

# The Style Invitational

Week 545: Put It in Reverse



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

- Iagelli: a gangster's favorite pasta**
- Kartma: a third-class railroad**
- ecnatsid: an annoying insect that you wish were far away from you**
- roma: the fragrance of love**

After 544 weeks, we can't deny that many, perhaps most Style Invitational contests are in some way variants—and occasionally out-and-out repeats—of previous ones from the past decade. But this week's, we are convinced, is utterly new. And not just that: It is also elegantly simple in concept and addictively fun to do. It was suggested by Richard Grantham of Melbourne, Australia, who for some reason chose to move from the way better-named Indooroopilly. Richard is a word wizard with his own contest site that we will celebrate and publicize as soon as we figure out the best way to rip it off. He wins a souvenir bust of President Bush, provided he comes to our office to pick it up.

**This Week's Contest:** Spell a word backward and define it, with the definition relating in some way to the original word. The Empress expects to be inundated with thousands of entries, so strive for originality and really clever wording.

First-prize winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational Trophy. First runner-up wins a cross-section model of the human ear, including a eustachian tube clogged with "Infection, Inflammation and Edema." Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after new Style Invitational Magnets, which you might not want to stick on your computer. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries via fax to 202-334-4312 or by e-mail to [losers@washpost.com](mailto:losers@washpost.com). Snail-mail entries are not accepted. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 23. Put the week number in the subject line of your

e-mail, or you risk being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published March 14. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Chris Doyle of Forsyth, Mo.

**Report from Week 541,** in which you supplied scenarios in which someone yakking on his cell phone instead of responding to the person addressing him would get what he deserved:

- ◆ Fourth runner-up: **Homeowner talking to landscaping contractor while attending the State of the Union address: "I want to get rid of the entire hill—but first things first, I want to take out all the bushes."** (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)
- ◆ Third runner-up: **Doctor: "That was a terrible blow your face took. How's your nose doing?"**
- Yakker to union shop steward: "I can't picket anymore since I went into the hospital because of that scab. Can someone picket for me?"** (Bill Spencer, Exeter, N.H.)
- ◆ Second runner-up: **Waiter at a Chinese restaurant: "May I take your order?"**
- Yakking veterinarian: "Yes, your cat will be fine. Just make sure that it's warm and the shoulder doesn't get too tender."** (Russell Beland, Springfield)
- ◆ First runner-up, the winner of the shot glass with the coat of arms of the "U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis": **Flight attendant: "Now boarding for Los Angeles."**
- TV exec yakking to a colleague about a planned sitcom: "Hi, Jack? Look, we've got a real bomb here—let's go ahead and kill the pilot."** (Jonathan Kaye, Washington)
- ◆ And the winner of the Inker: **Florist: "This bouquet will really cheer up your girlfriend in the hospital. What would you like to say on the card?"**
- Yakker, with bad reception: "Yo. We're breaking up. I have GOT to find a better service provider."** (Erika Reinfeld, Somerville, Mass.)

- ◆ **Honorable Mentions:**
- Surgeon: "Now, the implants are available in various sizes . . ."**
- Yakker to wedding dress designer: "Just brushing the floor would be perfect."** (Milo Sauer, Fairfax)
- Campaign fundraising official: "How much can you contribute?"**
- Yakker selecting a pepper grinder on his niece's wedding registry at Crate & Barrel: "Put me down for a mill."** (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)
- Talent agent during a routine traffic stop: "Trust me, I've got the perfect heroine. Of course, you're going to have to pay something extra."** (Russell Beland, Springfield)
- Hot chick at bar: "So would you like to take me home?"**
- Yakker talking about his first time piloting the family sailboat: "I'm really excited about this, but I'm gonna have my dad watch the whole time so I don't mess up too much. I want him to bring his video camera so he can go over in detail later what I was doing wrong."** (Joseph Romm, Washington)
- Reporter: "So what do you think of Lieberman for president?"**
- Yakker, speaking to his wife who is at the grocery store: "Forget it—we don't need any more juice!"** (Erica Rabbin, College Park)
- Car salesman: "Well, in addition to the DVD, the GPS and satellite radio, options include heated seats, spoiler kit, built-in cell phone, chrome wheels . . ."**
- Yakker to Girl Scout: "You sweet dear—I'll just take one of everything you've got. Just charge me and drop it off at my house."** (Jane Auerbach, Los Angeles)
- Co-worker: "My kid is swimming in a pool fundraiser this weekend. Would you like to sponsor him?"**
- Yakker negotiating with an entertainment agency for a stag party: "Okay, how about 50 bucks a lap?"** (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)
- Auctioneer: "Bidding for the 2,000-year-old Aramean chalice, believed to be the Holy Grail, now stands at \$3.45 million. Are there any other offers? Going once, going twice . . ."**
- Yakker to chiropractor: "Well, I'm raising my right hand directly toward the ceiling and shaking it vigorously, and it still doesn't feel any better."** (Peter Levitan, Sherman Oaks, Calif.)

