

World gets Weirder

■ Only in Oz

Thanks to founding Skeptics Dick Smith and Mark Plummer who sent us clippings about the case of the electronic device that was supposed to deter kangaroos from bounding in front of cars, resulting in collisions. It stands as a good example of the value of evidence gathered through scientific research over the anecdotal variety.

“Shu Roo”, a device which sells for between \$389-\$525, is supposed to emit a high frequency signal that scares the macropods away from its source. Melbourne University, sponsored by the motoring organisation RACV, conducted a study on the device including road tests carried out on vehicles in various parts of Australia, and a test conducted with ‘roos at Werribee Open Plains Zoo. Neither showed any effect, and in the case of the Werribee residents, they showed the same level of interest in a car fitted with the device, whether or not it was switched on.

The manufacturer of the device dismissed the scientific evidence, saying that it conflicted with anecdotes he had heard, but one letter from a rural insurance underwriter from WA put the matter in perspective. He claimed that in his business he had found that fitting Shu Roo had no effect on claims from clients and suggested that reducing speeds when driving through kangaroo infested areas was the best preventative policy.

■ Fearless Prediction Department

Readers may have heard about new research being conducted by astrophysicists, led by associate professor John Webb at UNSW, that was reported in the media as showing that “the speed of light is not constant”.

What actually has been derived from observations of extremely distant quasars is evidence that the “fine structure constant” may not have been constant throughout the entire history of the universe.

The FSC is a ratio that relates to the speed of light, the charge on the electron and Planck’s Constant, and the evidence indicates that this might have changed slightly in the 12 billion years since the light left those quasars. This change, if it exists, might have

happened in any (or all) of those three constants, and, if it can be confirmed by further observation and research, it marks a pretty dramatic advance in our understanding of the Universe. As such, it is not likely to have any dramatic impact on how we live our lives (unless we happen to be quantum- or astro-physicists). It won’t affect the price of fish, nor will it help an English cricketer’s batting average.

However (and here is where the fearless prediction comes in) we have no doubt that creation “scientists”, with their characteristic inability to understand anything about science, will trumpet it as somehow supporting their puerile propaganda. In fact it doesn’t, and even if one were to accept their fatuous chronology, rather

than claiming that the act of creation took place at 9.00am, October 23, 4004BC, one would be forced to say it took place some time between 8-59-59.99999999am and 9.00am.

■ Skeptic stumps psychics

It has long been our contention that Skeptics are far better at predicting future events than are psychics. This belief received substantial evidentiary support during the final day of the Fifth Test at The Oval.

Shortly before the luncheon (why do cricketers have luncheon rather than lunch?) adjournment on that day (9.30pm EST), we received the following email message from the US based Skeptics discussion group (skeptic@listproc.hcf.jhu.edu):

As a test of my psychic ability with the Poms at 4 for 55, I reckon Warnie will bag 6, McGrath 3 and Lee 1. Australia to win by an innings and 25 runs.

Shaun

“Shaun” is Shaun Cronin, a subscriber from Sydney who, like other Australian subscribers to the list (not excluding the Editor of this journal), likes to throw in the occasional cricket reference to confuse the Usanian majority.

However, this prediction proved to be remarkably prescient. Australia *did* win by an innings and 25 runs, which was only one of a huge range of possible outcomes. Lee *did* take one wicket, but this wasn’t quite so unlikely. McGrath took five wickets and Warne took four, which results were not pre-

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dicted by Shaun, however two of McGrath's wickets resulted from catches taken by Warne, so it could be argued (and psychics would invariably argue) that this was a partial hit.

In more than two decades of charting the predictions of "psychics" we have never seen a prediction as specific and as accurate as this one. Well done Shaun.

■ Written in the skies

Readers might be familiar with the myth sweeping the conspiratological sectors of US population (is that the majority?) that the familiar condensation trails (contrails) left by aircraft flying at certain altitudes in certain atmospheric conditions are, in fact, the result of a US government campaign to spray some sort of chemicals on the population (chemtrails).

