

National

THE 13-YEAR-OLD WHO
BEAT TETRIS

BY SOPAN DEB

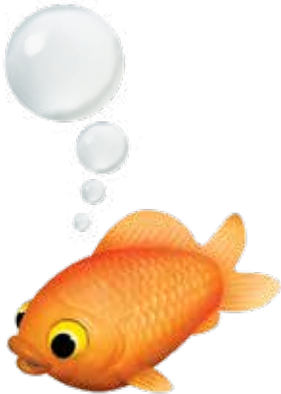


Willis Gibson at the Classic Tetris World Championship, where he placed third, last fall.

ON DEC. 21, Willis Gibson put his hands to his head and rocked back and forth in his chair. He couldn't believe what had just happened. "Oh, my God," he says in a video of the moment. "I can't feel my fingers." Willis, who's 13, had just done something no person had ever done before: beaten Tetris. He got so far in the original Nintendo version that the game actually froze! Tetris is one of the most-loved video games ever. If you've never played, the goal is to keep falling blocks from piling up. But with each level, the shapes come down faster and faster. For a long time after the game was first released in the 1980s, people thought that it was

impossible to get past Level 29. But in the past decade, players have been blowing right past that. And lots of them are teenagers. In 2020, a 13-year-old even won the Classic Tetris World Championship. Willis, who's from Stillwater, Okla., first got interested in Tetris after seeing videos of the game on YouTube. He liked how simple it was. "It's easy to start off," he says, "yet it's really hard to master it." His mom bought him an old television and a version of a Nintendo console that uses the same hardware as the original. In 2021, he started competing under the name Blue Scuti. Since then, he has won some small tournaments, making about \$3,000 in prize money. And in October he came in third in the world championship. "This Tetris

prodigy has just come up and just completely taken over the pro Tetris scene," says David Macdonald, a video-game content creator and competitive Tetris player. In December, when he crashed the game, Willis reached Level 157 — the game became unplayable, because the coding wasn't designed to go that far. It was a big moment for him, and also the Tetris world. "Now that it's been done, there's kind of a new phase or a new challenge," Macdonald says. As for Willis, he's "just extremely excited," he says. His next goal is to win the world championship. Just don't expect to see him playing on a PlayStation 5 anytime soon. "I don't really like newer games as much as the older games," he says. ♦



FORGET
GROUNDHOGS.

HERE ARE THREE
ANIMALS
WHO ACTUALLY
CAN PREDICT
THE WEATHER.

BY LAUREL NEME

ON FEB. 2, the country will watch as Punxsutawney Phil leaves his burrow in Pennsylvania and heads out into the daylight. You know the drill: If he sees his shadow, bundle up for six more weeks. If he doesn't, look forward to an early spring! Or maybe don't. Because the reality is that Phil's track record isn't great — over the past 10 years he has been right less than half the time. For better odds on predicting what the weather has in store, look to these animals instead.

CRICKETS
CHIRP THE TEMPERATURE

Should you throw on a sweatshirt before heading outside? Ask the crickets. Crickets are coldblooded, like reptiles, so they get their warmth from the environment. When it's chilly out, they move more slowly. That means their chirps — which they make by rubbing their wings together, often as a mating call — slow down, too. When they warm up, they rub their wings together faster, which produces faster chirps. There are even math formulas for different species that will tell you the exact temperature. For field crickets, add 40 to the number of chirps in 15 seconds to get the degrees in Fahrenheit.

FROGS
FORECAST RAIN

To know whether you need an umbrella, check out frog forecasts. Frogs are sensitive to moisture in the air, probably because they need it to stay wet and comfortable. And when it's about to rain, American green-tree frogs, known as rain frogs, will croak louder. The reason: Wet weather is good for breeding, because it creates puddles where females can lay eggs. When frogs croak louder before (and during, and after) a downpour, what they're actually doing is trying to attract another frog to mate with.

