

REVIEW

Oology and Ralph's talking eggs: Bird conservation comes out of its shell

L. Carrol Henderson

Mildred Wyatt-Wold series in ornithology. Published by University of Texas Press, Austin. 2007. ISBN 978-0-292-71451-9 177pp. Hard Cover \$US29.95

Henderson gives us an extremely detailed account of an egg collection that went untouched and unnoticed since 1969 when its collector, Ralph Handsaker, an Iowa farmer died. During 2003, after the death of his mother, Henderson visited the Handsaker farm situated only 10 miles from his own childhood farm to see the collection. Thankfully, Henderson immediately saw the research importance of such a collection and Handsaker's grandchildren graciously gave him permission to catalog the eggs. While cataloging the eggs Henderson develops a fascination not only with the eggs but also with the history of oology.

The earliest birders collected vast numbers of bird's eggs. Today we might wonder why these often well-educated men went to such labours to obtain the eggs of a certain species egg, or eggs of a certain color, or eggs from a particular location. We should not confuse the dedicated oologists with 'eggers' who have given this discipline a notorious reputation. Eggs collected by oologists earlier this century and throughout the 19th century were meticulously preserved and labeled. Modern ornithologists or birders are easily recognisable with copious amounts of technology hanging around their necks, allowing easy identification and documentation of birding records. Today nobody would think of collecting an egg from the wild to help with identification. In fact, it would rightly be regarded with horror by most ornithologists. However, when such technology was unavailable naturalists, who wished to learn more about birds, commonly collected both eggs and the birds themselves.

This is not just a book of pretty egg pictures, although there are a large number of egg images, but a history of birding in North America through the eyes of early oologists. Henderson starts by introducing why eggs were collected and by whom. However, the vast majority of the book is devoted to 60 species from the Handsaker collection. Ordered

by collection date, Henderson uses this chronology as a timeline with brief accounts for each species, past and present threats, and interspersing significant conservation events of the period. A photograph of the eggs from Ralph's collection accompanies each species account and nearly all species are illustrated by artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. While this section may not be of general interest to readers outside North America it is full of fascinating facts such as the number of different species adorning woman's clothing in Manhattan 1886, and how many hummingbirds it takes to make a party dress? The answers should shock you!

A short section deals with the difficult subject of whether oology was responsible for the extinction of any species. The examples in the book of the thousands of birds, not their eggs, that were killed for fun, feathers, or food is startling and makes it all the more surprising that more species did not go extinct! While we realize now that such a practice can be detrimental to a species, Henderson shows us that as early as the 1880s, America was passing laws to help protect its bird species. Unfortunately, the timeline finishes in 1934 and therefore there is no mention of one of the nation's most significant contributions to conservation, the legislation of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The audience for this book is probably not the scientific reader but an enthusiastic birder, and while its emphasis is on North American species, we can imagine the large number of *Notornis* readers who likely dabbled in this activity as youngsters and perhaps spawned their own birding passion. For us, the book is especially meaningful. Firstly, we have both recently spent much time conducting research in the eggshell collection of the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK. Secondly, we have also both been fortunate to have spent the last 3 years working in the Florida Everglades. Paddling through this wetland and flushing stunning waterbirds such as Great and Snowy Egrets, Brown Pelicans and Roseate Spoonbills and then reading their species accounts by Henderson makes you thankful for the early conservation pioneers highlighted throughout the book.

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