

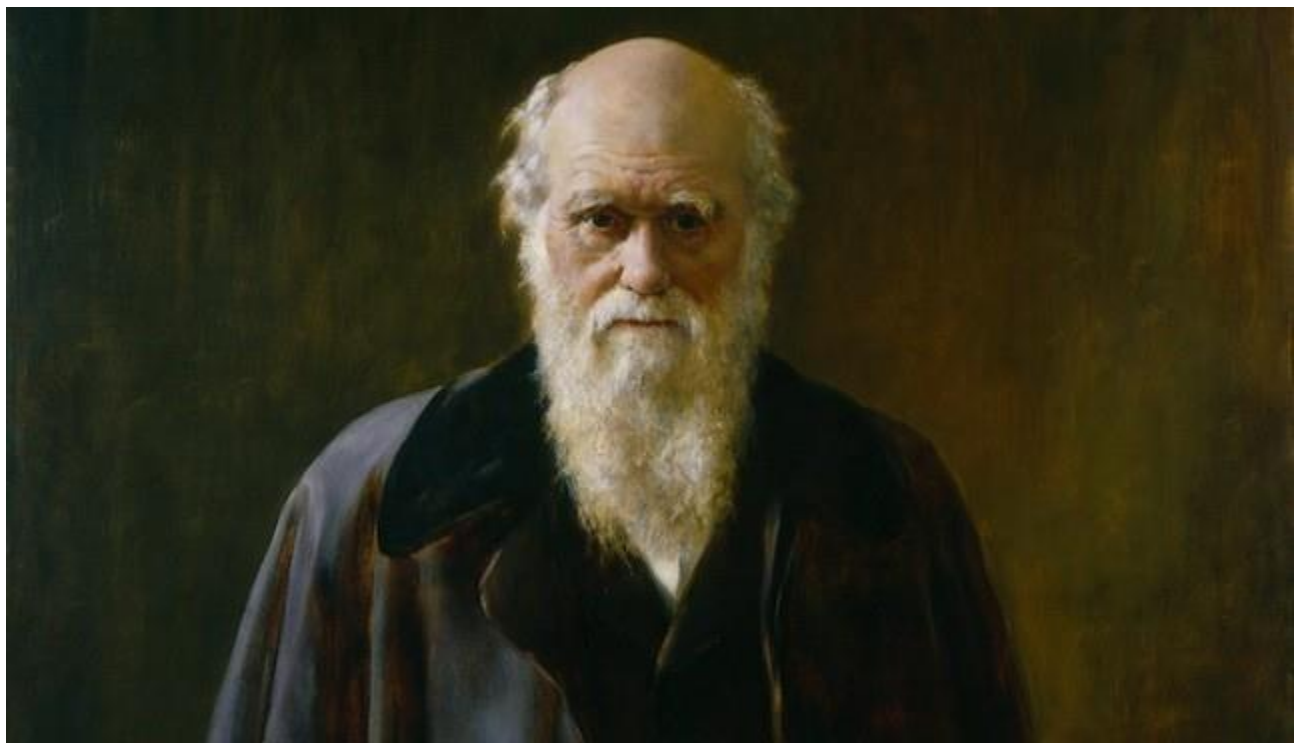
# MOTHER NATURE NETWORK

## Happy Darwin Day and Evolution Weekend

[Russell McLendon](#)

Charles Darwin's birthday has become not just an international holiday, but an entire evolution-themed weekend. Here are five ideas for how to celebrate.

Thu, Feb 12, 2015 at 09:48 AM



British naturalist Charles Darwin strikes a pensive pose in this 1881 oil painting by John Collier. (Image: [National Portrait Gallery](#))

[Charles Darwin](#) was born 206 years ago on Feb. 12, five decades before he would forever change the field of biology with "[On the Origin of Species](#)." Another book, published 143 years later, dubbed his opus on evolution "[the single best idea, ever](#)."

The editors of that book helped found [Darwin Day](#) in the 1990s, honoring not just Darwin, but also "the achievements of humanity as represented in the acquisition of verifiable scientific knowledge." People had already been celebrating Darwin's birthday on Feb. 12 for decades, but Darwin Day became a global holiday for science, with Darwin as its patriarch — sort of like a less jolly, more scholarly Santa Claus.

But while Darwin's discovery of natural selection has revolutionized science, it has also inspired generations of critics. Some distrust it for religious reasons, seeing it as a threat to creationism or "intelligent design," and some just don't like to think of people as animals. Darwin wasn't anti-religion, though — he was on track to be a clergyman before his fateful Galapagos trip, and his body is [buried](#) at Westminster Abbey.