- Obstetrician: "Mrs. Jones, would you like to try to deliver naturally or opt for the Caesarean?"**
- Yakker to her mechanic about an engine overhaul: "You just go ahead and yank that thing out of there. It's been tapping and rattling and sometimes I even see smoke coming out of my rear end."** (Judith Cottrell, New York)
- Urologist: "Please turn your head and cough while I check this out."**
- Yakker to wife about problems with cable company: "Hell, you can cut the damn thing off, for all I care—it's not like we're using it all that much."** (Michael Levy, Silver Spring)
- General: "What should we do with the new suspect?"**
- John Ashcroft yakking to his wife about their new puppy: "Hit him with a rolled-up newspaper and then put his nose in his poop."** (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
- Police officer: "Have you been drinking, sir?"**
- Yakker to plumber about leaky toilet: "I'd say, oh, about a quart every hour or so."** (Paul Kocak, Syracuse, N.Y.)
- Cop: "License and registration, please, ma'am."**
- Yakker to mechanic: "I know you people try to rip me off just because I'm a woman. But my husband told me it shouldn't cost a penny more than a hundred dollars to get something like this fixed."** (Tom Kreitzberg, Silver Spring)
- Cashier: "Debit or credit?"**
- Customer to home heating repairman: "Just clean out that register and dump everything in the bag."** (Marty McCullen, Gettysburg, Pa.)
- Teacher at parent-teacher conference: "Billy is having trouble with bullies."**
- Father to lawyer about his upcoming case: "Well, you just make sure his hands are tied. He needs to take it lying down!"** (Emily Conron, Alexandria)
- Michael Jackson in court, discussing the ears of corn and steamed crabs he wants for his victory cookout, and the jet he's chartering afterward: "I want them fresh . . . all males, gotta be all males . . . and Virgin, definitely Virgin."** (Russell Beland, Springfield)

Next Week: **Discombobulate Us, or Obscenarios**

## BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

Both sides vulnerable

NORTH (D)  
 ♠ 7 3 2  
 ♥ K J 9 3  
 ♦ A Q 5 2  
 ♣ A 5

WEST  
 ♠ A Q 8 5  
 ♥ 6 5  
 ♦ 10 7 6  
 ♣ K J 6 2

EAST  
 ♠ J 10 9 6  
 ♥ 4  
 ♦ K 9 8 4  
 ♣ Q 10 8 4

SOUTH  
 ♠ K 4  
 ♥ A Q 10 8 7 2  
 ♦ J 3  
 ♣ 9 7 3

The bidding:  
 North East South West  
 1 ♦ Pass 1 ♥ Pass  
 2 ♥ Pass 4 ♥ All Pass

Opening lead: ♥ 5

**I** learned in medical school that the heart operates involuntarily — without direct instruction from the brain," Ed Fitch, our club president, told me. "I didn't know until I began to play bridge that the tongue works the same way."

Ed had been paired with a visiting player who had flapped her yap all evening. Ed showed me today's deal, in which his partner had declared four hearts.

"She drew trumps," Ed said, "and let the jack of diamonds ride. East took the king and shifted to spades, and West took A-Q and led a third spade. My partner ruffed but had to lose a club. Down one."

"She didn't play it skillfully," I observed.

"No," Ed agreed, "but she did play it fluently. When I said her play hadn't been best, she insisted

she'd had a 75 percent chance—and what did I want her to do anyway? She went on forever. By the end of the night she was so tired she couldn't keep her mouth open."

How would you play four hearts? After South draws trumps, her correct play is to lead a low diamond from dummy toward her jack. If West had the king, he couldn't attack the spades, and South would have time to discard a spade on the A-Q of diamonds, losing a diamond, a spade and a club.

As the cards lie, East has the king of diamonds but can't beat the contract. If East plays low, South loses two spades and a club but no diamonds. If East takes the king, South loses two spades but later takes the jack of diamonds and discards two clubs on the A-Q.

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BY MICHAEL LUTZKY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Mark Obmascik, a convert to birding, brought along a scope and tripod on his book tour for "The Big Year."

## Finding Joy in a Wild Goose Chase

BIRDING, From D1

Every year, a few birders in the full plumage of their obsession enter something called the North American Big Year, a 365-day grueling Olympics of birding. (Birders are a proud people who disdain the passive term "bird-watching.") At their own expense, these birders travel across the continental United States, Alaska and Canada, pursuing the 675 species native to the region, as well as non-native birds who get lost in migration. They memorize minute differences in wing markings. They often identify birds by their calls alone. The one who records the most birds gets nothing except the envy of fellow birders, which is plenty in the birding world.

In his new book, "The Big Year," Mark Obmascik, a former Denver Post reporter, tells the story of 1998, the biggest Big Year ever, by reconstructing the journeys of three top birders. The winner saw a record-breaking 745 species, and spent about \$100,000 doing it. Obmascik, who is on a book tour, was in town last week, eating breakfast at a restaurant near Union Station and marveling at the reaction he'd received from callers on a Philadelphia radio show.

