Ask letter carriers about the strangest thing they’ve had to deliver on their routes and you’ll get some appropriately strange answers: adult-sized hula hoops, a broom (unwrapped), a desk chair (unboxed), a cowboy boot (unwrapped), a large homemade cookie with the address written in icing, and every conceivable kind of bug or small animal. Some carriers even deliver human remains and body parts. It seems like anything that can be shipped probably has been.

Jeff Van Bueren decided to put that idea to the test. Writing in The Annals of Improbable Research, a humorous science-based magazine, Van Bueren tested the Postal Service by mailing an assortment of strange and unwieldy objects—usually unpackaged—to see if they’d get through. He was surprised at his high success rate:

✓ An in-bloom rose with a tag attached to the stem arrived at the address three days later with the beaten-up bud still attached.

✓ A fresh green coconut with the address written on the husk arrived 10 days after being mailed from Hawaii.

✖ A helium balloon with the address written in magic marker on the side was refused at the clerk’s station because it involved “the transportation of helium” and was “not wrapped.”

✓ A molar tooth mailed in a clear plastic box arrived 10 days later with a handwritten note that read, “Please be advised that human remains may not be transported through the mail, but we assumed this to be of sentimental value, and made an exception in your case.”

Van Bueren’s tongue-in-cheek article, “Postal Experiments,” was published 10 years ago and is still touted on blogs and websites to this day. “People love it,” he said in a recent interview. After it was published, he heard from many carriers who “were very appreciative of the respect for the risks that they take, [and] that it actually involves much more than ordinary citizens are aware of.”

Van Bueren, a technical editor who works from his home in San Francisco, recalls that in the late 1990s, he frequently sent manuscripts back and forth through the mail. One day he received back a nixie of a burned and shredded remnant of a letter. As it still had the return address, the Postal Service was able to return it to him.

“This was an indicator to me that the Post Office was going to do everything it could to either send it forward or...
Among the items that Van Beuren tried to send through the mail were a can of soup (opposite page) and a hammer.

One letter carrier reported seeing an unboxed office chair sent through the mail stream.