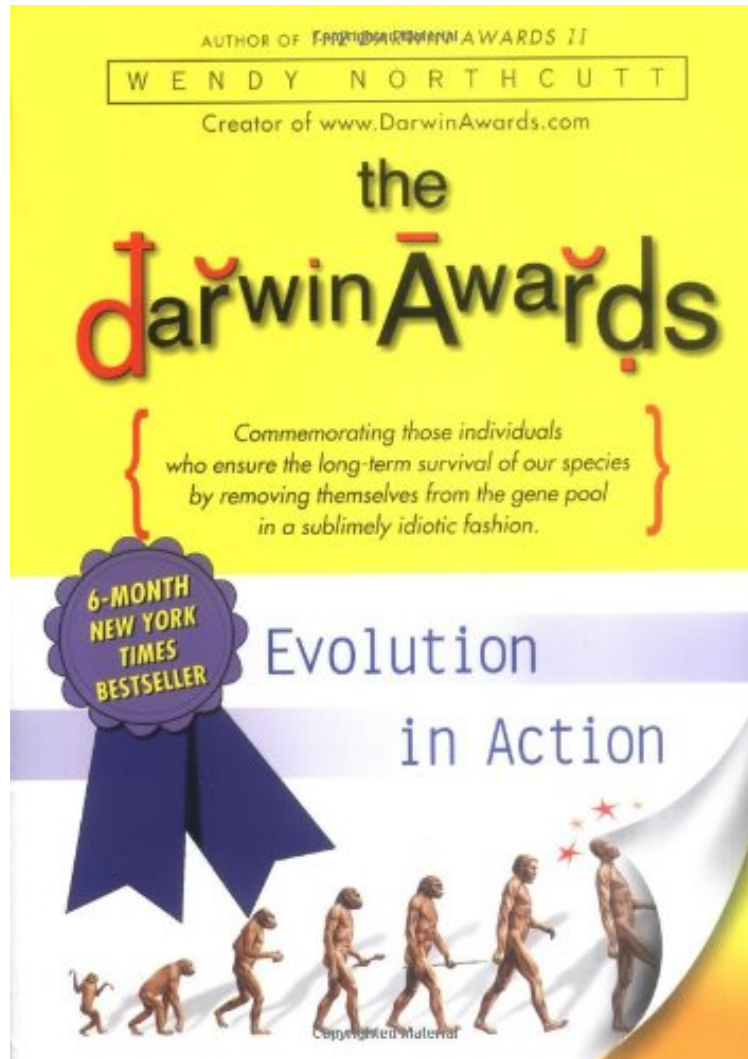


The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action (Darwin Awards (Plume Books))

Wendy Northcutt

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Wendy Northcutt : The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action (Darwin Awards (Plume Books)) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action (Darwin Awards (Plume Books)):

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. An utter hoot of a book! By Catherine S. Vodrey Wendy Northcutt had the imagination and good sense to start the Darwin Awards some years ago, and she's now compiled the best ones into a book. "The Darwin Awards" examines what Northcutt calls "the finest examples of evolution in action"--that is to say, just-plain-stupid folks who are killed (or sometimes just maimed) through direct result of their own stupidity.

