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Better early than never

I have two comments to add to the fine article about making decisions based upon less-than-total knowledge, "Simple minds, smart choices" (SN: 5/29/99, p. 348). It quite aptly starts off citing former big leaguer and current baseball analyst Tim McCarver on the need to go with one's first instinct. I wish to add McCarver's famous dictum: "Think long, think wrong."

The second comment I would like to cite is an old military adage about making choices under pressure and time constraints: "A good plan now is better than a perfect plan later."

Harold Gotthelf
Jersey City, N.J.

Smart little buggers

"The search for animal inventors" (SN: 6/5/99, p. 364) opened my eyes. I started paying attention to nature and found that a common (brown) sparrow has adapted to benefit from us. In a parking lot, I saw a sparrow search the fronts of cars for morsels. It ignored the back end of cars. Then today at

home, I saw the same type of bird land on a neighbor's porch railing under a roof. It fluttered up to where the light is and plucked a bug off the wall. The light is only on during the night when the birds are sleeping.

Scott Meyers
Roanoke, Va.

Among animal inventors, there are the English blue tits who learned to peck open milk bottles and skim off the cream and the Japanese monkeys who learned to wash the sand off the sweet potato slices researchers left on the beach. Then, there were the Welsh sheep who learned to cross cattle grids by rolling over them on their backs. I don't know what became of them, but I have a feeling they weren't allowed to live very long.

Bina Robinson
Swain, N.Y.

Your article reminded us of an experience we witnessed in Bryce Canyon National Park. A blue stellar jay buried something just across from our trailer. We could not distinguish what it was and we waited. He took off, brought back a rock the size of a Ping-Pong

ball, and placed it carefully on top of what he had buried before. He flew away a second time and brought back a twig, which he placed on top of the little mound. When we investigated, we found that the jay had buried a peanut pod. We carefully replaced the rock and branch. The next morning, the peanut pod was gone. The process demonstrated a genius for planning, and a good memory on the part of that magnificent bird.

John E. Deras
Phoenix, Ariz.

Ontogeny vs. phylogeny

I was confused by your article on elephant fetuses and how nephrostomes had been found in them, indicating a previously aquatic existence, ("Elephants may have started out all wet," SN: 5/22/99, p. 324). I thought the myth of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny had been pretty well debunked. While ontogeny can certainly provide clues to phylogeny, the researchers in your article seem to have returned to 19th-century scientific beliefs.

Jedidiah J. Palosaari
Dearborn, Mich.

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Cover: For more than 1,600 years, residents of the Venetian lagoon have struggled with continually rising water, according to a new study. By 1500, about the time Vittore Carpaccio captured this Venetian fishing scene, the water level had edged up 1.5 meters above the surface of the first lagoon settlements. **Page 63** (Painting: The J. Paul Getty Museum)

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