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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## NIGHT RAIDS AT THE HORNIMAN

Recently the Natural History Department at the Horniman Museum gained a new and enthusiastic type of visitor. Unfortunately these keen would-be naturalists were inclined to visit outside the normal opening hours, possibly carrying large sacks labelled SWAG. We had no less than four attempted or successful thefts within a four week period.

The first incident was a theft of birds' eggs from inside the museum. We have a complex alarm system and night security staff, yet two persons unknown managed to enter, because the relevant alarm chose that moment to malfunction. The thieves tried to kick in the front of the egg showcase (we had footprints to prove it) but the 1906 vintage plate glass resisted. Eventually they managed a small hole in the side of the case, and reached in, risking sliced arteries from the edges of the glass.

Most of the eggs had been glued down in 1954, so the thieves broke as many as were removed whole. All in all around 40 eggs were broken or taken whole, ranging from quite common species to the inevitable ospreys. It is probable that the osprey eggs were the main reason for the visit, but due to the glue, both were broken, though the thieves took the fragments.

Okay, I'm sure everyone is smugly saying that it served us right for displaying birds' eggs. I agree, but I inherited the display and had already set wheels in motion to remove it. The wheels simply didn't move fast enough; because there had always been an egg display in that case, and there had never been any problems before.

The aftermath of the theft led to the problem of valuation. I know that no decent, clean-living curator/keeper should sully his/her lips by asking about black market values of eggs. BUT how do you explain this to the Catford cops, who are more used to sorting out actual bodily harm? Eggs have no real value in law, as they cannot be sold legally without a Home Office licence. Yet, in the right market certain eggs can be sold illegally at inflated prices. So it was difficult to convince the police and security staff that birds' eggs are potentially worth stealing, and do require to be kept in secure conditions. It would be helpful if some official body (perhaps BCG?) could comment on the relative values and 'stealability' of Natural History specimens. \*

The second incident occurred about a week later over the next weekend. The museum had a small external display case containing three mounted freshwater fishes in a surprise encounter with a lobster. At some stage on Sunday night, someone unscrewed the back of the case, and neatly removed the fishes. (The lobster disintegrated and was left behind). This was clearly theft, not vandalism, but the police were still politely unconvinced that anyone might wish to buy a stuffed fish for real money. The local press became very excited, particularly when I mentioned the possibility that the skins might have been prepared using arsenical soap, but no trace of the fishes was found.

Over a week passed by without excitement. Then some enthusiast tried to batter his way into the Natural History hall (via the fire doors) in the wee small hours. The doors resisted ( - well, it is a listed building - ) and the prospective visitor ran away, bleeding slightly from the encounter with the doors. We thought the experience would discourage him, but no so.

The next Friday night he returned bearing a metal anti-parking bollard to use as a battering ram. The doors withstood this further onslaught, and he cut himself more severely than before. This time he was almost caught

by security staff as he fled, bleeding dramatically.

Things have been quite peaceful of late (if you don't count the lead thieves on the roof ..... but that's another story). Perhaps our unconventional nature lover is nursing his lacerations and biding his time. Meanwhile, we have removed the rest of the eggs to a safe place, and decided to use the external showcase for posters.

All the incidents may be quite unconnected; it could be that the publicity for the first theft triggered off the later attempts. But if an anaemic and somewhat scarred individual offers you a cheap carp or some cracked eggs - be warned, it could be our visitor. The local police have had no success in tracing the thief or thieves, and so I doubt we shall see the specimens again. As a consolation prize a local primary school gave us a very large, unidentified and UNBLOWN egg of uncertain age. If the thief calls again, I think we might have a suitable present for him.....

Penny Wheatcroft,  
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p.s. Needless to say that none of the stolen specimens bore distinguishing marks etc., so we would have difficulty proving ownership.

- \* Editor's note: perhaps an important element concerning the valuation of items like birds' eggs is the question of insurance. Can a curator make an insurance claim following the loss or breakage of birds' eggs? If he does make a claim is he or she breaking the law?!

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#### FREEZE-DRYING    ARCHAEOLOGISTS

This meeting will be held on Thursday, 7 May 1981 at the Institute of Archaeology, London, and will cover various aspects of the theory and practice of freeze-drying. The provisional programme consists of contributions from suppliers of freeze-driers on the theory of the process and the technology involved, and also lectures by various conservators who regularly use or have adopted freeze-drying techniques and machines to suit their own particular problems.

Among the speakers who have been approached are Jacqui Watson, Jim Spriggs, Howard Murray, Edwards High Vacuum and, if the finances can be arranged, a speaker from Copenhagen.

A finalised programme should be available before Christmas and those interested in attending should contact Mark Norman, City Museum, Queen's Road, Bristol, BS8 1RL.

#### Half-price for members

The issue of the Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History (Vol. 9 part 4) mentioned in the last Newsletter can be obtained at half price (i.e. £10.00) by members of BCG. This concession, available also to Geological Curators' Group members, is allowed to us as joint sponsors of the Conference on the History of Museums and Collections in Natural History. It is the papers read at that conference which fill the 305 pages of this part.