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Bird Egg Displays - Comments

The point in the editorial of vol.3 part 4 about the display of birds' eggs is well taken. I feel, however, that there can be no case for 'hiding away' eggs. If the museum's job is, at least partly, education, then the fact is that birds lay eggs. No one (I hope) would argue that our displays should ignore this integral part of bird biology, why, therefore, should we ignore the museum's most powerful educational tool; 'the real thing'? Surely it is part of our job to educate, also, about the need for conservation, and the laws which are involved. If seeing eggs in museums inspires a person to go out and collect, then museums are failing. The function of museum displays, in any discipline, should not merely be the communication of information but, also, the communication of enthusiasm and excitement. The public should feel that the person/people responsible for a display actually felt that the display and its contents were worthwhile.

It is also surely another case of 'if people want to do it they will'. There will always be egg collectors, no matter what the penalty. It is rather like badger baiting; those that do it know what they are doing, where the badgers are, the chances of prosecution (slim) etc. This does not mean that seeing the horribly mutilated body of a badger would make people suddenly want to go out and join the carnage. If the threats to birds from egg-collecting are made known we are more likely to win public support than stimulate a whole new generation of collectors.

Another, possibly egotistic, argument could be used: namely that if eggs are on display in a museum then they are always available for inspection by everyone, including the inquisitive child, for instance. If he/she knows that the eggs can always be seen, then there is less temptation to start ones own collection.

Just out of interest, I am organising a small temporary exhibition this summer entitled 'Living with Wildlife'. The purpose of this is to show the public what protection is afforded to wildlife, both, through legislation, and through the work of voluntary conservation bodies locally. This will obviously include consideration of why such protection is necessary. I plan to include a display of birds' eggs to illustrate this. Apart from the current local implications of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (i.e. West Sedgemoor, Tadham and Tealham Moors) the idea was inspired by a couple of instances of small children bringing eggs they had found to the Museum. We do not have a display of eggs.

In conclusion, I think I have outlined some positive arguments against the 'censorship' of egg displays. There is one negative argument: if we take the view that egg displays might encourage egg collecting, could it not, also, be said that displays of mounted birds and mammals might encourage people to go out and shoot or trap them? Photographs of schedule 1 birds might inspire people to go out and photograph them at the nest. Maybe, if we are to take this attitude, natural history displays should be terminated, altogether? I think not.

Who are we to decide that the public cannot be trusted with knowledge of natural history? It is up to us to help everyone enjoy their natural surroundings. This enjoyment will, in turn, cultivate a respect and concern which will be far more effective protection for wildlife than any amount of prohibitive legislation (or, indeed, any amount of concealing of egg collections!). Again, I would say that the museum's most powerful display tool is 'the real thing'.

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