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Author(s): Walters, M.

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Bird Egg Collections of the BM(NH)

The main problem with the BM(NH) collection, as Chekhov said about his dammed cherry orchard, is its size, it's VERY BIG. In fact it's probably the largest egg collection in the world, and though the world may be shrinking all the time due to improved travelling facilities, even the gigantic loss (which most of you will by now know about) which we have recently sustained, has done little to dent the indomitability of the collection which has come to rule my life. Besides being the largest collection, it is almost certainly the oldest. It is not quite certain just how old the oldest bits of it are, for the Museum's original collection, which started to be a collection in the early part of the nineteenth century, was mounted on bits of board in the public gallery, and most of the eggs perished or became so bleached by exposure to light as to be rendered useless. Few of these early eggs had any data, and so those that have survived the vicissitudes of time are for the most part referred to as the "Old Collection". A few of them, however, are more identifiable, such as an eighteenth century egg of the Great Bustard taken in Wiltshire and from the George Montagu collection, possibly the oldest egg in the world. The oldest actually dateable egg is a faded Gannet's egg from Bass Rock, collected in 1807.

In the 1840s, collections began to be properly catalogued, and during the nineteenth century collections, most comparatively small, began to be purchased or received as gifts. Among the many names were such notable gentlemen as Governor Holböll (of the Redpoll) of Greenland; Sir George Grey, Governor of New Zealand; E. L. Layard and John Gould. In 1885 the collection was swelled to probably three or four times its size by the acquisition of two of the largest private collections of the day, the massive Indian collection of Allan Hume, and the large, mainly Palaearctic collection formed jointly by Frederic DuCane Godman and Osbert Salvin.

In 1893, Henry Seebohm presented his large collection to the Museum and also undertook to catalogue the entire Museum collection while at the same time incorporating his own collection with it. It comes as a bit of a shock to realise that this is the last occasion on which the Museum's collection was every completely catalogued. Seebohm prepared a manuscript catalogue in 10 volumes, which is still in the Museum, and this catalogue formed the basis for Eugene Oates' "Catalogue of the Collection of Birds' Eggs in the British Museum" which was published in 5 volumes from 1901-1912. This book is now not only out of date, but in a number of places known to be inaccurate.

During the present century many more collections, some very large, have been received. Some of these are unregistered, some partly registered, some registered but not incorporated, and some incorporated but not registered. I should perhaps explain that "registered" means that every clutch is assigned a multi-digit number, which is written into the accessions Register, written on every egg on the clutch, on the label in the box and on the index card in the clutch card index. As readers will appreciate, this work is both tedious and time-consuming in the extreme, and there are moments, nay hours, when one queries the usefulness of the system. During the years between Seebohm and 1960 the Bird room had a staff of about 2, and eggs were a very low priority. Several people worked intermittently on the egg collection, but did little more than shove eggs into already full boxes with tatty scraps of paper on which the data had been written. Much damage resulted. In about 1960 a serious attempt was at last begun by Colin Harrison and Shane Parker to properly recatalogue the collection, and for the last 10 years I have been carrying on this work.

Although the collection is world wide, it is strongest on Palaearctic and Indian, indeed the Indian collections are particularly fine. Many of the officers of the British Army in India were avid egg collectors, probably because it was essential to have a hobby to pass the weary months when not actually on active service and indeed most of the work on Indian Ornithology, not to say ornithology, was done by these intrepid gentlemen, most of whose collections have ended up with us. One of the largest and most notorious of these was that of E. C. Stuart Baker, whose obsession with eggs (and cuckoos in particular) is almost as well known as his aptitude for falsifying data. But his collection is too big and too important to be ignored, for he has the only known eggs of some avian species, as well as eggs alleged to be the only eggs of certain avian species, but clearly erroneously identified. Perhaps it was just retribution that his collection was one to have suffered most severely from the depredations of the recent egg thief.

