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COVID-19, Asteroid Dust and Crane Flies: UArizona's Top Stories of 2020



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By Nick Prevenas, University Communications

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The University of Arizona generated major international media attention with its plan to resume in-person learning in 2020.

(Photo: Chris Richards/University of Arizona)

It was a year that changed everything.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Arizona responded swiftly to the challenges presented by an unprecedented public health crisis. The entire Wildcat community – from virologists to public health experts to psychologists and everyone in between – contributed their time, energy and expertise to help the university and the nation with life-saving safety efforts and long-term mitigation strategies.

In between, the world watched as UArizona researchers "tagged" an asteroid, explored previously unanswered questions about the Maya civilization and, yes, figured out what's up with all those crane flies.

These are the top 10 stories of 2020:

[President Robbins: UArizona Plans to Resume In-Person Classes in Fall: April 30](#) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/president-robbins-uarizona-plans-resume-inperson-classes-fall>)

The University of Arizona was one of the first higher education institutions in the U.S. to announce its intention to reopen its doors to in-person instruction in the fall semester. The university employed a data-driven, science-based approach as part of its **[Test, Trace, Treat](#)** (https://covid19.arizona.edu/test-trace-treat?_ga=2.178883300.1507109173.1607281393-1447767288.1564510221) strategy, with 17th U.S. Surgeon General Dr. **Richard Carmona** serving as director of the university's Reentry Task Force. The university held more than two dozen briefings on its **[YouTube channel](#)** (<https://www.youtube.com/c/universityofarizona>) and President **Robert C. Robbins** gave more than 50 interviews with major television networks, print and online publications to keep the public informed of the university's plans and procedures. Charles Fishman, a reporter for The Atlantic, **[detailed the breadth and scope](#)** (<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/16-weeks-and-5-days-university-arizona/616557/>) of the university's safety protocols in an Oct. 1 article. As a result of those protocols, the university successfully flattened a significant spike in positive cases in September and kept its physical and virtual doors open for the entire fall semester. (**[The Atlantic](#)** (<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/16-weeks-and-5-days-university-arizona/616557/>), **[Business Insider](#)** (<https://www.businessinsider.com/university-of-arizona-president-on-testing-all-60000-students-staff-2020-5>), **[ABC News](#)** (<https://abcnews.go.com/US/university-arizona-details-plan-person-learning-fall/story?id=70668520>))

Artist's impression showing the OSIRIS-REx spacecraft descending onto Bennu's surface to collect a sample on Oct. 20.

OSIRIS-REx Successfully Touches Asteroid Bennu in Sample Grab: Oct. 20 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/osiris-rex-successfully-touches-asteroid-bennu-sample-grab>)

Ten years after NASA selected UArizona to lead the OSIRIS-REx mission to an asteroid, the spacecraft successfully completed its most treacherous and rewarding task: sample collection. At 10:50 a.m. Tucson time on Oct. 20, the OSIRIS-REx spacecraft extended the shoulder, then elbow, then wrist of its 11-foot sampling arm, known as the Touch-and-Go Sample Acquisition Mechanism, or TAGSAM, and descended to collect a sample from the asteroid's surface. The sample, which could help scientists better understand the origins of life on Earth, will be returned to Earth in 2023. ([CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/20/world/nasa-asteroid-bennu-mission-updates-scn-trnd/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/20/world/nasa-asteroid-bennu-mission-updates-scn-trnd/index.html>), [BBC](https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54624653) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54624653>), [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/science/nasa-osiris-rex.html?action=click&module=News&pgtype=Homepage) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/science/nasa-osiris-rex.html?action=click&module=News&pgtype=Homepage>))

UArizona Tracking Coronavirus Through Wastewater Across US: April 2 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/uarizona-tracking-coronavirus-through-wastewater-across-us>)

