Eureka! Daily discoveries for the scientifically bent

by Scott LaFee

'TRUE FACTS'

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TRUE FACTS - Each year in the United States, coffins and burial vaults result in more metal being put in the ground than was used to make the Golden Gate Bridge, and enough concrete to build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit. CNS Photo. HIGH AND DRY - How do Arizona's tall trees stay alive in an environment with little rainfall? Scientists say the trees turn themselves off during dry times. CNS Photo. WHAT IS IT? - This is a picture of a flamingo tongue, a colorful sea snail found in the Caribbean Sea. CNS Photo. VERBATIM - 'It would be possible to describe everything scientifically, but it would make no sense; it would be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure.' -- Albert Einstein, Nobel laureate physicist (1879-1955) CNS Photo. ELECTRON INK - You can keep track daily of just how big the hole in the ozone over the Antarctica is by checking http://ozonewatch.gsfc.nasa.gov. CNS Photo.BRAIN SWEAT

Can you name the states with the highest and lowest percentages of towns named after an early U.S. president (any of the first 16, from Washington to Lincoln)?

PATENTLY ABSURD

Kissing screen

U.S. Patent No. 5,787,895

In these uncertain times, you can't be too careful. Or too obvious. The kissing screen, patented in 1998, consisted of a thin latex membrane stretched over a heart-shaped frame. The device was intended to block the transmission of germs and, we might add, any sense of closeness or spontaneity.

BRAIN SWEAT ANSWER

At 2 percent, New Hampshire lays claim to having the highest percentage of towns named after early presidents. Conversely, Hawaii contains no towns so named.

VERBATIM

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- Albert Einstein, Nobel laureate physicist (1879-1955)

HIGH AND DRY

Just about the only place you can find significant forests in arid Arizona is atop mountains, where the amount of rainfall exceeds the rate of evaporation. Even then, water scarcity is a way of life, and these forests sometimes go years without any significant moisture.

Constance Brown, a micrometeorologist who moved from dampish Indiana to Arizona a few years ago, wondered just how the forests managed to survive. In a forthcoming paper in the Journal of Arid Environments, she suggests an answer: The trees turn themselves off during dry times.

In more temperate, wetter forests, life is dictated by temperature. Dormant in winter, trees bloom and grow in spring and summer. In Arizona's mountain forests, however, Brown found a somewhat opposite phenomenon.

Erecting a tall tower of stairs, Brown minutely monitored and measured the interactions between leaf surfaces and the atmosphere. She found that during the spring and early summer, when rainfall is often nonexistent in Arizona, mountaintop trees are dormant. Indeed, they basically shut down operations.

Conversely, during the July monsoon season and winter, the trees shift into overdrive, packing in as much growth - and water - as possible.

PRIME NUMBERS

1-2 - Number of calories burned per minute watching TV

16 - Number of hours of television-watching required to burn off the calories consumed in one large bag of potato chips

1,800 - Daily caloric requirement of the average inactive 180-pound American

49 - Period, in hours, for which a 27-inch TV could be powered by the calories consumed in an average American's Thanksgiving Day meal

1.5 - Average amount of fat, in quarts, removed in a single typical liposuction procedure

Source: "Random Kinds of Factness" by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo (2005); "Fat, Dumb and Ugly: The Decline of the Average American" by Peter Strupp (2004)

ELECTRON INK

Ozone Hole Watch http://ozonewatch.gsfc.nasa.gov

Ozone, a colorless atmospheric gas, helps absorb harmful ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Each year for the past few decades, reactions between ozone and man-made chemicals have caused a hole in the ozone layer to open up over Antarctica. You can keep track daily of just how big the hole is by checking in here.

OUR IGNOBEL HISTORY

The title of the paper, published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, was high-toned and certainly scientific-sounding: "A Preliminary Survey of Thinotillexomania in an Adolescent Sample."

Conducted by Chittaranjan Andrade and B.S. Srihari of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences in Bangalore, India, it confirmed what many have noted anecdotally: Teens commonly pick their noses.

For their revelations, Andrade and Srihari won the 2001 Ig Nobel Prize in the field of public health.

ANTHROPOLOGY 101

In Peru, it was once customary to close your mouth and put a hand over your face if you saw a rainbow. If you did not, it was thought your teeth would rot.

WHAT IS IT? ANSWER

Though they resemble sea slugs or nudibranchs, flamingo tongues are actually gastropods or sea snails. Found in the Caribbean Sea, they reside within white shells covered by a retractable mantle, which serves to extract oxygen from the water like a fish's gills. The mantles can be quite colorful, from orange to purple to green with various markings and patterns.

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