Northcutt's premise is based on the idea that these idiots have done the human race a favor by removing themselves from the gene pool. Northcutt not only details some hilarious stories herein, she tells you whether or not they were "confirmed by the Darwin Awards" (most were) and what newspapers or magazines the original accounts appear in when the unfortunate event first took place. She also examines a number of remarkably resilient urban legends (remember the one about the guys, the dynamite, the iced-over lake, the SUV that hadn't yet been fully paid for, and the faithful dog?) and gives you her take on possible origins of the stories and what clearly makes them urban legends instead of true, out-and-out Darwin Award contenders. This book is a laugh a minute. You will be astonished at some of the idiotic things people do without thinking--looking into a gas tank or a loaded gun with a lit match, trying to get fish by dropping live electrical wires into a lake (then wandering in to retrieve said fish without removing or turning off the wires), and so on and so on. What a guilty pleasure this book is!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The correct book showed up so yeah. Not really ...By chris
The correct book showed up so yeah. Not really an option between picking anything other than 1 or 5 stars.
4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Funny at times
By Debbie Lee Wesselmann
Charles Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest" implies, by extension, that idiots will die, thus the premise of this humorous volume. Wendy Northcutt has compiled a series of anecdotes of fatal stupidity, from the drunken pilot who took off with a gust lock in place to the prison guard falling through a skylight as he "supervised" conjugal visits. Many of these stories involve alcohol, which is not so much stupidity as it impairment. The story of a man awakened in the middle of the night by a phone and mistaking his bedside gun for a receiver speaks less of a lack of intelligence than it does nighttime confusion. Other anecdotes are truly hilarious in their lack of common sense. A person must die to be awarded a Darwin Award, so these stories aren't for the fainthearted. They have all been carefully documented to avoid inclusions of urban legends. Unfortunately, as a whole, the book is simply not as funny as the individual stories I used to receive in my inbox. Too many borderline anecdotes are included. Although this book makes a good gift for those who revel in the stupidity of others, don't expect laughs on every page.

The hilarious New York Times bestselling phenomenon—more than 1.5 million copies sold! The Darwin Awards shares the stories of those human beings who improve the gene pool by removing themselves from it in a sublimely idiotic fashion. Marvel at the thief who tries to steal live electrical wires. Gape at the lawnchair jockey who floats to a height of 16,000 feet suspended by helium balloons. And learn from the man who peers into a gasoline can using a cigarette lighter. All contend for Darwin Awards when their choices culminate in magnificent misadventures. These tales of trial and awe-inspiring error—verified by the author and endorsed by website readers—illustrate the ongoing saga of survival of the fittest in all its selective glory. The Darwin Awards vividly portrays the finest examples of evolution in action, and shows us just how uncommon common sense can be.

“The Darwin Awards is a riot to read. Deeply entertaining.”—San Francisco Weekly
“Delightfully funny, The Darwin Awards, taken together, constitute a delicious sermon in support of common sense.”—The Baltimore Sun
About the Author
A graduate of UC Berkeley with a degree in molecular biology, Wendy Northcutt began collecting the stories that make up the Darwin Awards in 1993. Her award-winning Web site www.DarwinAwards.com is one of the most popular humor pages on the Web. The Darwin Awards have been profiled in USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Entertainment Weekly, and on NPR’s All Things Considered. Wendy is the author of the international bestsellers *The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action*, *The Darwin Awards 2: Unnatural Selection*, *The Darwin Awards 3: Survival of the Fittest*, *The Darwin Awards 4: Intelligent Design*, *The Darwin Awards: Next Evolution*, and *The Darwin Awards: Countdown to Extinction*. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.
The Darwin Awards: What are they?
Darwin Awards illustrate Mark Twain's observation, "Man is the only animal that blushes—or has reason to."
Survival of the Fittest
Most of us know instinctively that the phrase "trust me, light this fuse" is a recipe for disaster. Darwin Award winners do not. Most of us have a basic common sense that eliminates the need for public service announcements such as, WARNING: COFFEE IS HOT! Darwin Award winners do not. The stories assembled in this book show that common sense is really not so common. There are people who think it's practical to peer into a gasoline can using a cigarette lighter. There are people who throw beach parties to celebrate an approaching hurricane. We applaud the predictable demise of such daredevils with Darwin Awards, named after Charles Darwin, the father of evolution. No warning label could have prevented evolution from creeping up on the man who electrocuted fish with household current, then waded in to collect his catch without removing the wire. Darwin Awards show what happens to people who are bewilderingly unable to cope with obvious dangers in the modern world. The terrorist who mails a letter bomb with insufficient postage wins a Darwin Award when he opens the returned package. As does the fisherman who throws a lit stick of dynamite onto the ice, only to see his faithful golden retriever fetch the stick. As does the man caught stealing from a church. Darwin Award winners plan and carry out disastrous schemes that an average child can tell are a really bad idea. They contrive to eliminate themselves from the gene pool in such an extraordinarily idiotic manner, that their action ensures the long-term survival of our species, which now contains one less idiot. The single-minded purpose and self-sacrifice of the winners, and the spectacular means by which they snuff

