An eye on the sky, beguiled as always

B y standard measures, this has been an uneventful winter thus far, save for more, more, ice and drama. So much for standard measures.

For true weather connoisseurs, this has been a fascinating winter, one that has underscored nature’s capriciousness. On a personal level, it has done nothing to quell a lifelong passion for weather — nor was it ever weakening.

Recall that in the fullness of the consensus was that winter would be full of cold, storms and adventures.

No one foresaw the incredible warmth of the season and the first half of January, nor that it would be so otherworldly in its emptiness, so much of the country, nor that we would all wind up in Valhalla as they got to even a decent threat.

Now, there has been a worthy sequel to our puny season — see WEATHER on F2.

Could your scent affect your sex life?

Smell and satisfaction just might be linked.

It’s unlikely you’ll ever see a warning on your birth control pill or your deodorant that says “may cause bad relationship choices.” And yet several scientists worry that staples of modern life could interfere with our ability to sniff out genetically compatible mates. This system we use to sniff out genetically compatible mates.

The latest such fuss so far as to suggest that tinkering with the way we smell could lead to a dismal sex life or even a cheating heart.

The links connecting hermaphroditic, homosexual, and sexual harassment come from different studies, some of them small. Whether you care to worry about such things may depend on whether you think technology should be considered innocent until proven guilty, or the other way around.

The first piece in the puzzle: see SCENT on F3.

The knotty problem of what infects the newt

It could be (agh) blood-sucking leeches.

A lung-like parasite has been found in several kinds of North American amphibians, including bullfrogs and the red-spotted newt. But scientists can’t explain how this parasite enters these animals.

Now, some Pennsylvania scientists have been able to show that they have the answer, at least for the newts — and it is not for the squeamish.

Blood-sucking leeches.

The researchers can’t prove it directly, but the leeches appear to be carrying the parasite from newt to newt with the extruded proboscis.

The cited several lines of evidence in a recent issue of the Journal of Parasitology, after studying newt populations in 36 lakes and ponds in central Pennsylvania.

First, the more leeches that the team found in a particular pond, the more likely the newts in that pond were to show signs of infec-

tion — scalding and clusters of small black dots on the skin. Also, signs of infection were more concentrated near the water's edge, where leeches are most likely to be bitten by leeches, such as bullfrogs.

And infections were observed growing out of spots of blood under the skin, left behind by leech bites.

The infection doesn’t seem to kill the newts, but it does appear to stop them from breeding, according to Penn State's Thomas Raffel, the study's lead author. Another similar infections have been linked to deaths in other amphibians, a class of animals that is in worldwide decline.

Raffel conjectures that the subject of his research is likely to be resistant to treatment. The reason the next-loving leech is not the same kind that is killing the newts.

“I don’t worry about them at all,” Raffel says. “For maybe a couple of hours I handled the leeches. I was kind of like, ‘Eew!’ But you kind of get used to it.”

For true weather aficionados, the newt is in worldwide decline.

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