

The Fumblebuster is dedicated to Cade McPherson.

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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*

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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!

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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!*”

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