themselves, qualifies them for the honor of winning a Darwin Award. Rules and Eligibility To win, nominees must significantly improve the gene pool by eliminating themselves from the human race in an astonishingly stupid way. All races, cultures, and socioeconomic groups are eligible to compete. Contenders are evaluated using the following five criteria: The candidate must remove himself from the gene pool. The prime tenet of the Darwin Awards is that we are celebrating the self-removal of incompetent genetic material from the human race. The potential winner must therefore render himself deceased, or at least incapable of reproducing. If someone does manage to survive an incredibly stupid feat, then his genes de facto must have something to offer in the way of luck, agility, or stamina. He is therefore not eligible for a Darwin Award, though sometimes the story is too entertaining to pass up and he earns an Honorable Mention. Heated philosophical discussions have sprung up around the reproduction rule. If a person or group gives up sex, are they eligible for a nomination since they are no longer willing to breed? Must the candidate be utterly incapable of reproduction? Can the elderly be ruled out because they are too old to have an impact on the gene pool? Should those who already have children be banned from winning? These are complicated questions. For example, frozen sperm and ova are viable decades after the donor's demise, and sheep and humans can be cloned from a single cell. It is almost impossible to completely eliminate an individual's genes. And it would take a team of researchers to ferret out the full reproductive implications, a luxury the Darwin Awards lacks. Therefore, no attempt is made to determine the actual reproductive status or potential of the nominee. If he no longer has the physical wherewithal to breed with a mate on a deserted island, then he is eligible for a Darwin. The candidate must exhibit an astounding misapplication of judgment. We are not talking about common stupidities such as falling asleep with a lit cigarette or taking a bath with a radio. The fatal act must be of such idiotic magnitude that we shake our heads and thank our lucky stars that our descendants won't have to deal with, or heaven forbid breed with, descendants of the buffoon that set that harebrained scheme in motion. The Darwin winner is seldom a copycat. The death under consideration must reflect a unique manifestation of the grave lack of sense and misapplication of judgment indicative of a genuine cleansing of the gene pool. Using bullets as fuses, reenacting the William Tell stunt, and bungee jumping with rubber bands are all worthy Darwin Award activities. Oscar Wilde said, "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune ... to lose both seems like carelessness." If you fry yourself along with your parents while rewiring their outdoor hot-tub during a thunderstorm, you may be eligible for a Darwin Award. The candidate must be the cause of his own demise. The candidate's own gross ineptitude must be the cause of the incident that earns him the nomination. A hapless bystander done in by a heavy anvil dropped from a skyscraper is an unfortunate tragedy. If, however, you are smashed by the anvil you rigged above your own balcony to kill those squawking pigeons, then you are a Darwin contender. A tourist trampled to death by a rampaging bull in a parking lot is merely suffering from bad luck. If you are gored to death during the "running of the bulls" while riding naked in a shopping cart piloted by your drunken friend, you are a candidate for a Darwin Award. Some feel that a person who intentionally attempts to win a Darwin Award, and succeeds, is by definition a perfect candidate. However, readers should remember that a Darwin Award is an exceedingly dubious honor, and we discourage anyone from intentionally attempting to join these illustrious ranks. The candidate must be capable of sound judgment. Humans are generally capable of sound judgment, except those with mental, chemical, or chronological handicaps that render them unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of their actions. That means no children, Alzheimer's disease sufferers, or Downs Syndrome patients. Child nominees are a bone of contention. A vociferous majority argues against letting them win Darwin Awards, citing the gulf between ignorance and stupidity. An equally clamorous minority contends that they are the best candidates for a "rusty chromosome" award, since they obviously have not reproduced. To muddy the ethical waters further, some children have stated that restricting them from vying for this laudable award is yet another encroachment on their civil liberties. We appreciate that parents are responsible for teaching their offspring to make responsible decisions. Therefore children are not eligible to win a Darwin Award. However, a few are included as nominees, when their actions can be considered foolhardy by even their peers. The event must be verified. Reputable newspaper or other published articles, confirmed television reports, and responsible eyewitnesses are considered valid sources. A friend's mother's employer, a chain email, or a doctored photograph are not. This book contains four categories of stories. n Darwin Awards nominees lost their reproductive capacity by killing or sterilizing themselves, and this is the only category eligible to win a Darwin Award. n Honorable Mentions are foolish misadventures that stop short of the ultimate sacrifice, but still illustrate the innovative spirit of Darwin Award candidates. n Urban Legends are cautionary tales of evolution in action, and are so popular they have become part of the Internet culture. Various versions are widely circulated, but their origins are largely unknown. They should be understood as the fables they are. Any resemblance to actual events, or to persons living or dead, is purely coincidental. n Personal Accounts were submitted by loyal readers blowing the whistle on stupidity, and are plausible but usually unverified narratives. In some cases readers submitting Personal Accounts have been identified with their permission, but this does not necessarily mean that the sources are directly associated with their Personal Accounts. Darwin Awards and Honorable Mentions are known or believed to be true. Look for the words Confirmed by Darwin under the title, which generally indicate that a story was backed up by multiple submissions and by more than one reputable media source. Unconfirmed by Darwin indicates fewer credible submissions and the unavailability of direct confirmation of media sources. In "unconfirmed" Darwin Awards or

