

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by TRACI WATSON

Animal Importer Admits Primate Conspiracy

Talk about monkeying around! Imagine a legal case involving smuggled orangutans, the KGB, a man in a gorilla suit, Jane Goodall, and Britain's Prince Philip. That isn't an imaginary scenario. Those are the actual participants in a recent legal imbroglio. And the outcome: a guilty plea by the third-largest U.S. primate importer. Earlier this month, Matthew Block, owner of Miami-based Worldwide Primates, pleaded guilty to charges that he had conspired to ship endangered orangutans out of Indonesia in violation of the Endangered Species Act. Block faces a maximum punishment of 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

The case began in 1989, when Thai authorities intercepted a shipment marked "birds" headed for what was then Yugoslavia. The boxes, which were traced to Block, actually contained six orangutans and two other primates, captured wild in Indonesia.

Guy Lewis, the federal prosecutor on the case, told the judge earlier this month that Block's attempted shipment had been initiated by the KGB, whose agents were trying to find smuggled primates for Prodingtorg, a large Russian importer rumored to be a KGB front. Shirley McGreal, chairwoman of the South Carolina-based International Primate Protection League, suggests that Prodingtorg intended to sell the animals to the West as captive-bred animals for hard currency. Block's lawyer thinks they were likely destined for a Moscow zoo.

Since his indictment last February, Block has aided investigations of other illegal primate imports. For example, he helped on a sting that last month resulted in the arrest of five Mexicans by federal agents, including one agent who wore a gorilla suit and sat in a cage to lure smugglers. Believing that his cooperation would work in his favor, Block attempted a plea bargain in October to reduce his charges to misdemeanors, with no jail time.

But that move outraged Mc-

Greal, who organized an international protest that elicited letters of complaint from such notables as Prince Philip and primatologist Jane Goodall. Block sued McGreal for damaging his reputation, but after a federal judge rejected his plea bargain, he dropped the suit. Block is set to be sentenced on 15 April.

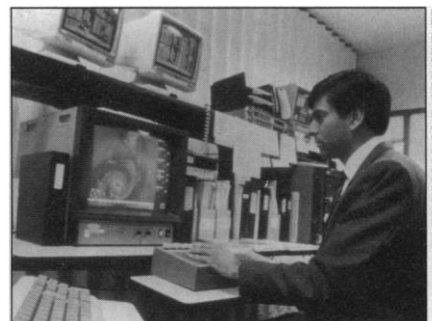
Uncovering a 10-Ton Hoax

For geologists who study asteroid structure, few things are more valuable than the meteorites known as pallasites. These lumps of iron and the mineral olivine contain material from both the core and mantle of their parent bodies, providing an incomparable view of an asteroid's innards. But unfortunately for geologists, pallasites make up only 1.4% of all known meteorites. Which is why scientists went wild in 1859 when esteemed geologist John Evans (known for charting geological formations in the western United States) announced he'd found a 10-ton pallasite in southwestern Oregon.

To prove his tale—and to help persuade Congress to allocate funds for a pallasite-retrieval expedition—Evans showed off a genuine pallasite chunk, which

he described as a fragment of the Oregon block. Then, before Evans told anyone exactly where the mother lode was, he died of pneumonia. In the 131 years since, geologists and countless other meteorite-hunters have scoured the Oregon forests in search of Evans' find, to no avail. Now a newly revealed twist explains why.

In a monograph published last month by the Smithsonian Institution, Howard Plotkin, a historian at the University of Western Ontario, shows that Evans had both means and motive to perpetrate a classic science hoax. After searching old documents, Plotkin learned that Evans had large debts and probably hoped to pay them with expedition money from Congress, a trick he'd used to pay other debts. In an accompanying paper, Vagn Buchwald of the Technical University of Denmark and Roy Clarke Jr., the Smithsonian's chief meteorite curator, show that Evans' pallasite matches those from a Chilean meteorite shower during the early 1800s. Plotkin figures that Evans probably bought his small pallasite when crossing Central America in 1858.



SPACE TELESCOPE SCIENCE INSTITUTE

Favoritism? Some astronomers say they're not receiving their share of data from the Hubble Space Telescope.

A New Director for Hubble Facility

Astronomers who use the Hubble Space Telescope are rejoicing over the appointment last week of Robert Williams as the new director of the Space Telescope Science Institute, which determines who gets to use the overbooked telescope, when, and for how long. The 53-year-old Williams, director of the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory in Chile, will succeed Riccardo Giacconi, who left the Baltimore-based institute last December to become director of the European Southern Observatory.

Williams, who was chosen by seven noninstitute astronomers, will have to help balance the many conflicting demands for telescope time and institute resources. Unlike astronomers working at traditional, ground-based facilities, Hubble scientists must rely on the institute to collect and process data from the orbiting telescope's various instruments. During Giacconi's 10-year tenure, some astronomers have complained that the institute neglected the needs of the general users, instead putting too much emphasis on its own scientists' research projects.

Williams' colleagues are optimistic that he will be able to soothe any tensions, noting that they are impressed with his direction of Cerro Tololo, which is widely used for its clear view of the southern heavens. "If this place can be kicked into shape," says NASA-Goddard astronomer Steve Shore, a formerly dissatisfied Hubble user, "he can do it."

A RUN IS A RUN IS A RUN

Here's a new—and hopefully healthy—diversion for chemists. Bleary-eyed from perusing aisle after aisle of the latest analytical techniques and instrumentation, attendees of this year's Atlanta edition of the megameeting known as Pittcon will be invited to partake in a new communal experience: the 50-Trillion Angstrom Run. That ought to bring some fresh air to lungs clogged with convention hall must.

If the idea works as well as the Pittsburgh Conference staff hopes it will, organizers of other science meetings may clone it. Of course, astronomers would call their version the 0.528 Trillionth-of-a-Light-Year Run. And to the biblical archeology folks, it would be the 10,900-Cubit Run. But any way you cut it, chemists will still experience 3-ish tough miles on Georgia roads.