The reasons given for this are varied but they always have sinister connotations. This mythology has spread (like all mad ideas from the USA) to other parts of the world, and we have heard, though we haven't seen any conclusive evidence (ie we haven't read *Nexus* for a while), that there are now some Australian followers of the chemtrail conspiracy.

We have always regarded this as just another example of people of a conspiratological bent seeing something sinister in everything that happens, even in the most mundane of happenings (see also crop circles).

However, during the recent Ashes Test series in the UK, we began to take note of the sky above the cricket grounds on those (rare) days when blue sky was visible. Invariably the sky contained one or more contrails. As a result we are now convinced that some Australian secret scientific agency has developed a chemical whose effects are a reduction in competency and which is specifically targeted at Pommy batsmen. We intend lobbying the government to ensure that this agency be given more funds.

■ Question

If magnets are really so healthy, why do you have to have your fridge turned on?

■ According to Hoyle

We note with sadness the death, at 86, of Sir Fred Hoyle, the distinguished, though controversial, British astronomer who has been credited with coining the term "Big Bang" as a description of the beginning of the Universe. Hoyle, however, was not a supporter of the Big Bang theory, favouring rather a "steady state" view of an eternal cosmos. His term was intended to be a mocking reference, but it was taken up by his opponents in the debate and remains in use today.

Hoyle is also credited with the analogy of "a hurricane blowing through a junk yard and producing a Boeing 747" in reference to the statistical unlikelihood of any of the particular steps in biological evolution. He formulated an hypothesis that life on Earth was as a result of "seeding" from space, claiming that the age of the solar system was insufficient for it to have arisen spontaneously here. Hoyle obviously didn't fully understand evolutionary processes, but this didn't stop creation "scientists" distorting his statement even further in support of their far less tenable beliefs.

Nevertheless, Hoyle was an innovative scientist who introduced some very profound insights into the nature of stars and stellar evolution, and his passing is regretted.

■ Out of Africa

Meanwhile the offers of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice continue to flood in from various impoverished parts of west Africa. No longer confined to Nigeria, in a recent one month period *the Skeptic* received email offers to share in large sums from Lome-Togo (\$14 million – 3 times, from different people), Sierra Leone (\$12m), Nigeria (\$31m twice, \$33m once, \$65m once) and most recently \$152 million from an undisclosed source in South Africa.

Rumour suggests that some entrepreneurial types are supplying people in the region with lists of email addresses, and perhaps draft letters, for a price.

A curious note was that one correspondent claimed he had received our address from the "Korean Chamber of Commerce".

■ Out of luck

While on the topic of unsolicited offers, we're not sure what it is about producing a Skeptical magazine that causes marketeers to have suspicions about our sex life, but we seem to receive an inordinate number of email offers for Viagra and "natural" substitutes therefore, human pheromones and X-rated web sites. Do they know something we don't?

Perhaps we should get out more. Or is it that we should *get* more?

■ Quote

Thanks to Gold Coast stalwart John Stear for this memorable quotation.

Timing has an awful lot to do with the outcome of a rain dance. (Anon)

■ Ouch

We were tickled to hear of the man in the USA who is suing the promoter of a fire-walk for "misrepresenting to spectators that fire-walking was safe". It seems that seven people were hospitalised with severe burns to the bottoms of their feet, after the promoter had told them that it was "a safe and spiritual experience where you walk through your past to arrive at your future" (pardon?).

Not very surprising, we hear the reader cry, but there is one element that made this fire-walk an even more revealing event than Ian Plimer's famous fire-stroll-clad-in-underpants of a few years ago. It was at a ceremony at the American Association for Nude Recreation convention.

There are lots of things we could say about this, but we won't, this being a family magazine and all.

■ Quote

I'm not a vegetarian because I love animals, I'm a vegetarian because I hate plants. (Anon)

Bunyip

