

once took an algebra- or calculus-based introductory physics course are unable to discuss common physics phenomena and cannot demonstrate a better understanding of basic physical concepts than can those adults who never saw the inside of a physics classroom.

Physicists talk about the need for a science-literate public, but I fear they squander their only opportunity to work toward that goal.

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Folksinger's father famous as physicist

The passing of Albert Baez (see his obituary on page 75) recalls a beautiful encounter. At a dinner party in 1982, I asked him how it was being the father of a famous person. He replied that he had gotten used to being eyed at conferences and inevitably being asked, "Are you any relation to [folk musician] Joan Baez?" On one occasion, as he saw a young physicist approach, he was

sure he knew what was coming. But this time it was different. "I was astounded," Baez said, "and thrilled, when he asked, 'Are you Albert Baez, the inventor of the x-ray telescope?'"

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Advocating real-world physics classes

I agree that more physics needs to be offered in US high schools (PHYSICS TODAY, March 2007, page 32). All high-school students should be required to take at least one physics class. However, that class should have real-world application.

The physics that is now taught in high schools is for the few students who will go into high-energy research and is of little value to most other students. A local physics teacher told me that he had a class of "A" students and did not want any "C" students.

Judging by most physics textbooks, the authors do not know how to teach

the basic physics of people's homes. Textbook authors should learn, and then could teach, the physics involved in electrical wiring, structural support, insulation, and the safe use of electricity. For example, a student who learns that a white roof can save on the air-conditioning bill has learned something of value, without the need to calculate the rate of heat transfer.

It is a shame, too, that there is so much confusion about centrifugal and centripetal forces. Some authors use the word "centrifugal" correctly, but some think it doesn't even exist. Rotation never moves anything inward toward its center.

Let's give high-school students some physics that they can use in their daily lives.

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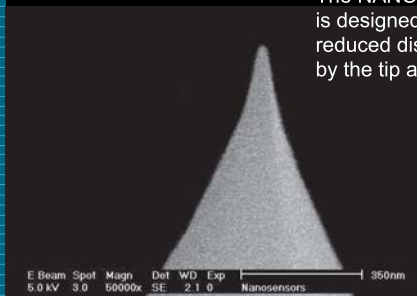
Correction

October 2007, page 5—In the caption for the cover illustration, the second sentence should read "The patterns the birds form change shape and density when a predator attacks." ■

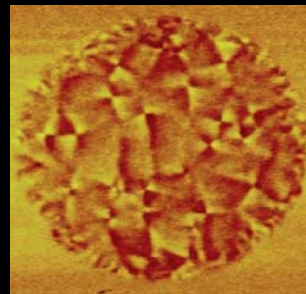
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