

The Fumblebuster

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Thinking Ahead

If you have ever munched on plump, crunchy Brazil nuts during the winter holiday season (or if you ever selected the largest items in a typical can of mixed party nuts), the nuts were likely already shelled for you. If not, you probably struggled with a nutcracker before you could enjoy your snack. You might also have eaten these nuts without knowing how or where they grow. Maybe you thought they grew as tiny, individual nuts in the end of long branches at a farm near you—or in the ground like peanuts. Not so! Although we call them “nuts,” Brazil nuts are actually *seeds* that grow inside a pod (“castaña seed pods”) at the top of a very tall tree (sometimes as tall as 160 feet) in both Central and South America. This pod resembles a coconut and can weigh up to four pounds and contain 10-25 nuts (seeds) arranged like the sections of an orange inside the pod. When the pod ripens enough to drop, it is hard as a rock and acts like a bomb. When such a pod does fall, watch out! Imagine someone standing at the window of a very tall building and dropping a cannon ball to the street where you are walking below! You don’t want to be on the receiving end of that one! These falling pods have killed many humans and forest animals that were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The mature pods are so hard that they don’t even crack open when they fall to the rainforest floor. And after they hit the ground, the *only* animal that can open them is a rainforest rodent—the agouti (pronounced /uh-GOO'-tee/).

The agouti is a member of the rodent family (mice, rats, squirrels, and guinea pigs). It can grow to the size of a small rabbit. An average agouti is about 20 inches long (including its one-inch tail) and weighs between 6 and 13 pounds. Using its long, sharp front teeth and strong jaws, the agouti chisels and scrapes its way through the tough pod of Brazil nuts. When it has managed to make a small hole, it inserts an agile forepaw and fishes out the nuts one by one. Then it uses its sharp teeth again, this time as a nutcracker, before it finally has food. From start to finish, this takes a lot of work.

The agouti eats what it wants of these nuts and then buries the rest individually for later meals—much like squirrels do with acorns. The agouti’s memory is so bad, though, that it can’t find many of those “later meals.” Such memory loss allows those buried nuts to become seedlings—thus populating the wild forests with more Brazil nut trees and perpetuating the plant cycle.

While the agouti’s favorite food is the Brazil nut, the agouti itself is the preferred food for other forest animals, especially the ocelot (pronounced /OSS'-uh-LOT/). *See back cover.* The ocelot belongs to the cat (feline) family and is covered with large spots. It is known for its running speed, its fierceness, and its beauty. Some people mistake it for a leopard, and others call it the “tiger cat.”

Many factors affect the food supply in Brazil, and sometimes the forest animals get very hungry. That’s the case when this story begins!

Ocelot was hungry. Food had been scarce for too long, and his unsuccessful night of searching for food had left his stomach growling. Just ahead he spied Agouti—the tastiest morsel in the forest—and he knew his luck had changed.

Agouti was also hungry. Clutched tightly in his paw was the only remaining Brazil nut he could find from the last season’s crop. There were more, but he couldn’t recall just where he had buried them. He looked high in the sky at the tall Brazil nut tree just above him and noticed that a large dangling pod was almost ready to drop. He closed his eyes and drooled at the thought of the delicious delicacies inside that pod, and he dreamed of gnawing through that thick, tough shell protecting the savory cluster of nourishment. Ten, fifteen, maybe even twenty Brazil nuts would soon be his! More pods would drop later, but this first one of the season would be special.

When he finally opened his eyes, he was staring right at Ocelot—Agouti’s worst enemy. Agouti knew he was trapped. Escape was impossible. *Or was it? Although Agouti couldn’t outrun Ocelot, could he outsmart him? At least he had to try.*

“G-g-g-good morning, Mr. Ocelot.” Agouti trembled. “I-i-i-t’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“I don’t care if the day is pretty or not. I’m *hungry*, and *you* are going to be my dinner.”

“Uh... that’s fine, Mr. Ocelot. I’m happy to be your dinner. But you wouldn’t want to eat

before... uh... before I give you a *present*, now would you?”