Honorable Mentions, names have often been changed and details of events have been altered to protect the innocent (and for that matter, the guilty). Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution Do the Darwin Awards really represent examples of evolution in action? In 1859 Charles Darwin revived the theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species*, which presented evidence that species evolve over time to fit their environments better. At that time, the theory of evolution was no longer in vogue. It had already been conceived, discussed, and discredited. The earth was thought to be only six thousand years old, far too young to show evidence of the slow pace of evolution, and besides, there was no plausible explanation for how evolution might occur. Furthermore, many people were repelled by the notion that man descended from apes. But Darwin's careful biological observations, and his proposed mechanism for evolution, propelled the theory back into the scientific limelight. Darwin called his mechanism for evolution "natural selection," and described four requirements that must be satisfied in order for natural selection to occur. First, a species must show variation. Humans exhibit this quality in abundance. There are variations in every trait you can imagine: height, eye color, emotional balance, toe length, intelligence. We also are very different on the inside. For example, the major artery from the heart may branch either before or after it leaves the left ventricle. Both variations are normal. Your liver may be large or small, your appendix present or absent at birth. Countless differences exist between even the most closely related individuals. Second, variations must be inheritable. Children resemble their parents. A staggering number of traits are inherited in the myriad genes we store on our chromosomes. For better or worse, parents pass their genetic strengths and weaknesses on to their offspring. Complex characteristics such as intelligence and personality are influenced by the environment, but even these traits have strong, heritable genetic components. Third, not all individuals in a population survive to reproduce. Charles Darwin calculated that a single pair of elephants would multiply to nineteen million in 750 years if each descendant lived 100 years and had six offspring. But the elephant population has remained fairly stable over time. Why aren't we overrun with elephants? Because most of them die without reproducing. As our population boom attests, this criterion is less obviously met by humans; nevertheless, a significant number of people die without reproducing, as the stories in this book show. Fourth, some individuals can cope with selective pressures better than others. Due to inherited attributes, some members of a species are more likely to survive predators and cold winters, win the competition for mates, and leave more offspring. Successful traits become more prevalent in the population, while less successful ones decline and eventually die out. The tales you will read clearly show differences in our ability to cope with the selective pressures that surround us. Keeping these four criteria in mind, let's follow the example of a hypothetical group of humans with a single variable trait: some are taller than others. Because height is inherited, short people bear shorter children than tall people, on average. Picture these people living in a beautiful setting among branching trees and scenic cliffs. In this environment, tall people whack their heads on branches and fall over cliffs more frequently than their shorter fellows do. Therefore, short people have a survival advantage, and within a dozen generations, the population will become shorter. It should also become better at evading low branches. The stories in this book vividly illustrate evolution in all its selective glory, from the sublimely ironic to the pathetically stupid. We think that even Charles Darwin himself would be amused by these examples of trial and fatal error.

