

Are redheads going extinct?

by [Jacob Silverman](#)

Redhead extinction is the idea that the recessive gene that causes red hair will eventually die out. Read about the theories behind redhead extinction. See more [pictures of genetics at work](#).

In August 2007, many news organizations reported that redheads or "gingers," as our British and Australian friends call them, would eventually become extinct. Other news outlets and [blogs](#) picked up the story, citing the "Oxford Hair Foundation" or "genetic scientists" who claimed that there would be no more redheads by as early as 2060 [source: [The Courier Mail](#)]. It turns out that all those people were wrong. Redheads are here to stay and should be around well beyond 2060.

The story of redhead extinction has gone around the Internet before, most recently in 2005, with [news](#) articles again citing the Oxford Hair Foundation as a source. These articles work on the mistaken assumption that [recessive genes](#) -- like the one for red hair -- can "die out." Recessive genes can become rare but don't disappear completely unless everyone carrying that gene dies or fails to [reproduce](#). So while red hair may remain rare, enough people carry the gene that, barring global catastrophe, redheads should continue to appear for some time.

Some of the articles discussing redhead extinction referred to the Oxford Hair Foundation as an "independent" institute or research foundation, but a Google search shows that the Oxford Hair Foundation is funded by Procter & Gamble, makers of numerous beauty products -- including red [hair dye](#).

In the most recent wave of redhead extinction warnings, some news outlets incorrectly cited the September 2007 issue of National Geographic as the source of the extinction claims. Others, correctly, cited that issue of National Geographic for the statistics it presented in a short piece on redheads. In fact, the National Geographic story provided some data about red hair in the world population, but it only said that "news reports" have claimed that redheads were going extinct [source: [National Geographic](#)]. The piece did not explicitly back the claim. Instead, the article stated that "while redheads may decline, the potential for red isn't going away" [source: [National Geographic](#)]. Unfortunately the misconception about disappearing redheads is now widespread.

Experts who have been interviewed agree that the redhead extinction claim is bogus. David Pearce from the University of Rochester Medical Center told the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle in 2005 -- after the last round of redhead extinction news -- that the scientists behind the original claim should "check their calculator" [source: [Seattle Times](#)]. Rick Sturm, a researcher in hair and skin genetics at the University of Queensland, told the Australian Broadcasting Company that "there's no shortage of red-heads" and that the Oxford Hair Foundation didn't provide sufficient scientific evidence to prove its findings [source: [ABC Canberra](#)].

Red hair is caused by a mutation in the MC1R gene. It's also a recessive trait, so it takes both parents passing on a mutated version of the MC1R gene to produce a redheaded child. Because it's a recessive trait, red hair can easily skip a generation. It can then reappear after skipping one or more generations if both parents, no matter their hair color, carry the red hair gene.

If the redhead story sounds familiar to you, it might be because, according to some people, they're not the only

endangered hair color. On the next page, we'll talk about the plight of blondes.

Will blondes become extinct?

Before there were the redhead extinction stories, there were the blondes. In September 2002, numerous major [newspapers](#) and television news programs claimed that blondes would be gone within 200 years. A BBC News article at the time cited "German scientists" who said that blondes would be extinct by 2202. The article also claimed that the research stated that [Finland](#), with its high proportion of blondes, would be the birthplace of the last blonde. The claim was based on the fact that blonde hair is a recessive gene and that more men were choosing [dyed](#) blondes -- so-called "bottle blondes" -- over true blondes. Other articles repeated the same facts about the future extinction of blondes but sourced them to the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO).

A dermatologist at the University of Edinburgh was one of many people to take issue with the claim. Jonathan Rees said that the gene for blonde hair would only "disappear" if there were some inherent [evolutionary](#) disadvantage in being blonde, which isn't so, despite the many jokes to the contrary [source: [BBC News](#)]. He added that blondes may become less common but that they will not disappear entirely [source: [BBC News](#)].

The Web site Snopes, which specializes in debunking rumors and [urban legends](#), published an article overturning the blonde-extinction story. They cited a Washington Post piece showing the story was overreported. Snopes also found similar newspaper stories about disappearing blondes reported in 1961, 1906, 1890 and 1865. The story from 1961 claimed 50 to 140 years remained before blondes disappeared, while the 1906 story said they had 600 years left. Most of the articles cited scientific research that in one way or another claimed that men considered dark-haired [women](#) more desirable.

As the Washington Post pointed out, the World Health Organization never produced a study about the eventual extinction of blondes. But no news organization that initially wrote about the story contacted the WHO to confirm the results of the supposed study. (One [television](#) producer contacted the WHO but didn't wait for confirmation about the study before running the story.)

The Washington Post eventually traced the story to a German women's magazine named "Allegra." That magazine used as its source an apparently non-existent anthropologist working for the WHO [source: [Washington Post](#)]. In the end, most of the newspapers and TV stations that carried the story were forced to correct their reporting.