

In a Pickle

by Andy Zach

Now, what was he going to do? His boss just told him to double the productivity of Vegan Inc's pickle strain they used for their Kilwowski Pickle brand. That was completely impossible.

But keeping his job required it. He was the low man on the genetic engineering totem pole at Vegan Inc., the last one hired and the first one to be fired if another recession hit.

He couldn't think. He couldn't face this. So he cruised the internet. "The origin of Zombie turkeys? I didn't know they'd found that. Hmm, a Midley Beacon exclusive, the foremost zombie news source," he read to himself.

Zombie turkeys had ravaged Illinois and the US at Thanksgiving. Thankfully they hadn't hit near Terre Haute where he lived. He skimmed the article rapidly. Corn All, one of their agribusiness rivals, had genetically modified their corn to fight off corn disease. The genetic modification would adapt to the disease at a cellular level, and neutralize it by copying the DNA from the disease organism, whether fungal or bacteria.

When wild turkeys ate the corn, it modified the E Coli in their gut, creating the zombie turkey bacteria, e coli gallopavo. That got into the turkeys' bloodstream and made them zombies, able to regenerate any lost or damaged body part, even bringing turkeys back from the dead.

What caught his eye was the reproduction rate: zombie cells reproduced every twenty minutes. Could that work for pickles? Why not try?

He read the article more carefully and found it sourced from a Dr. Edwin Galloway of the Northwestern Poultry Institute. He followed the link to Dr. Galloway's original paper.

There it was. The whole DNA sequence of Corn-All's modification and the zombie turkey bacteria, e coli gallopavo. Now, he just needed to get a sample. Nothing like going to the source.

He called Dr. Galloway.

"Hello? Dr. Galloway? This is Brice Butterworth with Vegan Inc."

"Hello, Mr. Butterworth. How can I help you?"

"I read your paper on E Coli Gallopavo, and I'd like to test it on various vegetables. Could I get a sample?"

"I can send you a sample, but the bacteria only affects turkeys, not plants."

"But Corn-all used the sequence in corn."

"Yes, but the zombie effect only showed up in turkeys. E Coli is an animal-specific bacteria."

"No other animals?"

"We only tested turkeys, pigs, chickens, and cows."

"I'll test some other animals."

"All right. I'll send you some of the bacteria and some of the Corn-all corn. Let me know what you find out."

"Will do. Make it a next day shipment. Vegan Inc will pay. We're under a time crunch."

"I'll ship it today."

"Thanks so much! This may help solve a problem for me."

"Great! Let me know your results. Be sure to give the Poultry Institute of Northwestern credit."

"You've got it. Bye."

Brice spent the rest of the day thinking about how to get the zombie growth bacteria to grow in the pickles. Maybe he could genetically engineer them so they appeared to be turkeys to the bacteria? That would be a kind of chimera, a hybrid, between turkey and cucumber. He went out and bought a pair of live turkeys from eTurkey, the online turkey delivery service. They too would be delivered tomorrow.

He created his project plan. He'd try to insert turkey DNA into the cucumber genome and then infect it with the zombie turkey virus. That'd double the growth rate of cucumbers, easily!

The turkeys, bacteria, and corn arrived the next morning. First, he ensured the zombie bacteria worked. He injected the bacteria into the two birds and watched their eyes turn red. That was the first sign of zombiism.

He had already moved them from standard chickenwire pens to the Zombie Turkey Farmers of America (ZTFA) approved steel cages. They couldn't defeat the quarter-inch steel bars, but they kept trying. They'd peck at them until they were bloody. Then they'd pause and heal and try again. So that's what Dr. Galloway meant when he wrote that the zombie bacteria caused increased aggression.

Using the Vegan Inc. lab's waldo, he extracted fresh blood from turkeys and separated out fresh E Coli Galipavo bacteria. The turkeys pecked at the mechanical hands, to no avail. He injected the ECG into living cucumbers at various stages of growth. No effect.

