

DVD review: *Miracles of Nature*

When a Hamster Gets out of the Car



Richard Hammond discovers how the Cape vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) has inspired a flying submarine

Dropping a lightbulb from space to test a protective cover designed like a woodpecker's head – the British TV entertainer Richard Hammond is notorious for spectacular do-it-yourself experiments. But is it science or trash when he puts himself in harm's way to investigate the extraordinary super-powers of the animal kingdom?

Without a doubt, the best natural history TV is produced by the BBC, says your *Lab Times* reviewer, who has to content herself with boring German broadcasting. When the grandmaster of natural history documentaries, David Attenborough, steps off the stage, he will leave huge footprints behind him. However, a little hamster is already scurrying along behind. And he's no slouch. In fact, he's rather compelling.

You don't know THE Hamster? That's okay. You obviously don't idolise cars. In the world of petrolheads, however, the Hamster is very well known. Under his real name, Richard Hammond, he's the snappy sparring partner of two other car fanatics in *Top Gear*, a rakish British TV motoring show, covering anything with wheels from super-cars to combine harvesters. With *Top Gear*, a show that boasts an estimated 300 million viewers all over the world, self-proclaimed Porsche aficionado Hammond became very popular. His nickname stems from his 1.7 meters height (not particularly short, but relatively small compared to his co-presenter, Jeremy Clarkson, at 1.96 meters).

Super Bodies, Super Senses...

Hammond, who started out as a radio journalist, tried something completely different a few months ago: in *Miracles of Nature* he plays the role of storyteller. Stories – as with his beloved super cars – are about



super bodies, super senses and super powers. And as he cannot obscure his enthusiasm for technique, the outcome is a documentary showing how to apply the magic of evolution in the natural world to designed super-features in the human world. Or, simply, it's about bionics. *Miracles of Nature* shows how nature has provided the inspiration for us to solve at least some of our problems – even if they aren't the most urgent ones.

“There are eight million different types of animals to learn from”, says Hammond and presents some of them: spiders, vultures, hagfish, bats, owls, butterflies, harbour seals, crabs, giraffes; by definition not the most exotic creatures, but all have inspired the construction of new technology.

Do-it-yourself constructions

According to the Hamster's understanding of himself as a human guinea pig, he tries everything, however terrifying. From stepping off the edge of a cliff in South Africa strapped to a paraglider, to having a cooling bath with slimy hagfish in California. With the paraglider he was able to get up close to Cape vultures (*Gyps coprotheres*). Their ability to sail effortlessly high in the sky prompted engineers to build a submarine that “flies” without propulsion in water. Hagfish slime could eventually become the model for newly designed artificial materials with the strength of nylon or spider silk.

Being not only a hero of words but also a car enthusiast and amateur craftsman, Hammond presents some cute pieces of kit. Examples? With the help of his “mate Adrian”, Hammond equipped his prized

oldtimer (once used to chauffeur Queen Victoria) with sensors designed to mimic harbour seals' whiskers, in order to drive it safely back into the garage. Nice idea!

And at an aeroplane graveyard in the USA they fitted an old wing with egg boxes and long haired carpet to demonstrate the reduction of turbulence and hence noise, copying owl feathers that allow the animals to approach their prey in complete silence. Admittedly, egg boxes and carpets are technologically basic. But sophisticated versions can make fans noiseless. Imagine a world of silent hairdryers, vacuum cleaners and air conditioners. Hammond muses, “Very, very quiet fans could make our noisy world a bit quieter...until the next plane comes.”

Racing against geese

The series is – as you would expect from BBC – superbly produced. Perhaps the most intoxicating scene is a race between greylag geese and an E-type Jag on an airfield. To present the animals in their natural habitat the broadcaster sent Hammond and his crew all around the world, be it Africa, the USA, Germany or Somerset, UK. It's a real treat for fans of cinematic production.

Though Hammond explains the animals' abilities and their evolution into ever more contrived techniques in a generally intelligible manner, his *Miracles of Nature* are never naively delivered. Hammond's own superpowers make a contribution here. His brand of convincing astonishment and talent for storytelling are wonderfully appropriate. Perhaps he has less understanding of the science behind these stories than many of his colleagues, but he is far more humorous. Last, but not least, he's British. Several boxes ticked, therefore, on his quest to fill the shoes that Attenborough has left behind.

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Richard Hammond trying to hear a barn owl (*Tyto alba*) approaching.