"After a while it began to sound like an AA meeting," Obmascik says. "Hi, my name is Julie. I'm a birder. I got up at dawn to go from Philly to a sewage lagoon in Baltimore to look at a Ross's gull."

Sewage ponds, it turns out, are excellent habitat for certain birds. "Rich with life," Obmascik says. In the book, he writes with reverence of a Big Year competitor whose "secret weapon" is the years he spent working with chemicals and inadvertently ruining his own sense of smell. This allows the man to seek out a rare crow at a steaming landfill with relative ease. Such are the joys of birding.

Obmascik, 42, is himself a convert to birding, after writing occasionally about birds and birding for his paper. (He was also the lead writer on the Denver Post's Columbine coverage, which won the Pulitzer Prize.) Back home in Denver, he takes his sons on birding expeditions. When he comes to Washington for his tour, he carries birding books, a scope and tripod, padding the metal legs with pipe insulation to cushion his shoulder. At Hains Point, he watches great black-backed gulls tearing apart fish as they drift along on ice floes.

But what really fascinates him are the hardest of the hard-core birders, mostly men, who travel countries and continents just to see an animal "that has a brain the size of your pinky nail," he says. Several years ago, for a news story, Obmascik observed birders who'd come to see the mating grounds of the Gunnison sage grouse, off a dirt road in Colorado. There was a group of "Harvard lawyers from Boston. They had come all this way to watch some birds have sex before dawn," he says. "There was a vanload of Brits who were doing the chicken tour of Colorado."

What makes a man do a chicken tour? It is a question that Obmascik can never fully answer, though he points out how birding taps into a love of nature, intellectual prowess and most of all the competitive spirit. At High Island, Tex., a hot spot during spring migration, birders come from England, Germany and Japan, Obmascik says. The good ones don't need to consult their field guides to name the avian travelers.

"Calling out a mistake at High Island during migration is like letting a grounder go between your legs during the World Series," Obmascik says.

But there seems to be something more to it than competition, something that transforms birding from recreation to fixation. What is it?

"I asked these guys that a million different ways," Ob-

mascik says. "Finally I think one of them said, 'Why'd you fall in love with your wife?'"

Maybe it is that inexplicable. Maybe it is fate. Oddly, among those who adore chicken tours and landfill expeditions, a significant proportion seem to have been born with avian last names. Thus, there is the young man who used to edit the youth publication for the Colorado Springs-based American Birding Association, Ben Winger, and the president of the National Audubon Society, John Flicker. (The flicker, as any birder knows, is a kind of woodpecker.) There's the editor of American Birding's newsletter, "Winging It," whose name is Matt Pelikan.

"For me, birding is a way of understanding the world—it's like a filter," says Pelikan, who's been birding for 40 of his 45 years. "I don't see surroundings; I see bird habitats. That probably makes me sound like a wack job."



BY IAN L. JONES—UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

A rare bird: The whiskered auklet makes an appearance at Buldir Island, Alaska.

Then there's the professor who heads McGill University's Avian Science and Conservation Centre, whose name is David Bird (not to be confused with the distinguished Virginia ornithologist Mitchell Byrd). Bird has always been into birds. Once, as a kid, he ruined his mother's canasta party by releasing a flock of swallows in the house. Nowadays, he gives salacious talks at stops on the bird circuit, such as the swan festival and the turkey vulture festival, with titles like "How Birds Do It."

"Cheating, necrophilia, homosexuality, rape—everything," Bird says. "The birds are into some very serious sex, actually."

The most sympathetic of Obmascik's three subjects is Greg Miller, now 46, who lived in Lusby, Md., and worked as a computer programmer when he embarked on his Big Year. (He now lives in Sugarcreek, Ohio, and runs a bird-guiding business.) Broke and newly divorced, Miller worked 13-hour days so he could take long weekends and maxed out five credit cards to make his journey. For three days he subsisted on "Jif and Mister Salty," he says. Halfway through, "I was burnt to a crispy critter," but borrowed \$5,000 from his dad to keep going.

Miller really likes lists. He has been known to list the birds he sees while driving along one road, then start a new list as the car turns onto a new road. After he returned from his Big Year, he developed leukemia, which has been in remission for 2½ years now. While being treated with chemotherapy, he counted birds from his hospital window.

Today, he still has two more credit cards to pay off from his birding adventure, but no regrets.

"My dream year," he calls it.

Alas, there may never be a year like 1998 again. Obmascik ticks off several reasons, including what he calls the strongest fluctuations of the warm El Niño current off Ecuador, which spawned storms that blew many birds off course and into the scope range of North American birders.

Which doesn't mean that birders will stop doing their Big Years, their county lists, their state lists, their long drives. There will always be the lure of the beautiful and the rare.

Bill Maynard, who plans birding conventions for American Birding, spent 15 years trying to see 700 birds in North America. He finally succeeded three years ago. He draws the line, though, at certain types of lists. Counting birds you see while waiting in airports, for example.

"I have a friend who does that," Maynard allows. "Kind of obsessive."

Birders often seem consumed by their passion, but Maynard, for one, has other hobbies. He also collects stamps.

Stamps with birds on them.