No surprise. Now for the second branch of his research. Even though a cucumbers DNA was far simpler than a human's he had thousands of sites where he might splice it in. He picked the ten likeliest and planted twenty chimera seeds.

Only half even sprouted. He tested them with the ECG bacteria. Failure. He tried ten different DNA sites each day to make his 'turkeycumber' as he called the chimera. After a month of failure, he gave up. He had to try something else.

Scanning the internet for inspiration, Brice read the Midley Beacon again. The headline 'Zombie Squirrel caught on video' leapt out at him.

He read, "The hawk nabbed the squirrel, as hawks normally do, but in midair, the squirrel revived, ripped open the hawk's belly, bit off its leg, and fell a hundred feet to the ground, where it scampered away unharmed. It was captured on drone video."

That's it! He'd try some other animals and see if they'd turn zombie. First, he made a squirrelcumber. No effect. Then a cowcumber. Failure. Then a deercumber. Nothing.

Another month down the drain. His boss, Wilma O'Reilly stopped by.

"Hi Brice, how's it going?" That meant 'had he doubled the cucumber growth rate yet.'

"Success is just around the corner," he lied. He knew what to say to get her off his back.

"That's great! So you'll have this solved in another month?" That meant she didn't believe his lie.

"Maybe a month and a half. Or two." He had no clue when he'd solve it.

"Fantastic! That's a commitment to have something by June, then. Right?"

"Uh, right." She had him nailed to a wall. He had three months to solve this and he was no closer than when he started.

"Wonderful. When you succeed, you'll easily pay for the money you've spent on the research. Oh, and by the way. If you can't solve this problem, we'll have to let you go in the mid-year budget cuts. But I'm sure you'll solve it." She smiled brightly at him and walked away.

Ugh. Now what? His mind was blank. He filled it up with social media. A tweet on a hummingbird picture led him to an article about them. Fastest metabolism of all animals. Insectivores as well as herbivores. Huh. They were like turkeys. They were like turkeys on speed!

Why not? Brice thought. *What have I got to lose—besides my job?* Could he buy hummingbirds on Amazon? Nope. Not legal, since they're migratory birds. But he could become a hummingbird rehabber. He already had a biology degree, as well as a masters in recombinant DNA.

Brice volunteered at the nearest bird rehab center. They were delighted to have him. He nursed several birds back to health, bound broken legs and wings. He also extracted some hummingbird blood and sequenced its genome.

He brought one hummingbird back to the lab instead of releasing it to the wild. He fed it Corn-all GMO grain and studied its droppings for any E Coli. Yes! It produced the zombie bacteria too, just like turkeys.

He sprayed the zombie e coli (ZEC) at the bird. Soon its eyes turned red. It rammed the birdcage, faster and faster, bending the bars. It was a zombie.

Brice extracted its blood and put it in a cage of bulletproof glass. It settled down, slurping up the nectar from the feeder, eating twice as much as usual. Higher metabolism was another sign of zombiism.

No time to waste. He had only one week left until June. Over the next two days, he spliced the zombie hummingbird DNA into the three hundred spots he'd found on the cucumbers DNA and planted them all.

Only one came up. He injected the hummingbird's zombie bacteria into it. It began to grow even as he watched it, flowering. He hand pollinated it and by the time he left for home, he had twelve full-grown cucumbers. Success! Brice could hardly wait for the next day.

The cucumber plant filled the lab when he got in, covered with flowers. He pollinated hundreds of them. Then Brice pickled his twelve cucumbers. Now they just had to pass the taste test. It'd be a week before they were ready.

Brice took the brine solution and sprayed his zombie hummingbird with it. As everyone knew, five months after the zombie turkey apocalypse, salt water was the most effective way of eliminating zombiism. He watched the bird until its red eyes turned to black. Then he let it go back to the wild.

"Thanks, little guy," he murmured.

While he waited for the pickling to complete, he picked hundreds of cucumbers. He tested their seed to ensure the hummingscumber chimera bred true. It did. The second generation grew just as fast. The rest of them he canned in brine.