Promoting peace between science and religion is the focus of another Darwin-themed event this month: the Clergy Letter Project's [Evolution Weekend](#), which marks its 10th anniversary Feb. 13-15. The idea is for religious groups to discuss evolution, whether it's the basis of a sermon or just a side topic in Sunday school. Some advocates of intelligent design dismiss this as a push to "[Darwinize](#)" people, but it has nonetheless spread to 574 congregations in 13 countries and 45 U.S. states.

There have also been renewed efforts lately to make Darwin Day a U.S. holiday. Rep. Rush Holt of New Jersey, for example, introduced a [resolution](#) in 2013 "expressing support" for the federal designation of Darwin Day, an idea first floated in 2011 by former Rep. Pete Stark of California.

"Charles Darwin is even more than the author of the theory of evolution, as great as that is," Holt said in a [statement](#). "He represents a way of thinking, a philosophy, a methodology. It was his thirst for knowledge and his scientific approach to discovering new truths that enabled him to develop the theory of evolution. This lesson, about the value of scientific thinking, is almost as valuable as the theory he uncovered."

If you'd like to honor Darwin's legacy but aren't sure how, here are a few suggestions:

- **Host a Phylum Feast:** Darwin enthusiasts have been holding yearly Phylum Feasts on Feb. 12 since at least the 1970s. A [Phylum Feast](#) is a potluck dinner in which all the dishes are as biodiverse as possible — ideally, each should come from a different phylum. Darwin reportedly enjoyed eating "birds and beasts ... unknown to human palate," and many people still see this as a way to embrace our evolutionary past. "Most of our day-to-day food comes from a small number of domesticated vertebrates and grasses," writes naturalist and Phylum Feast authority Frederick Schueler, "but by seeking out and identifying the diverse biotic sources of our diet in this meal, we remember our origin as omnivores, and our relatedness to other lineages."

- **Make "primordial soup":** Of course, the idea of a Phylum Feast can make conservationists cringe, especially when the [menu](#) includes rare or exotic items like minke whale. Phyla diversity is also limited at some grocery stores, often making such feasts impractical. But you could always just make another Darwin Day favorite instead: "primordial soup." Named after the cocktail of amino acids believed to spark the first life on Earth, this dish is wide open to interpretation — from simple stews to Phylum Feasts in a pot. There's also [Julia Child's version](#), if you're feeling more literal.

- **Attend a Darwin Day event:** There were hundreds of Darwin Day events worldwide in 2014, and [darwinday.org](#) offers a partial list of those being held in 2015. Many are one-day affairs, including several held during Evolution Weekend rather than on Darwin Day itself, which falls

on a Thursday this year. But the site also lists an array of longer events, like [the 15th annual Darwin Week](#) in Charleston, South Carolina. Darwin Day originally focused on scientific lectures, but today it includes debates, museum exhibits, film festivals, art shows, essay contests and more. Some use the holiday to jointly honor U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, who was also born on Feb. 12, 1809.

• **Go to church:** [Evolution Weekend](#) is organized by the Clergy Letter Project in hopes of mending an old rift between Darwin and some religious groups. The goal is to foster open discussion about evolution in places of worship, an attempt to "show that religion and science are not adversaries." That doesn't mean capitulating on the scientific validity of evolution, though. It just means spending one weekend focusing on common ground rather than rehashing the same old debates from the Scopes monkey trial (even though those debates are still raging in many places — including New Hampshire and Indiana, both of which recently floated "[anti-evolution](#)" bills in their state legislatures).

As the CLP explains on its website:

"Religious people from many diverse faith traditions and locations around the world understand that evolution is quite simply sound science; and for them, it does not in any way threaten, demean, or diminish their faith in God. In fact, for many, the wonders of science often enhance and deepen their awe and gratitude towards God."

To join in, see the CLP's [list of participating congregations](#), its [list of scientific consultants](#) for clergy and its archive of [past Evolution Weekend lectures](#).

• **Read "On the Origin of Species":** Not only is the [full text](#) of Darwin's seminal work available online, but so are [all of his publications](#). It's a lot to absorb in one day, or even three days, but a chilly weekend like this one might nonetheless be a good time to dig in — with a steaming bowl of primordial soup, of course.

For more information about evolution by natural selection, check out this classic (and animated) explanation by the late astronomer and science educator Carl Sagan:

*Editor's Note: This story has been updated since it was first published Feb. 10, 2012.*