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NOT-SO-BRIGHT IDEAS IN SCIENCE



BY LAUREL MILLS

Every year, the good people at the *Annals of Improbable Research* (AIR) serve up their Ig Nobel prizes to the greatest not-so-great ideas in science, and every year, we at *mental_floss* can't resist reprinting the results. From swimming in syrup to analyzing froggy B.O., the awards never fail to disappoint. And while the award-winning research is intended to make people laugh first and think second, we're still trying to get past step one.

1. Like Water for Syrup: The Chemistry Prize

At long last, two brave souls have mustered up enough collective courage to seek out an answer to one of life's imponderables: "Can people swim faster in syrup or water?" Our knights in sticky armor: Ed Cussler, a distinguished chemical engineering professor at the University of Minnesota, and one of his students, Brian Gettelfinger. Abandoning a plan to fill the university's pool with corn syrup, the two men instead added 700 lbs. of guar gum (an edible thickening agent) to the normal pool water to simulate syrup's viscosity, then instructed the school's swim team to dive in. Many gooey subjects later, they concluded that syrup made no difference on the swimmers' performance. That's right; you can swim just as quickly in syrup as you can in water. And while it's not yet known how this information will affect the future of professional water sports, if you're heading to a swim meet, we suggest you bring waffles.

2. Locusts, Robots, and Jedi Mind-Tricks: The Peace Prize

Robots are great and all, but let's face it—they can be pretty clumsy sometimes. But hope for grace is on the horizon, thanks to Dr. Claire Rind and Dr. Peter Simmons of Newcastle University. By designing robots that think and act like swarming insects, the two scientists have been able to construct machines that can avoid collisions with other objects. So, how did they figure out the brain patterns of swarming bugs? By showing locusts clips from "Star Wars," of course. When exposing the bugs to startling light sequences and rapid on-screen motion, the scientists realized that locusts' brains react as though they're actually in the middle of the action. Rind and Simmons then duplicated the patterns in the electronic brains of their robots. But why did they land the Ig Nobel in Peace? Anything that introduces a new species to "Star Wars" must be in the name of intergalactic harmony, right?

3. Why We Prefer to Focus on the Tuxedos: The Fluid Dynamics Prize

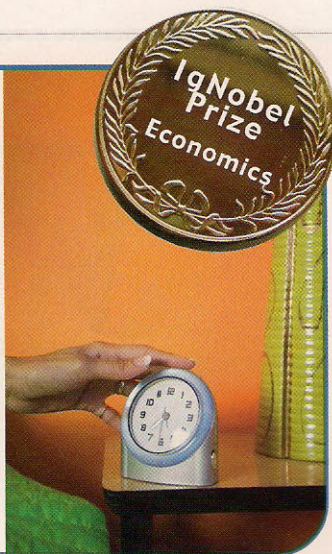
Jozsef Gal of Loránd Eötvös University (Hungary) and Victor Benno Meyer-Rochow of the International University Bremen (Germany) and the University of Oulu (Finland) traveled to the ends of the Earth to experience firsthand one of nature's greatest wonders—penguin feces. In an Ig Nobel-worthy paper entitled "Pressures Produced When Penguins Poo: Calculations on Avian Defecation," the two scientists examined not only the projection and direction of penguin feces, but also the internal pressure required by penguins to scatter their scat. Of course, now that they know "how" the penguins do their business, the only question left is, "Why?" Gal and Meyer-Rochow are currently trying to find funding for their next trip to Antarctica, where they aim to figure out whether these fanciful birds have reasons behind their choice locales, or if the answers are actually left blowing in the wind.



[left_brain]

4. Hide-and-Go-Seek for Generations to Come: The Economics Prize

Snooze-button addicts of the world beware: There's a new alarm clock in town named "Clocky," and he won't take your repeated morning whackings sitting down! No, Clocky wakes you up and then scurries off your dresser. He might be under the bed, halfway to the bathroom, or buried beneath last night's discarded shirt and empty Jack Daniel's bottle. But wherever he is, he'll beep until you find him, forcing you to leave the haven that is your bed. Gauri Nanda, a graduate of the M.I.T. Media Lab, invented Clocky to help sleepyheads wake up a little more quickly. For her efforts, she bagged the economics prize, not to mention the adoration of frustrated moms everywhere.



