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## Radio tracks crickets

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A few unlucky crickets will become unwitting informants this summer. Agricultural researchers in the United States have fitted them with radio tags equal to half of their body weight to track their movements across the Utah desert, in an effort to understand the cues directing their devastating march.



**A mormon cricket carries a radio back-pack.**

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The signals will enable the scientists to record the kinds of topography, plant communities and weather patterns that favour the insects, hopefully helping them to predict future outbreaks.

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The southwestern United States is set to experience the worst invasion of mormon crickets (*Anabrus simplex*) since the 1930s. One of the researchers, Greg Sword of the US Department of Agriculture's Northern Plains Laboratory, says that "10,000 to 50,000 insects, weighing a few grams a piece, moving up to a mile a day, can be a formidable threat".

In 2001 the crickets cost the state of Utah \$25 million. But apart from the insects propensity to wander, little is understood about when they invade, where or why. "The cues that determine what direction they march to might be set early on," says Sword. "We're trying to track these bands to predict what direction they will go."

**50,000 insects moving up to a mile a day can be a formidable threat**

**Greg Sword, US Department of**

"Part of the problem is that there has been a 10-year period where nothing much was happening," explains Pat Lorch, a behavioural ecologist at the University of Toronto at Mississauga in Ontario, Canada.

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The crickets reach usually reach substantial numbers every seven or so years. Some speculate the current outbreak is tied to recent dry conditions, which may facilitate successful egg hatching from the soil. Major outbreaks happen only every 50-70 years

What the scientists do know is that the crickets swarm over the land, stopping at any food source in their path - crops, carrion, even fallen brethren - and become a traffic hazard along the way. As the crickets pause to cannibalize roadkill, the ensuing mass suicide causes notoriously difficult driving conditions.

Mormon crickets plague much of the western United States. But the impact they've had on Utah is cultural as well as economic. The seagull was designated Utah's state bird specifically for its cricket-devouring ability - legend has it that seagulls miraculously saved the state from crop devastation years ago.

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