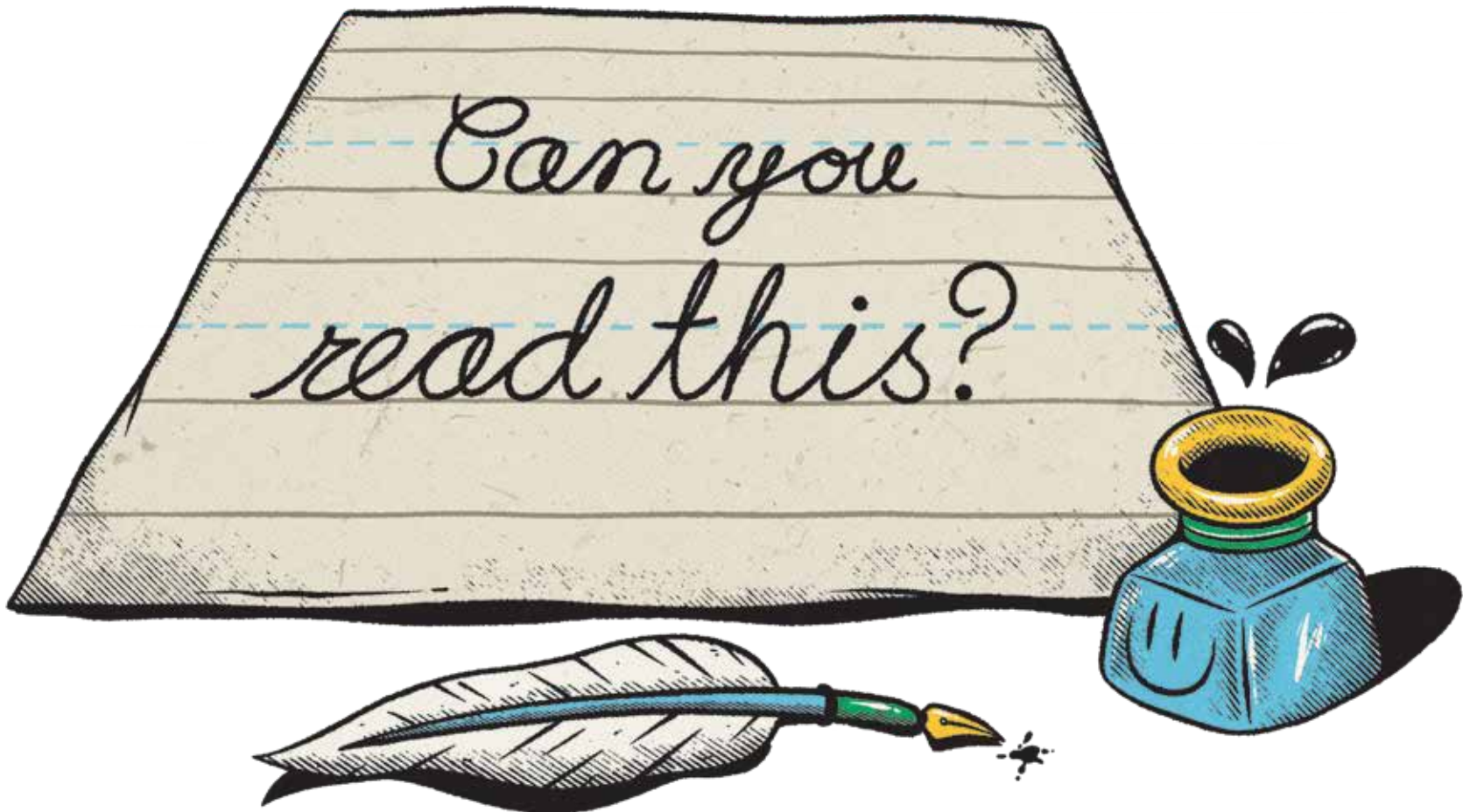
BIRDS
SENSE STORMS

If you look up and see a flock of Canada geese flying right above you, it might be time to head indoors. That's because migrating birds' altitude, or how high they're flying, can tell us when a storm is coming. When they're flying low, it means the air pressure is dropping, and gloomy weather like clouds, wind and rain is coming in. When they're high, it means clear skies ahead! ♦

FOR AND AGAINST
LEARNING CURSIVE
AN ADULT AND A KID MAKE THEIR CASE

BY KATHERINE CUSUMANO • ILLUSTRATION BY SUPER FREAK

MAYBE YOU CALL it cursive. Maybe you call it script. Maybe you call it nothing, because you've never actually had to learn it. But if you live in California and are not already familiar with those looping, connected letters, you'd better get ready. This month, a new law started requiring schools there to teach cursive between first grade and sixth grade. Twenty-two other states have similar laws. What's the point of making kids learn cursive? Is there a point? The New York Times for Kids talked to two people with different viewpoints: an adult who wrote California's new law and a sixth grader who had to learn cursive at his school in Idaho. Here's what they had to say.



FOR:
It gives students more options.

I was an elementary-school teacher for 30 years. I felt that we shouldn't have some students who have been exposed to cursive and others for whom it appears to be almost a foreign language. I really think we can use the word "equity" here, meaning everybody gets the same resources. Being able to read cursive is important: You need it to read historical documents, including family letters and diaries, and book covers, wedding invitations and holiday cards. Also, there's a lot of research that shows that when you're writing things down, it helps with memorization and it helps with fine motor skills — and writing in cursive is also faster than printing. I'm a huge believer that we need to teach students typing, printing and cursive, to allow them to make some choices in how they express their writing. Sharon Quirk-Silva, California State Assemblywoman

AGAINST:
We don't actually use it.

At first, I thought learning cursive was pretty fun. You would see a lot of things written in cursive, and it was really cool to finally learn that skill. Now I feel like it's kind of unnecessary, because we never actually put our cursive skills to use in anything else we did — it was just its own thing. We type for most things in our class, or else we hand-write, but everything we do is focused on expressing our ideas and having good, well-structured answers — handwriting itself is not as much of a concern. I would prefer using this cursive time to work on other important things. I get assigned a lot of homework, and if cursive were freed up, it could make things a lot less stressful. If you need to be able to read cursive, you could probably learn a skill like that in the future. You don't really need to learn it at a superyoung age. Rowan Mitchell, 11, Boise, Idaho