game to try to predict which movie is going to get an Oscar nomination based on its release month, but it's good to know that, once again, we're going to have good movies in theaters. September's [best-performing movie](#) has been an M. Night Shyamalan film, for crying out loud. We deserve better, and we're about to get it.

Walt Hickey is FiveThirtyEight's lead writer for lifestyle.





**Kingsport couple treated for minor injuries when their Smart Car hit a Squirrel in Bloomingdale. Everything is okay.**

**Good news is...**



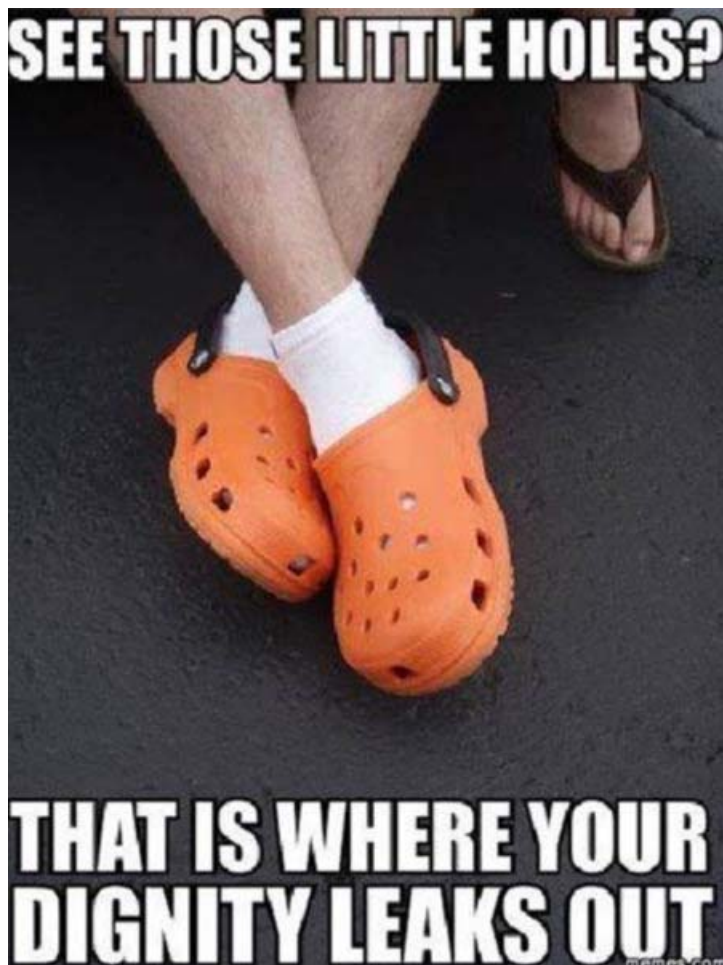
**I found your Prius!**

**HOW TO ENJOY PUMPKIN BEER**



**STEP 1: THROW IT IN THE TRASH**

**SEE THOSE LITTLE HOLES?**



**THAT IS WHERE YOUR  
DIGNITY LEAKS OUT**

**SO IF MARRIAGES LICENSES FROM  
ONE STATE NOW HAVE TO BE  
RECOGNIZED BY OTHER STATES**



**DOES THAT MEAN MY CONCEALED CARRY  
PERMIT FROM TEXAS NOW HAS TO BE  
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