The next Monday, Brice tasted the pickles. They were a beautiful light green on the inside. They tasted heavenly, better than any pickle he'd ever tasted before.

Brice called Wilma into the lab.

"Hi, Wilma. These are the results of my research."

"Wow! What do you have, a hundred quarts of pickles? How long did that take?"

"That's a week's growth, from one cucumber plant. I've got a couple more plants growing, but we need to transplant them to a field. We'll have to harvest them daily."

"How? I've never seen anything like this!"

"I made one difficult genetic modification. I made a chimera, combining a cucumber with a hummingbird. I then infected it with the zombie bacteria."

"That's insane! What made you try that?"

"I wanted the cucumbers to grow as fast as the zombies do."

"Brilliant. You're promoted to a senior researcher, right now."

Brice proudly watched the fields of zombie cucumbers grow and harvested daily all that summer. If left unharvested for a day, the cucumbers would turn iridescent green, like a ruby-throated hummingbird. These colorful vegetables became even more popular than the plain zombie hummingbird pickles.

One morning, overlooking a beautiful field of jewel-like green, Brice noticed a waving motion. Walking into the field, he saw the cucumber wriggling on the ground. The wriggling became waving, and then flapping. Each cucumber grew a pair of flapping iridescent emerald wings.

In one motion, the entire field of cucumbers rose in a sparkling green murmuration from the ground. With his mouth agape, Brice watched the glittering vegetable cloud head south.

After it was out of sight, Brice looked around the bedraggled field. Not one opalescent pickle remained.

"Hi Wilma, I've got some bad news," he said into his phone.

"What's that Brice?"

"The pickles have migrated south."

"What? I have a connection problem. I thought you said, 'the pickles have migrated south!'."

"Yes, that's right. Apparently, the hummingbird DNA is more powerful than I thought. Their migration instinct has been spliced into the pickles."

"You realize that field is worth over a million dollars. You've *got* to get it back."

"Calm down. I have a plan."

"What's that?"

"The pickle hummingbirds will probably instinctively migrate to Mexico, like regular hummingbirds."

"Get going then. We need you to capture those flying pickles!"

"I'm leaving today."

Brice arrived in Mexico City that night. He read the news and tracked the pickles by the news reports and Instagram photos and Twitter gifs. Louisiana. Texas. Reynosa Mexico. Xalapa. Where was that? The picture from Twitter showed iridescent pickles with wings nesting by the thousands in the trees.

He found Xalapa on the eastern side of the Mexican Rockies. He rented a truck, loaded it with the supplies he had shipped with him, and headed there.

Brice drove to the grove of trees where the zombie cucumbers nested. He started the power washer in the back of his truck and headed to the trees, dragging his hose. He sprayed a jet of salt water over the cucumbers in trees, killing their zombie bacteria. They dropped to the ground by the thousands and tens of thousands.

Brice then hired local farm workers to place them in jars filled with brine. He had enough for a whole semi.

He didn't catch all the escaped cucumbers, but he had enough to make up for the lost harvest.

After that, Vegan Inc prevented the pickles from developing to the winged stage. But enough escaped Brice, that they became part of the annual pickle migration from Mexico to the US. People captured thousands each year along the Mississippi migration route. Some people felt the wild zombie pickles tasted better than the domestic, farm-raised ones. Vegan Inc. took advantage of this and built canning factories in Mexico near the pickle nesting sites.

Vegan Inc. even sold their iridescent wings separately as a pickled delicacy. This became their most profitable item. Until they dried the wings and sold them as earrings.

This story is set just after my first book [Zombie Turkeys](#). I got the idea for flying pickles while joking with my daughter Tori. When I picked her up to take her somewhere, I'd say, 'Watch out for the flying pickles as you go into the car. It's the season for their annual migration.' From that, we built up a whole life cycle for flying pickles. Naturally, it had to be my short story collection.