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Letters

Speed under scrutiny

Since lives are measured over time, not miles traveled, time might be a more meaningful scale for vehicle accident rates. For instance, in "The deadly cost of 65 mph" (SN: 11/4/89, p.294), the 1.5 fatal crashes per 100 million vehicle-miles at the 55 mph speed limit equals 0.825 fatal crashes per 1 million vehicle travel hours at 55 mph, and the 2.9 fatal crashes per 100 million vehicle-miles after the speed limit rose to 65 would equal 1.89 fatal crashes per 1 million hours of vehicle travel at 65 mph, or a 2.28X increase in the rate of fatal crashes versus a 1.9X increase on the distance scale.

The differences are even more striking in comparisons of automobile, train and airline passenger fatality rates.

Robert P. Willis
Des Moines, Iowa

"The deadly cost of 65 mph" seems to be one of those articles that appear regularly to scold the American driver for his sinful

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Cover: Like all animals, *Hypacrosaurus* (pictured here), a member of the hadrosaur family of dinosaurs, suffered various injuries and diseases throughout its life. By studying fossils for traces of these pathologies, scientists are reaching new conclusions about the behavior of extinct animals, as well as piecing together the histories of some modern diseases. (Painting: Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology/Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism)



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A stellar man

James Stokley, who for more than half a century wrote a monthly astronomy column for this publication featuring star charts of that month's evening skies, died Dec. 29 in La Jolla, Calif., at the age of 89.

Stokley began his column Oct. 2, 1926, in the first printed issue of SCIENCE NEWS-LETTER (which became SCIENCE NEWS in 1966) and continued it throughout a distinguished career. His last column appeared in the year-end issue of 1977. He left our offices in 1931 to direct the Fels Planetarium in Philadelphia and then the Buhl Planetarium in Pittsburgh. He returned to us in 1940, and in 1941 went to the General Electric Research Laboratory as a publicist.

Stokley joined the journalism faculty at Michigan State University in 1956 and later received a second appointment in the astronomy department teaching nonmajors. He retired from MSU in 1969.

speeding proclivities, but that often leave out other information casting the matter in a different perspective.

When the speed limit was first raised back to 65 on certain interstate highways, there was the usual rash of dire predictions by politicians and editors of massive highway carnage certain to ensue. Indeed, initial reports in California suggested the fatality rate had gone up, but it later turned out they had gone down on other interstate highways, resulting in a pretty even situation. The latter conclusion made more sense to me, since it is my impression that Californians, at least, drive 70 mph whether the speed limit is 55 or 65, and regardless of whether the freeway is an interstate. Nationwide, the situation appeared similar as reported by Transportation Secretary James Burnley, who said in May 1988 that the states' fatality rates "are all over the board," rising in some states but falling in others.

While bemoaning the sin of driving at 65

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mph, one might bear in mind that more fatalities occur in urban driving at speeds below 40 mph and that drunk driving is the leading cause of accidents. It might also be noted that fatality rates have been going down since about 1923. That trend is probably due to safer roads and automobiles. Thus, if we are really concerned about the automobile fatality rates, then I think the greater payoff continues to be in the area of further improvements in highway and automobile safety, rather than in clucking our tongues over the "nut behind the wheel" who embraces 55 mph about as enthusiastically as he did Prohibition.

John J. Brooks
Santa Ynez, Calif.

I am surprised to see a study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) described in your magazine. I expect SCIENCE NEWS either to avoid reporting on studies by organizations known to be biased or to identify that bias. I have read the article carefully and fail to find the phrase "funded entirely by insurance companies who stand to profit from lower speed limits."

Bob Koure
Walpole, Mass.

The IIHS does serve as the research arm of the insurance industry. However, the New Mexico study described in the article was funded entirely by state and federal agencies, to determine whether highway travelers themselves stand to profit — in terms of survival — from lower speed limits in that state. — J. Raloff

Books

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America's Wildlife Hideaways—National Wildlife Federation. Wildlife photographers and naturalists reveal 50 of the finest spots in the United States for observing and photographing animals in the wild. A valuable book for reading or reference. Natl Wildlife (Sewall), 1989, 238 p., color illus., hardcover, \$29.95.

Countdown to Glory: NASA's Trials and Triumphs in Space—Kent Alexander. A beautifully illustrated history of space exploration and aeronautics, covering such topics as ancient Chinese rockets, the monkeynauts and the proposed space station. Price Stern, 1989, 192 p., color/b&w illus., hardcover, \$29.95.

The Essential Guide to Prescription Drugs, 1990 Edition—James W. Long. The major part of the book includes 10 new drug profiles and more than 200 commonly prescribed drugs, addressing benefits and risks, available dosage forms and strengths, how the drugs work alone or in combination with others, their use during pregnancy, their side and adverse effects (including effects on sexual function) and more. Other sections include treatments for chronic disorders such as high cholesterol and psoriasis, a glossary of drug-related terms, a listing of drugs by class, tables of drug information, and brand and generic names. Har-Row, 1989, 1,094 p., hardcover, \$27.50, paperback, \$14.95.

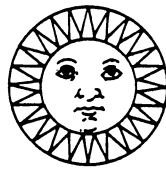
The Greenpeace Book of Antarctica: A New View of the Seventh Continent—John May. Describes Antarctica's physical features, wildlife, exploration and exploitation, and investigates the scientific research in progress on this icy continent. Readable text is complemented by gorgeous color photographs and satellite- and computer-generated images. Doubleday, 1989, 192 p., hardcover, \$24.95.

The North American Porcupine—Uldis Roze. The natural history of this most unusual herbivore, which defends itself with quills and stark black-and-white coloring that warns nocturnal predators of its presence. Roze notes that porcupine quills have antibiotic properties and come equipped with special barbs that pull them through flesh. The animal has been known to lick salted highways to sate its salt cravings, to eat sugar-maple buds for their high nitrogen content and to survive numerous falls from trees. Smithsonian Inst Pr, 1989, 261 p., illus., hardcover, \$29.95, paperback, \$19.95.

Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics and History—Mary Kilbourne Matossian. Presents statistics and epidemiologic data pointing to microfungi in rye bread as the cause of outbreaks of infertility, bizarre behavior and sudden death in Europe from the 14th to 18th century. The author's research on colonial America links mold poisonings to a throat distemper epidemic, the Salem witchcraft persecution and the religious "Great Awakening" of 1741. Yale U Pr, 1989, 190 p., hardcover, \$22.50.

THE WEATHER COMPANION

By Gary Lockhart



Wiley, 1988, 230 pages, 9" x 7", paperback, \$12.95
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