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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society Club Notice - 12/15/95 -- Vol. 14, No. 24

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in the Middletown cafeteria Wednesdays at noon.

DATE TOPIC

01/03/96 Book: BRICK MOON by Edward Everett Hale ("Steampunk") 01/24/96 Book: THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold

Outside events:

The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2E-530 908-957-5087 j.j.jetzt@att.com HO Co-Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 n.j.sauer@att.com HO Co-Librarian: Lance Larsen HO 2C-318 908-949-4156 l.f.larsen@att.com MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com Distinguished Heinlein Apologist:

Rob Mitchell MT 2D-536 908-957-6330 r.l.mitchell@att.com Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-337 908-957-2070 e.c.leeper@att.com All material copyright by author unless otherwise noted.

1. An odd piece of information has come my way in an odd manner. Let me tell you about it. Our local Public Radio station gives acknowledgements of contributions after the morning news program and one of the ones they have been giving lately is for some company who makes a product "Squirrel-Away" to keep squirrels out of bird feeders. The program that follows has a sort of laconic announcer and in disgust one morning he complained that this is what Public Radio is reduced to, selling ads for squirrel poison. He was highly indignant.

Well, the following week he came on the air and said that he was being forced to air a correction. The company who makes Squirrel-Away had asked him to apologize and to explain that Squirrel-Away is a product that you mix in with birdseed. The claim is that it is healthy for birds to eat it and that they like it, but that

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while squirrels do not like it at all, it is harmless. So the squirrels leave the birdseed alone. Well, this piqued my curiosity. How do you find a food that tastes good to birds and not to squirrels? Well, he went on that the main ingredient is capsicum. That tells the story right there. What is capsicum? It is technically an irritant. It is the stuff that makes hot peppers hot. Why is it that birds will eat seed that is laced with capsicum but squirrels will not? Because it is spicy. Hey, I might hit some of that birdseed myself. Squirrels on the other hand tend to have a rather bland diet. They pick up acorns and seeds, but rarely anything so spicy as a pizza someone has thrown out, and almost never do they get a good jalapeno. So they have not cultivated a taste for hot food, including Sizzling Cajun Birdseed. So there is no mystery why squirrels stay away from spicy spiked seed.

I guess the real question is why do birds not mind Birdseed Diablo. The answer is either that birds cannot detect that seeds are spicy or they don't care. Or perhaps they do care, but if you are a bird, do you associate a monumental case of heartburn with those seeds you are eating? And if I remember right, even when bird's digestion is working properly it gives every outward sign of being screwed up. (Please don't ask me to explain. If you can't figure out what I mean, just assume it was over your head. Oops, sorry that was a poor choice of words. What I mean is just let it pass. No, maybe that isn't so good either. Well, you get the idea.) Anyway, if a bird was suffering ill-effects from hot food, who could tell? Does a bird wake up its mate in the middle of the night saying, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing?" Does a bird think, "Owww, my stomach is upset. For the next few days I think I'll just eat worms." It is hard to tell the real effects of diet on birds and we often get the wrong idea. Take canary seed. (Well, not internally.) For a long time you could get canary seed that would make the little birds sing. Little old ladies would buy

it for their canaries because they figured it was making their little birds so happy that they just couldn't help giving voice to their joy. Well, that was not quite what was happening. First of all, birds sing to mark their territory and warn enemies away. And it is no secret that the ingredient of canary seed that makes the little birdies sing is hemp seed, a hallucinogen that is a controlled substance for humans but was not so well controlled for canaries. The well-meaning owner gives her little canary singing seed and the bird just seems to sing so merrily. But in reality Tweetie-pie is bombed right out of Tweetie-pie's little miniature skull and seeing all sorts of monsters outside his cage that only Tweetie-pie can see. [-mrl]

Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com

The world is populated in the main by people who should not exist.

--George Bernard Shaw