

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick

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Notes: Sources included the American Museum of Natural History, <http://www.amnh.org/science/biodiversity/extinction/Intro/GiantBeasts.html> (including and especially the link "What happened to all these mammals?"); *Ice Age Mammals of North America* by Ian Lange (2002, Mountain Press Publishing Company); *Twilight of the Mammoths* by Paul S. Martin (2005, University of California Press); *Mammal Evolution* by R.J.G. Savage and M.R. Long (1986, Facts on File); and the BBC's "Walking with Prehistoric Beasts."

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Q. Dear Twig: Why did those great big mammals in North America — sloths, mammoths, those guys — go extinct?

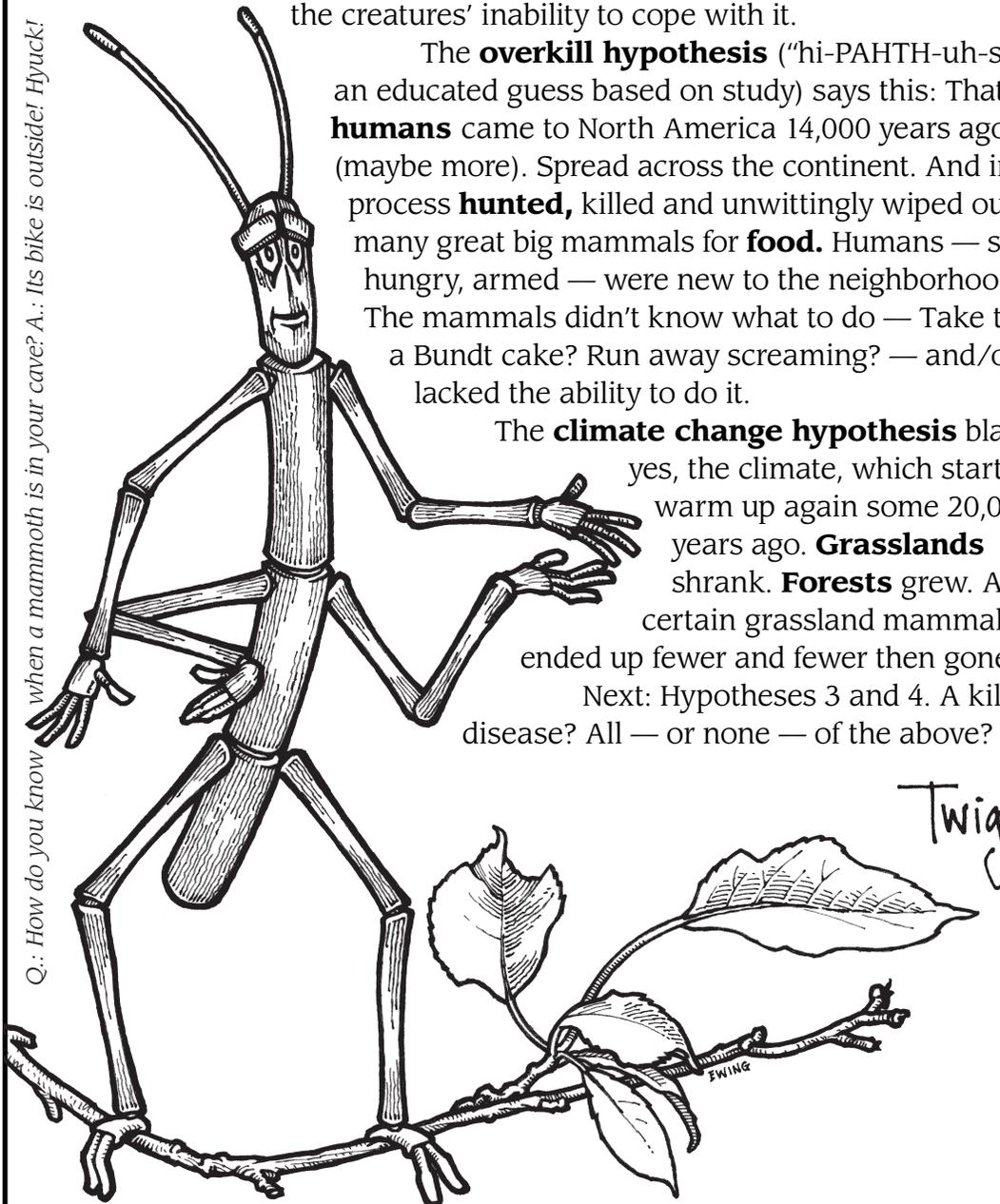
A.: Scientists have four main ideas. Each one has to do with change and the creatures' inability to cope with it.

The **overkill hypothesis** ("hi-PAATH-uh-siss"; an educated guess based on study) says this: That **humans** came to North America 14,000 years ago (maybe more). Spread across the continent. And in the process **hunted**, killed and unwittingly wiped out many great big mammals for **food**. Humans — smart, hungry, armed — were new to the neighborhood. The mammals didn't know what to do — Take them a Bundt cake? Run away screaming? — and/or lacked the ability to do it.

The **climate change hypothesis** blames, yes, the climate, which started to warm up again some 20,000 years ago. **Grasslands** shrank. **Forests** grew. And certain grassland mammals ended up fewer and fewer then gone.

Next: Hypotheses 3 and 4. A killer disease? All — or none — of the above?

Q.: How do you know when a mammoth is in your cave? A.: Its bike is outside! Hyuck!



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