“A present?” Ocelot liked getting presents almost as much as he liked feasting on agoutis!

“What’s my present?”

Agouti thought fast—and it’s a good thing, too, for he didn’t really have a present to give. But he only needed to stall long enough to plan an escape. Then he felt the Brazil nut still in his paw, and he had an idea.

“Your present is ... is ... *a fumblebuster!*”

“A fumblebuster? I’ve never heard of such a thing. You’re just trying to delay my dinner.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Ocelot. A fumblebuster is a very *special* present. It’s given *only* to the fastest and mightiest creature in the whole forest.”

“Well, let me see it!” Ocelot demanded.

Agouti held up the Brazil nut for Ocelot to see.

“There’s nothing special about that,” said Ocelot.

“Oh, yes there is! When I toss *this* fumblebuster into the air and you run to catch it, then everyone in the forest will admire your speed and strength as you sail through the air in your grand and glorious style. All will be in awe of your magnificent prowess. Every forest creature...”

“Quiet! I won’t fall for such foolish flattery,” growled Ocelot, although he *did* enjoy the thought of all the forest creatures adoring him. “Besides, do you think I’d let a silly thing like that distract me long enough to let you get away? No! I’m hungry and I’m ready for my dinner.”

“You’re right, Mr. Ocelot. You should have your dinner. I... I was just being selfish. I so much wanted to enjoy, one last time, the sensational vision of seeing you sail through the air, so graceful, so strong. What an incredible memory to carry with me into Agouti heaven! You do have me trapped, and I know it. But pleeeeeease let me pitch this fumblebuster to you, so I can savor the wondrous sight of your muscles, your grace, the wind brushing back your beautiful golden hair as you leap and glide through the air. Then I’ll gladly be your dinner.”

Ocelot thought about it for a moment. *Why not* show off his prowess to yet another forest creature? He basked in all of the flattering remarks. Besides, he knew that he could quickly catch that silly fumblebuster before Agouti could possibly escape.

“OK, I will grant your request—just to show you what a good sport I am and how generous I can be—heh, heh. I will not deprive you of the pleasure of seeing how gracefully I sail through the air. *And then I’ll gobble you up.*”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Ocelot. On your mark! Get set! Watch for the fumblebuster!”

With amazing precision, Agouti took careful aim and paused the exact number of seconds needed before the toss. He knew the ways of the Brazil nut trees. At just the right moment, he sailed that fumblebuster high into the air, and Ocelot raced toward it. And at that precise second, that large, mighty Brazil nut pod snapped from its branch and began its fierce plunge toward the earth. Several pounds of hard-shelled pod zoomed furiously toward the rainforest floor.

As if in slow motion, Agouti watched the body of Ocelot, the arc of the fumblebuster, and the heavy pod—as each one approached the exact same spot at the exact same time.

Ocelot... Fumblebuster... Pod... Ocelot... Fumblebuster... Pod....

In the very moment that Ocelot caught the nut with his front paws, that giant pod plunged... right onto... Ocelot's tail... almost burying it as the fallen pod made a deep crater in the ground. He dropped the fumblebuster and was powerless to retrieve it. The swift and mighty Ocelot had been halted.

Halted by a pod containing several of the nuts like the one he had just caught.

Halted, but fortunate—for that mighty pod possessed the strength to crush any animal's skull, but it had only snagged Ocelot's tail.

Halted long enough for Agouti to escape.

And if Ocelot had listened closely, he might have heard clever Agouti deep in the rainforest chuckling to himself, *"It was good to see you fumble, Buster!"*

Perhaps Ocelot was lucky, though, for he had quickly learned his lesson about the impact of idle flattery. However, it took much longer for his tail to heal.

And now this tale is over.

Or is it? After Ocelot fumbled, that nut started to "bust," and it had to have a few stitches and a couple of band-aids. Here's how it looks now:



Do you know some "nuts" today who sit for hours and watch people chase something that looks like a fumblebuster? Think about it!