Researchers at the University of Arizona Water and Energy Sustainable Technology Center are testing wastewater across the country to trace coronavirus prevalence in communities and help public health officials better prepare for the future. "Testing the wastewater gives you an idea of the number of cases within a community and if the numbers are increasing or decreasing," said [Ian Pepper](#), director of the [WEST Center](#) (<https://west.arizona.edu>) and a [BIO5 Institute](#) (<https://www.bio5.org>) member. "The approach can also be used to help determine if an intervention is working to reduce the transmission of the virus." In August, the University of Arizona used wastewater-based epidemiology to prevent an outbreak in one of its dorms. ([ABC News](https://abcnews.go.com/Health/catching-coronavirus-water/story?id=70245815) (<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/catching-coronavirus-water/story?id=70245815>), [The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/28/arizona-coronavirus-wastewater-testing/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/28/arizona-coronavirus-wastewater-testing/>), [The Huffington Post](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/university-of-arizona-coronavirus_n_5f480505c5b64f17e13a9ac3) (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/university-of-arizona-coronavirus_n_5f480505c5b64f17e13a9ac3))

Largest, Oldest Maya Monument Suggests Importance of Communal Work: June 3 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/largest-oldest-maya-monument-suggests-importance-communal-work>)

A University of Arizona discovery suggests that the Maya civilization developed more rapidly than archaeologists once thought and highlights the importance of communal work in the earliest days of the civilization. Located in Tabasco, Mexico, near the northwestern border of Guatemala, the newly discovered site of Aguada Fénix lurked beneath the surface, hidden by its size and low profile, until 2017. The monument measures nearly 4,600 feet long, ranges from 30 to 50 feet high and includes nine wide causeways. ([WIRED](https://www.wired.com/story/archaeologists-discover-the-largest-oldest-maya-monument-yet/) (<https://www.wired.com/story/archaeologists-discover-the-largest-oldest-maya-monument-yet/>), [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jun/03/maya-structure-discovered-mexico-lidar-aguada-fenix) (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jun/03/maya-structure-discovered-mexico-lidar-aguada-fenix>), [NBC News](https://www.nbcnews.com/science/science-news/mayans-built-massive-structures-thousands-years-ago-researchers-found-biggest-n1223586) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/science/science-news/mayans-built-massive-structures-thousands-years-ago-researchers-found-biggest-n1223586>))

UArizona Partnership with State Begins COVID-19 Antibody Testing: April 14 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/uarizona-partners-state-provide-covid19-antibody-tests>)

The University of Arizona announced in April that it would provide antibody testing for the state of Arizona. An initial \$3.5 million investment by the state supported the testing of 250,000 Arizona health care workers and first responders. In [June](#) (<https://news.arizona.edu/press-release/uarizona-state-arizona-expand-eligibility-covid19-antibody-testing-add-capacity>) and [July](#) (<https://news.arizona.edu/press-release/uarizona-state-arizona-expand-eligibility-covid-19-antibody-testing-concert-77m-study>), the antibody testing effort was expanded throughout the state. ([ABC's Good Morning America](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxVvzM9mNjw&feature=youtu.be) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxVvzM9mNjw&feature=youtu.be>), [CNBC](https://www.cnbc.com/video/2020/04/27/arizona-ramps-up-anti-body-tests.html) (<https://www.cnbc.com/video/2020/04/27/arizona-ramps-up-anti-body-tests.html>), [Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-arizona/arizona-to-test-250000-first-responders-healthcare-workers-for-covid-19-idUSKCN21X04W) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-arizona/arizona-to-test-250000-first-responders-healthcare-workers-for-covid-19-idUSKCN21X04W>))

Study Shows SARS-CoV-2 Antibodies Provide Lasting Immunity: Oct. 13 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/study-shows-sars-cov-2-antibodies-provide-lasting-immunity>)

One of the most significant questions about the novel coronavirus is whether people who are infected are immune from reinfection and, if so, for how long? To determine the answer, University of Arizona Health Sciences researchers studied the production of antibodies in nearly 6,000 people and found immunity persists for at least several months after a person is infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. "We clearly see high-quality antibodies still being produced five to seven months after SARS-CoV-2 infection," said [Deepta Bhattacharya](#), associate professor in the UArizona [College of Medicine – Tucson](#) (<https://medicine.arizona.edu>)'s [Department of Immunobiology](#) (<https://immunobiology.arizona.edu>). "Many concerns have been expressed about immunity against COVID-19 not lasting. We used this study to investigate that question and found immunity is stable for at least five months." ([CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/14/health/lasting-immunity-covid-19-antibodies-studies/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/14/health/lasting-immunity-covid-19-antibodies-studies/index.html>), [BGR](https://www.bgr.com/2020/10/19/coronavirus-immunity-length-5-7-months-study-arizona/) (<https://www.bgr.com/2020/10/19/coronavirus-immunity-length-5-7-months-study-arizona/>), [UPI](https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2020/10/13/Study-COVID-19-patients-produce-high-quality-antibodies-up-to-7-months-after-recovery/9741602619576/) (https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2020/10/13/Study-COVID-19-patients-produce-high-quality-antibodies-up-to-7-months-after-recovery/9741602619576/))

