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Famous dead sparrows

SADLY, we are not sure we will be able to make it to the Netherlands to visit an exhibition showcasing some rather rare birds at the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam.

The Grand House Sparrow Exhibition, which opened on 14 November, is curated by Kees Moeliker, winner of the 2003 Ig Nobel prize for biology "for documenting the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck".

Moeliker's exhibition features what are possibly the two most famous sparrows in the world. One was killed by a cricket ball at Lord's cricket ground in London in 1936. Stuffed and perched on top of the fatal ball, it has been in the museum at Lord's ever since its demise. It is considered so valuable that Moeliker himself had to travel to London to take it back to Rotterdam by plane, giving it its first opportunity to fly since its death.

The other A-lister in the exhibition is the sparrow whose death caused worldwide outrage last year when it was shot for disturbing a Dutch TV company's attempt at a world record in domino toppling. The bird flew through a window and knocked over a line of 23,000 dominoes just a few days before the event was to be televised live in 11 countries. After obtaining the sparrow's corpse from the Dutch authorities, the Rotterdam museum had it stuffed and mounted on a box of dominoes.

"From the department of dreadful puns: Tom Lloyd reports moaning in anguish when he discovered that the international journal of The Fingerprint Society is called Fingerprint Whorl"

These avian celebrities join a host of other notable ex-sparrows from around the world in what is believed to be the first exhibition of its kind.

Richard Dawkins and the occult

HAVE creationists seized control of the UK's net filters? After buying Richard Dawkins's The God Delusion, Eliot Attridge thought it worth visiting Dawkins's website from the school where he works.

Unfortunately, the school has installed a net filter called Netsweeper which, Attridge discovered, blocks access to www.richarddawkins.net on the grounds that it is an "occult site".

Amazed - as Dawkins is possibly the man least likely to be a proponent of occultism - Attridge decided to check his rating with another net filter called Sonicwall. This described Dawkins's site as "religious", a categorisation Dawkins would probably find even more disturbing than the occult one. It all looks very suspicious.

Digital disease

ON THE Amazon website, Wayne Joslin found a book entitled Griffith's Instructions for Patients with CD-ROM. He says he had never heard of this disease but as soon as he read about it he started to feel a little feverish.

Tyre life puzzle

THE tyre pressure gauge Paul Brown spotted in a Times Offers Direct catalogue is a device that screws into your tyre valve and indicates whether it's at the correct pressure. The blurb about it warns: "Under-inflated tyres can reduce tyre life by a dramatic 50 per cent, but if correctly inflated the average tyre could last 20 per cent longer."

Brown says that he is "a mere artist and not a mathematician" and that he tried to work out just what this meant - "but then my head started to go a bit woozy so I gave up".

We don't understand it either.

Proverbial stones

ROADSIDE notices near cliffs and embankments often proclaim "Loose stones travel slowly". Neil Gray, one of several readers who have pointed this out, speculates that this statement is, or ought to be, a proverb - although one that might require a bit of lateral thinking.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss," one might say, "but loose stones travel slowly."

Feedback competition

FINALLY: out with the old, in with the new! Once again, as in 2004/2005, we are having a New Year rather than end-of-year Feedback competition.

This year you are invited to imagine you are an alien newly arrived on Earth. You are able to send home an interplanetary text message of no more than 160 characters describing what you have found. What would your message be?

All entries must reach us by Monday 11 December. The results will be published in the first issue of New Scientist in 2007 (6 January). Thanks to the generosity of Profile Books, 10 lucky winners will each receive three of its most popular new titles, Four Elements: Water, Air, Fire, Earth by Rebecca Rupp; Gilbert White, a biography of the author of The Natural History of Selborne by Richard Mabey; and The End of the Question Mark, a compilation of questions and answers from the Any Questions Answered text service - plus a copy of New Scientist's very own bestseller Why Don't Penguins' Feet Freeze? The editor's decision is final.

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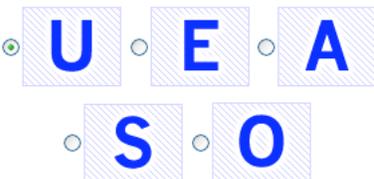


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