Uncommon Common Sense Why are there so many failures of common sense in the modern world? The world we inhabit today is very different from the world of our ancestors. We evolved to survive on a planet with nothing faster than tigers, and nothing more toxic than broccoli. No carcinogenic man-made chemicals, no explosive fuels or electricity, no refined radioactivity, no mercury thermometers, no lead paint. Imagine a woman standing in the sun watching squirrels playing in the trees. Imagine that she lives in the past, when there were only a thousand people on earth, and none had thought to smoke tobacco yet. Suddenly, at the speed of light, a photon of ultraviolet radiation travels from the sun to the earth, zaps one of the chromosomes in her ovary, and changes the sequence of a gene. When that egg becomes an embryo, the result is a child who falls asleep while smoking in bed. He has the Sleepy Smoker gene. Of course, this is an oversimplification. Complex behaviors don't usually arise from a single mutation. Nevertheless, let's think through the consequences of our hypothetical scenario. Cigarettes are still unknown in the world, so this child grows up and has children of his own, who also harbor the Sleepy Smoker gene. As the centuries roll by, one in a thousand in our growing population has the dangerous but unexpressed tendency to fall asleep while smoking in bed, and all because one woman's ovary was pierced by a stray bit of radiation. Eventually shamans discover tobacco, peace pipes become popular in diplomatic circles, and an occasional religious or political figure dies tragically in bed from a side effect of tobacco use. Even so, there just aren't enough people smoking in the world yet to make the consequences significant. The Sleepy Smoker gene continues to proliferate. Then, in the 1920s, cigarettes are popularized by Hollywood movies. Over the next few decades smoking gains popularity. Suddenly that one person in a thousand is far more likely to be in a situation where his tendency to doze off while smoking in bed will play a role in evolution. Now there is a selective pressure against this particular gene, and the incidence of Sleepy Smoker disease will begin to decline. Don't take this scenario to heart, and expect to see changes during your lifetime. Evolution works on a grand timescale. It can take hundreds of thousands of years to eradicate a single unfortunate trait. And if we learn to overcome our addiction and stop smoking, the selective pressures against the Sleepy-Smoker gene will ease, and sleepy smokers will continue to proliferate undetected, hidden by a progressive culture.

History and Internet Culture The philosophy of the Darwin Awards is a way of life.

The origin of the Darwin Awards lies in the infancy of the Internet itself. Darwin Awards were one of the first email chain letters. A story was born when someone with a flair for journalism would notice an example of natural selection in his own backyard, turn it into an amusing anecdote, and send the story to friends. Friends would email friends would email friends, and those original email chains continue even today. They are fossils from the dawn of the Internet. Some Darwin Awards are short reports based on a single newspaper clipping, such as the man who slept with a gun (FOOLISH INGENUITY: "Midnight Special"). A few turn out to be clever fictions crafted by sardonic writers not content with mere facts. Surreptitiously hidden among authentic Darwin Awards, these legends are known and loved by a microgeneration of fans. Therefore they remain the winners of record, despite being debunked as indicated in the text. Darwin winners are determined by a lengthy and subjective process. Nominees are culled from the submissions using the the five rules of death, excellence, self-selection, maturity, and veracity. They are written with an eye toward the evolutionary, and made available for public vote and comment. Thorny issues are debated in the Philosophy Forum, a process illustrated by the John F. Kennedy Jr. debate (LEAPS OF FAITH). Discredited nominations are removed, and those that fare poorly in the vote are reevaluated for suitability. Community members who believe a story is misrepresented are encouraged to provide an accurate version of events, and stories earning the disapproval of family or community members may be reassessed and removed from consideration. This continuing process of evaluation and revision is perhaps unique to the Internet culture and is made possible by the constant exchange of information among Darwin's thousands of readers. In this manner errors have been eliminated and the stories published here have benefited from that corrective process. At the same time readers should understand that the Darwin Awards and related stories have been built upon this process of community information exchange and are not the results of official investigation. While Darwin is constantly striving to eliminate errors, readers would be wildly missing the point if they were to treat these stories as gospel rather than as humor. Advice on Reading the Stories