5. Puppy Prosthetics: The Medicine Prize

Is your dog secure in his masculinity? Do you worry that all the "intact" dogs judge him at the park? Do you think their casual sniffing is really an affront to his manhood? If so, Gregg Miller, a businessman from Oak Grove, Mo., has a viable (and Ig Nobel-worthy!) solution for you: Neuticles. Synthetic dog testicles designed to protect your pet's "appearance and self-esteem" after neutering, Neuticles are offered in three sizes and levels of firmness. There's a pair for every dog (though they're now also available for cats, horses, and bulls). During the 10 years the product has been on the market, well over 100,000 creatures have been Neuticled, meaning that—sadly—there are at least 100,000 pet owners out there gullible enough to believe that an animal willing to mount any pants leg in sight worries about public humiliation.

6. Pitch Imperfect: The Physics Prize

University of Queensland physics professors John Mainstone and Thomas Parnell won this year's Ig Nobel prize in physics for an experiment that required more patience than humanly possible. In fact, Parnell died in 1948, long before seeing the recognition of his efforts. Begun in 1927, the experiment involved nothing more than a funnel that dripped pitch, a tar derivative commonly used to waterproof boats. While pitch seems solid at room temperature (it can even be broken with a hammer), putting it in a funnel and allowing drops of it to fall to the ground proves that it's not a solid at all,

but a liquid. The problem is, pitch drips at the rate of approximately one drop every nine years. No one has ever actually seen the pitch fall, but the drops are there. Just think about that the next time you're fighting with a ketchup bottle.

7. You Are What You Over-Analyze: The Nutrition Prize

No disrespect to Suzanne Somers, but few people in this world are as dedicated to their diets as Dr. Yoshiro Nakamats of Tokyo, Japan, who's spent the last 35 years photographing and chronicling every meal that has passed his lips. Thanks to such scrutiny, he now knows how his caloric intake has affected his mood, his physical well being, and even his sex drive. In fact, Dr. Nakamats is possibly the world's most prolific inventor. He has more than 3,200 patents to his name (including some of the technology used to develop the floppy disk), and he isn't about to stop there. Now 78 years old, Dr. Nakamats still believes he's middle-aged and claims he'll make it to the ripe old age of 144. As for his twilight years, the good doctor intends to spend them reminiscing over Polaroids of meals past.

8. Scam I Am: The Literature Prize

Remember when Grandma asked to borrow money to help out the widow of Nigeria's former prime minister? Or when that sweet barrister, Jon A. Mbeki, contacted you with a positively heart-wrenching story about being denied his rightful fortune? Well, don't spend

another sleepless night pondering their tragic situations. The authors of those emails have finally gotten their day in the sun, in the form of the 2005 Ig Nobel prize in literature. However, should anyone come forward to claim the prize, we imagine they might have some explaining to do—the kind where recording devices and interrogation heat lamps are involved.

9. Frogs Need Yoga, Too: The Biology Prize

Apparently humans aren't the only creatures that feel the need to check their deodorant before first dates, job interviews, or public presentations. Benjamin Smith, the "Frog Man" of the University of Adelaide in Australia, led a team that investigated how frog odors change when the amphibians experience stress. Smith looked at 131 species of frogs in anxiety-inducing situations. What did he learn? Trying to get from one lily pad to another is as taxing in the wild as it is when you're playing "Frogger."

10. When Pants on Fire Doesn't Mean You're Lying: The Agricultural History Prize

"The Significance of Mr. Richard Buckley's Exploding Trousers" sounds an awful lot like something you'd see in *MAD* magazine, but the paper by James Watson, a historian at New Zealand's Massey University, actually took home the Ig Nobel prize in agricultural history. So who is this Buckley fellow? Well, he was a farmer in 1930s New Zealand whose pants detonated while drying in front of the fireplace. Apparently, the trousers were covered in sodium chlorate, a common herbicide of the era, which led to the combustion. Lucky for the Buckley family, quick-thinking Richard threw the pants out the window before the house burned down, but other farmers weren't so fortunate. Turns out, exploding pants were a common occurrence at the time. Although deceptively playful in title, Watson's paper investigated the self-sufficiency of the New Zealand agriculturist and how that role has changed over time. 🍄