One-Third of Plant and Animal Species Could be Gone in 50 Years: Feb 12 (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/onethird-plant-and-animal-species-could-be-gone-50-years>)

A University of Arizona-led study presented detailed estimates of global extinction from climate change by 2070. By combining information on recent extinctions from climate change, rates of species movement and different projections of future climate, the researchers estimated that one in three species of plants and animals may face extinction. **Cristian Román-Palacios** and **John J. Wiens**, both in the **Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology** (<https://eeb.arizona.edu/>), analyzed data from 538 species and 581 sites around the world and found that 44% of those species had already gone extinct at one or more sites. ([USA Today](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/02/14/climate-change-study-plant-animal-extinction/4760646002/) (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/02/14/climate-change-study-plant-animal-extinction/4760646002/>), [CBS News](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-may-eradicate-one-third-of-animal-and-plant-species-in-50-years/) (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-may-eradicate-one-third-of-animal-and-plant-species-in-50-years/>), [CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/weather/species-extinction-climate-trnd/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/weather/species-extinction-climate-trnd/index.html>))

[UArizona and Covid Watch Launch COVID-19 Exposure Notification App: Aug. 19](https://news.arizona.edu/story/uarizona-and-covid-watch-launch-covid-19-exposure-notification-app-aug-19) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/uarizona-and-covid-watch-launch-covid-19-exposure-notification-app>)

The University of Arizona partnered with the nonprofit organization Covid Watch to launch the [Covid Watch](https://www.covidwatch.org/) (<https://www.covidwatch.org/>) exposure notification smartphone app to the campus community. The app allows users who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 to anonymously notify others who may have been exposed. More than 14,000 people on campus have download the app since its launch. ([The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/technology/coronavirus-exposure-alert-apps.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/technology/coronavirus-exposure-alert-apps.html>), [ABC News](https://abcnews.go.com/US/smартphone-app-alerts-university-arizona-students-exposed-covid/story?id=72580199) (<https://abcnews.go.com/US/smартphone-app-alerts-university-arizona-students-exposed-covid/story?id=72580199>), [Politico](https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/city-hall/story/2020/08/19/contact-tracing-apps-have-been-a-bust-states-bet-college-kids-can-change-that-1310514) (<https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/city-hall/story/2020/08/19/contact-tracing-apps-have-been-a-bust-states-bet-college-kids-can-change-that-1310514>))

Adult crane flies live for two weeks, tops.

(Photo: Daniel Stolte/UANews)

[What's Up With All the Crane Flies?: March 5](https://news.arizona.edu/story/whats-all-crane-flies) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/whats-all-crane-flies>)

A mass emergence of crane flies in March had many Tucsonans wondering what the creatures were, why there were so many of them and why they seemed to show up all at once. **Michael Bogan**, assistant professor of aquatic biology in the [School of Natural Resources and the Environment](https://snre.arizona.edu/) (<https://snre.arizona.edu/>), talked with UArizona News about the "invasion" of crane flies in the Old Pueblo. This interview comes up as one of the top 10 results on Google when a user searches "[crane flies](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=crane+flies) (<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=crane+flies>)."