These stories aren't meant to be read all at once. Like tasty gourmet jelly beans, the flavors are most appealing when you consume a few at a time. A story that makes you laugh out loud when read fresh, may elicit a mental ho-hum after you've surfeited yourself with a dozen others. For maximum enjoyment, be content with a chapter each day. Remember that a story that makes you laugh may make another recoil with dismay, and vice versa. Reader polls show that, in my quest to illuminate the evolutionary process, I am usually successful at walking the fine line between humor and horror. If you find that I have erred, please turn the page and enjoy the next selection. As you explore these gems, I hope that you, too, will find joy in the concept of evolution as it applies to our fellow man. Chapter 1 Natural Selection: Animal Misadventures "Only two things are infinite-the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not so sure about the universe."-Albert Einstein, Scientific Advisor to the Darwin Awards. Can Animals Win Darwin Awards? The simple answer is no. Darwin Awards commemorate individuals whose deaths improve the human gene pool, not the animal gene pool. But that trifling objection could be countered if the Darwin Awards credo were simply changed to read "Darwin Awards commemorate individuals who improve their species' gene pool." Then would an animal be eligible for a Darwin Award? To win a Darwin, one must first behave stupidly. And the prerequisite to behaving stupidly is to possess intelligence. Animals can certainly display intelligence. Lassie, the legendary canine, taught us that dogs are sensible enough to dial 911 and summon help in an emergency. And an impressively smart fox was recently shown on a British news story. Pursued by hunters and dogs, it ran across an electrified railway line. Four of the dogs were electrocuted by the live wire, and another ten were killed when a train plowed through the confused pack. The fox escaped. It is apparent that animals possess a degree of intelligence. But animals lack the mental capacity to weigh alternatives. What's dumb for a human is not dumb for a dog. If a human stuffed his head into a potato chip bag to scarf the last scraps, we might laugh at his suffocation, but for a dog, the death is just plain sad. If animals are to win Darwin Awards for their respective species, the triggering events must be appropriate. For instance, when birds fly into "invisible" windows, their mistake is not of Darwinian caliber. But a bird that singles itself out by repeatedly attempting to peck fleas off a cat is a prime target for natural selection. Animals can be really stupid, even from their own limited perspectives. Chickens get trampled to death in a rush to be the one to drink the water dripping from the ceiling, while abundant water is available all around. A dozen sheep will follow one another, each stopping to gaze down the cliff at the bodies of its buddies before stepping out into space. We can imagine a few sheep and chickens standing back from the scene of the disaster, shaking their heads and clucking in astonishment at the stupidity of their own species. In their defense, it is anthropomorphic of us to categorize chickens and sheep as "stupid" for their lack of foresight. Indeed, perhaps it is even hypocrisy. We have bred domestic animals for docility, not intelligence. There is evidence that we are the most intelligent species on earth because we systematically eliminated the competition of our intelligent cousins. Furthermore, domestic animals are living in an artificial environment instead of in their natural habitat. Domesticated pets and livestock are prey to dangers undreamt by Nature. We animals are all subject to the same process of evolution. Therefore, each species is eligible for Darwin Awards from its own perspective. But the human version of the Darwin Awards is meant to tickle the human funny bone. Since we can't easily relate to the thought processes of animals, we just aren't amused by their foolish deaths. Therefore, animals are not eligible to win Darwin Awards. But the human animal can and does win, as the following stories attest. --

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