The other collection to have suffered heavily is sadder - the collection of Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain. While its owner was alive this was probably the finest Palaearctic egg collection the world has ever seen. It is, alas, so no longer. Its tortuous history is one of the most tragic stories Ornithology can present. Jourdain's daughter was a religious maniac who disapproved of her father's collection, which she regarded as "laying up for yourself treasure upon earth, where moth doth corrupt, and where thieves break in and steal". Her attitude was prophetic, for moth hath indeed corrupted, and thieves broken in and stolen. The collection is believed to have been burgled twice while it was still in Jourdain's house. It was then bought by a mad millionaire Captain Vivian Hewitt who lived in a fortified house on Anglesey, surrounded by a high wall with a postern gate! Hewitt collected everything from butterflies to Chinese jades but rarely looked at anything once he had bought it. Here the Jourdain collection lay for some time, unregarded, in somewhat damp conditions, with no protection from parasites until Hewitt's death. His heir, frightened by the prospect of death duties, was within an inch of destroying the entire collections by dumping them over the cliff into the sea. Eventually, however, a legal loophole was apparently found, and the birds and eggs were passed to the British Trust for Ornithology. The latter decided to sell most of these to an American Museum, excepting only the Jourdain Collection which was presented to the British Museum, as it was of British and Palaearctic importance. Somewhere, between its leaving Jourdain's house and its arrival at the Museum, via the BTO it is believed to have been burgled again, as well as being repacked several times, so that it was in a right muddle by the time I began to look at it. There were large numbers of data slips for which no eggs could be found, and vice versa. As intimated, its troubles were still not over, and was burgled yet again, even in the holy of holies. Jourdain must be positively whizzing round in his grave, but no doubt his daughter is clicking her teeth in full approval! Happily, there are less depressing aspects too.

The massive bequest of Lord Rothschild frequently produces gems which make the curator's day seem more bright. This ponderous morass of frequently unsorted material, like Jonathan Jo with a mouth like an O, often turns out to be a wheelbarrow filled with surprises. In the basement, soon after our arrival in Tring whence we were moved from London in the early 70s, I found an old cabinet with a forgotten drawer which had some small *Acrocephalus*-like eggs rolling about on the bare wood. An accompanying nest, and several scraps of paper revealed that they were the eggs of the extinct Millerbird of Laysan Island, and possibly the only ones known. On another occasion, in sorting through a box of "junk" I saw a couple of bulbul's eggs which had escaped the damage which had befallen most of the other inmates of this container. Careful examination of the name scrawled on them in the usual almost illegible nineteenth century writing, together

with the date and locality, revealed that they were the only eggs ever collected of *Hypsipetes affinis* a species only found on some of the Moluccas. I expect most collections have their curios, our prize examples in this category include an ostrich egg which once belonged to Lawrence of Arabia; and a nineteenth century Mute Swan's egg which has had spots painted on it so that it could be sold (as it indeed was) as the egg of a Great Auk! We have actually six eggs of the latter, and a tatty looking lot they are too. The series of plaster casts and models which we also have, look much nicer. Someday, if the fates are kind to me, I shall rewrite and update Oate's catalogue!

Michael Walters,
Tring.

HAVE YOU ANY GENUINE WOODEN DUCK DECOYS?

Wildfowlers have always had to use subterfuge in pursuing a living, a way of life now virtually disappeared. Using decoys carved in wood is one classic way to attract the bird within range. The use of decoys has been traced to prehistoric times and is practised today by primitive tribes. Nowadays, of course, the sportsman uses lightweight, sometimes inflatable, plastic or rubber ducks, being unwilling to carry the relatively heavy and bulky wooden types across miles of saltmarsh. These latter have now virtually disappeared and are seldom seen in this country (though there is a thriving hobby in North America of collecting genuine wooden bird decoys of various species).

I recently staged a display by a local sculptor and artist, Stephen Radnedge of Fennisowles, Darwen, of modern examples supported by information on other methods, pipe decoys (now used for ringing and migration studies by ornithologists), the use of calls, etc. We did not have any examples of genuine decoy ducks, the only one so listed in the inventory turned out to be a Sikkim Gold Ore Smelter's Steam Generator, an unlikely identification which I made following a visit to the Horniman Museum where they have one just like it. Stephen Radnedge is now thinking of writing an illustrated booklet on the subject of wooden duck decoys and therefore any member aware of the existence of such artefacts, please contact the Editor.

E. G. Hancock.