([Arizona Daily Star](https://tucson.com/news/local/harmless-crane-flies-aren-t-uncommon-insects-in-tucson-following/article_a0f0e905-fb6f-52fc-8f86-dd3d54ac2b7a.html) (https://tucson.com/news/local/harmless-crane-flies-aren-t-uncommon-insects-in-tucson-following/article_a0f0e905-fb6f-52fc-8f86-dd3d54ac2b7a.html), [The Dothan Eagle](https://dothaneagle.com/news/local/answer-man-do-crane-flies-kill-mosquitoes/article_29f3be4a-ec49-56f4-9fbb-53e501f1eef1.html) (https://dothaneagle.com/news/local/answer-man-do-crane-flies-kill-mosquitoes/article_29f3be4a-ec49-56f4-9fbb-53e501f1eef1.html))

[University of Arizona Announces Expanded Access through University of Arizona Global Campus: Aug. 3](https://news.arizona.edu/story/university-arizona-announces-expanded-access-through-university-arizona-global-campus-aug-3)

(<https://news.arizona.edu/story/university-arizona-announces-expanded-access-through-university-arizona-global-campus>)

The University of Arizona acquired the assets of Ashford University to create a new nonprofit entity: The University of Arizona Global Campus. The fully online university provides access to affordable high-quality higher education with flexible opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds around the world. ([The Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/articles/university-of-arizona-to-acquire-ashford-university-in-online-push-11596452400) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/university-of-arizona-to-acquire-ashford-university-in-online-push-11596452400>), [Military Times](https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2020/10/06/blazing-a-trail-how-a-black-navy-seal-boosted-his-success-through-online-learning/) (<https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2020/10/06/blazing-a-trail-how-a-black-navy-seal-boosted-his-success-through-online-learning/>), [The Chronicle of Higher Education](https://www.chronicle.com/article/u-of-arizona-expands-reach-with-acquisition-of-ashford-u?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in) (https://www.chronicle.com/article/u-of-arizona-expands-reach-with-acquisition-of-ashford-u?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in))

Here are some additional stories that deserve honorable mention:

- [Faking Emotions at Work Does More Harm Than Good: Jan. 21](https://news.arizona.edu/story/faking-emotions-work-does-more-harm-good) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/faking-emotions-work-does-more-harm-good>)
- [Einstein's Description of Gravity Just Got Much Harder to Beat: Oct. 1](https://news.arizona.edu/story/einstiens-description-gravity-just-got-much-harder-beat) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/einstiens-description-gravity-just-got-much-harder-beat>)
- [Pain Relief Caused by SARS-CoV-2 Infection May Help Explain COVID-19 Spread: Oct. 2](https://news.arizona.edu/story/pain-relief-caused-sars-cov-2-infection-may-help-explain-covid-19-spread) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/pain-relief-caused-sars-cov-2-infection-may-help-explain-covid-19-spread>)
- [Photo Gallery: White House Coronavirus Task Force Leader Deborah Birx Visits UArizona Labs: Sept. 23](https://news.arizona.edu/photos/photo-gallery-white-house-coronavirus-task-force-leader-deborah-birx-visits-uarizona-labs) (<https://news.arizona.edu/photos/photo-gallery-white-house-coronavirus-task-force-leader-deborah-birx-visits-uarizona-labs>)
- [Got Pandemic Fatigue? COVID-19 is Taking a Toll on Mental Health, Psychologist Says: June 13](https://news.arizona.edu/story/got-pandemic-fatigue-covid-19-taking-toll-mental-health-psychologist-says) (<https://news.arizona.edu/story/got-pandemic-fatigue-covid-19-taking-toll-mental-health-psychologist-says>)

- [How Cold Was the Ice Age? Researchers Now Know: Aug. 26](https://news.arizona.edu/story/how-cold-was-ice-age-researchers-now-know)
- [University of Arizona Awarded \\$26M to Architect the Quantum Internet: Aug. 4](https://news.arizona.edu/story/university-arizona-awarded-26m-architect-quantum-internet)
- [Theater Students Make Masks for Health Care Workers: March 26](https://news.arizona.edu/story/theater-students-make-masks-health-care-workers)
- [Bee Afraid ... 'Murder Hornets' are Here: May 4](https://news.arizona.edu/story/bee-afraid-murder-hornets-are-here)
- [Study Predicts Millions of Unsellable Homes Could Upend Market: Aug. 11](https://news.arizona.edu/story/study-predicts-millions-unsellable-homes-could-upend-market)

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Media Contact(s)

[Nick Prevenas](/person/nick-prevenas) (/person/nick-prevenas)

University Communications

nprevenas@arizona.edu (mailto:nprevenas@arizona.edu)

[520-621-2194](tel:520-621-2194) (tel:520-621-2194)

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