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Not forgetting the naughty bits

Asymmetrical scrota, bulls' penises and date rape by an ostrich: this year's Ig Nobel tour was a risqué business, writes Kees Moeliker

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Kees Moeliker, Ig Nobel laureate, holds a sparrow killed by a cricket ball in 1936 at Lord's cricket ground. Photograph: Sarah Lee

Friday: The seven dried bull penises my companion Pek van Andel carries on his back attract the attention of security at Rotterdam airport, but are not recognised as the mean weapons they can be. So we can make our way to Oxford to join Marc Abrahams on his fourth Ig Nobel tour of the UK. As winners of an Ig Nobel prize, each of us was invited to come and speak about the improbable research that won us the prize and thus "first make people laugh and then make them think". I witnessed and documented the first case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck. Pek used an MRI scanner to provide an in-depth insight into the anatomy of the human sexual organs while those organs were in use.

Just outside Oxford railway station we run into a huge bronze bull that, on closer inspection, appears to be, at least symbolically, the Oxford ox. Pek uses the statue to teach me about penile morphology: "The root runs up to here internally, and this is the external part." His seven dried real ones fit wonderfully well with the large statue.

Our show is at the university's physics department. Fellow Ig Nobel prize winner Chris McManus is there, too. His five-



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minute talk is about "scrotal asymmetry in man and ancient sculpture". It may seem, if one judges only by our three achievements, that Ig Nobel is mainly about "below the waist" subjects - but this small sample is misleading. Pek, a rare kind of maverick, devotes part of his talk to serendipity (unsought findings) and part to his latest achievement: becoming the Netherlands' first "total donor" of his corpse to science.

In my talk, I just briefly mention peculiar duck behaviour, then tell how, as a bird curator, I managed to obtain and preserve the "Domino Sparrow", the unfortunate house sparrow that was recently shot in the Netherlands because it disturbed an attempt at a world record in domino toppling. The bird flew in through a window and knocked over 23,000 dominos just a few days before the grand domino-toppling event was to be televised live in 11 countries. The death of this now-immortal bird caused worldwide outrage, and so did the outrage itself.

Saturday: The four of us (the hard core of the UK tour) - Marc, his wife, Robin, Pek and me - travel by train to Edinburgh. We settle in at Gerald's Place, a wonderfully idiosyncratic and hospitable B&B filled with beautiful, mostly Arabian art. We meet Gordon Rutter, a local Ig Nobel fan and head of the Fortean group. He proudly shows us his collection, which includes an original Uri Geller spoon, a furred trout and 2,500 videotapes, mostly of Doctor Who and the like. I advise him to regularly dust his taxidermied Scottish wild cat, otherwise moths will soon destroy it. Back in our B&B, Gerald offers us a nightcap. We discuss the use of straw in medical investigations by young schoolboys, and why Germans have their Holocaust museum while the US probably will never have a museum about slavery.

Sunday: We have to wade through almost knee-deep snow to get to the Royal Museum, the site of our Edinburgh show. The museum has "a tiny concern" about Pek's talk: the management thinks the MRI image of human copulation may be pornographic, and doesn't want to deal with complaints from families who did not expect their children to see it. There is even a warning that the event is 18+.

I thought the Royal Museum wanted, as its slogan says, "to show the world to Scotland". Well, here is a chance to see the image that showed the medical world something unexpected: that the male member has an enormous root. Strangely, there is no prior inquiry about my talk, although the subject is obviously controversial and the images are very explicit. Maybe homosexual necrophilia is widely accepted among the people of Scotland.

Pek shows his MRI image but does not talk directly about it. Few people understand what they are looking at, and that is a pity. I like Jonathan Rees's one-minute-long lecture: with the aid of brown and white Maltesers, he explains why blondes will never become extinct.

Monday: Our train ride takes much longer than expected because the doors in our car fail to open at the station where we are supposed to get off. After seeing the famous Dundee railway bridge, and then doubling back on the next train, we reach our destination right at the moment when a Tornado takes off from the RAF base at Leuchars.

The noise must be unbearable for the people who live next to the airbase.

Our show is at the University of St Andrews. Charles Paxton, who won an Ig Nobel prize for his classic study "Courtship behaviour of ostriches towards humans under farming conditions in Britain", is the host of the evening. He visibly enjoys telling the remarkable story of how he, as a researcher, almost got raped by an ostrich. "The count of infinity", the mini-opera that is part of every show, is sung tonight by the world's most fragile-looking opera singer. Her voice is beautiful though.

Tuesday: A day off. I walk the streets of Edinburgh and wonder how all those girls, wearing almost nothing, survive.

Wednesday: We are in Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire, home of the world famous Synchrotron Radiation Source, which makes all sorts of "light" for research purposes. Although the Lab is in the middle of nowhere, the lecture theatre completely fills up with both bearded scientists and local families.

My talk gets good responses from the audience, especially when I tell them about another sparrow that was killed in a dramatic way: by a ball bowled by Jehangir Khan at Lord's cricket ground in 1936. It was mounted on the very same cricket ball and the specimen is kept in the MCC museum at Lord's. I am after it to display next to the Domino Sparrow in the Grand Sparrow Exhibition I curate at the Rotterdam's Natural History Museum.

After the official part of the show there is the UK premiere of Pek's moving MRI images, and a friendly woman presents me the lines of an old Scottish song: "Once there was a sparra. Sat on a barra. Along came a boy with a bow and arra. And the boy shot the sparra. That was sat on the barra ..." I am thrilled.

Thursday: I arrange a meeting for Friday with Glenys Williams, the archivist in charge of the stuffed cricket sparrow at Lord's. I hope she will allow me to borrow the bird. Tonight we are in the Guardian Newsroom archive centre. It is the fifth show and Marc Abrahams, our Ig Nobel guru, performs at his best. So do tonight's participants in "The Great Intelligence Debate". Emily Dubberley, editor of Scarlet - the UK's hottest monthly magazine for women - wins by showing six inches of her naked lower back.

This diary ends in The Betsey Trotwood, a pub, where Emily is asked to choose the best of the seven bull's penises.

- Kees Moeliker is curator of the Natural History Museum, Rotterdam, and winner of the 2003 Ig Nobel biology prize. The Grand Sparrow Exhibition will open on November 14, exactly a year after the "Domino Sparrow" was shot

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