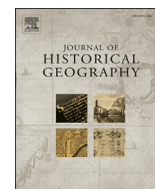




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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an 'almost-animal' geography of egg collecting, also known as 'oology', through a sustained engagement with the contents of the *Oologists' Record* (OR), a specialist journal published between 1921 and 1969. It seeks to investigate egg collecting as a 'culture of nature', organised and represented in the print spaces of the OR through which egg collectors, often widely separated geographically, could convene to define, celebrate and defend their chosen pastime. This paper contributes to existing geographical work on 'cultures of enthusiasm' by discussing how, in the OR, birds' eggs were the focus of scientific enquiries and more visceral forms of enthusiasm, coming together in a leisure practice whose validity was increasingly contested by oppositional lobby groups. By considering how the ambiguous status of birds' eggs - on the boundary of the animal and not-animal - was important in ethical contestations about egg collecting, this paper also raises wider ontological questions about the 'almost-animal' that should extend the reach of animal geographies. Finally, the case of the OR presents the unusual spectacle of a special interest community that was declining and dying in print: as its individual members reached the end of their lives; and collectively, as oology changed in status from being a respectable pastime to a wildlife crime.

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What the leisure of my life would have been like without days afield after eggs ... I do not like to imagine.¹

This paper offers an 'almost-animal' geography of egg collecting, also known as 'oology', through a sustained engagement with the contents of the *Oologists' Record* (OR), a journal published in London between 1921 and 1969.² In particular it seeks to recover some of the cultural practices and attitudes involved in the geographical translocation of birds' eggs from the 'nature' of the nest and habitat into the 'culture' of an egg collection.³ The OR provided a space within which egg collectors, often living far apart from each other, could share their passion and forge their self-identity as a special interest group. The pages of the OR reveal egg collecting as a focus both for scientific enquiry and more visceral forms of enthusiasm, coming together in a practice whose ethical validity

was increasingly contested by other interest groups. This article thus contributes to geographical literature on both 'cultures of enthusiasm' and 'cultures of nature', coming together in the space provided by the OR as a specialist journal.⁴ In addition, by considering how the ambiguous status of birds' eggs - on the boundary of the animal and not-animal - was important in ethical debates about egg collecting, this paper raises wider ontological questions about the 'almost-animal' that should extend the reach of animal geographies.

Oology was one of the most popular forms of natural history collecting in nineteenth-century Europe and beyond, seen as a healthy and respectable pursuit for children and adults (mostly male in both cases).⁵ In contrast to short-lived collecting crazes such as seaweeds and ferns, oology endured throughout the Victorian period and beyond.⁶ During the early twentieth century,

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¹ '[A] famous ornithologist', *Oologists' Record* [henceforth OR] 35 (1961) 30.

² Note that not all material within it was credited to a specific author.

³ For a discussion of the entangled status of museum natural history specimens as 'museum nature' or 'material culture' (or both), see S.J.M.M. Alberti, Constructing nature behind glass, *Museum and Society* 6 (2008) 73–97.

⁴ An appropriate description of this paper might be a 'historical geography of participation', to complement recent discussions of 'participatory historical geography' in *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014).

⁵ Its popularity was reflected in books such as R. Kearton, *Birds' Nests, Eggs and Egg-Collecting*, London, 1890.

⁶ D. Allen, Tastes and crazes, in: N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary (Eds), *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge, 1996, 394–407.

however, it became the subject of fierce debates in ornithological circles about its ethical validity as a practice.⁷ Gradually, the tide turned against the oologists, and egg collecting in the UK has been largely illegal since the Protection of Birds Act 1954, with restrictions tightened further in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and subsequent amendments.

Previous studies in the field of animal geographies have mainly been concerned with direct interactions between humans, animals and their ‘spaces and places of encounter’, through activities such as angling, herding and hunting.⁸ As well as investigating the encounters that egg collectors had with birds and the ‘animal landscapes’ where they built their nests, this paper concentrates on the collecting of objects – birds’ eggs – that are of animal origin, and potentially becoming-animal, but arguably not quite attaining the status of fully living creature.⁹ Despite, or perhaps because of the liminal status of eggs as (at least potentially) living things, debates about oology were often more vexed than those over other forms of collecting, such as of bird skins, which unarguably entailed the death of living things. In what ways was the ambiguous ‘almost-animal’ status of birds’ eggs, between animal and non-animal, important in these contestations over the practice and ethics of oology?

Cultural aspects of collecting have been considered from a wide variety of different angles and disciplines, including art history, psychology, anthropology and sociology, as well as geography.¹⁰ Much of this work is related to human-made artefacts, but attention has also been paid, as part of scholarly interest in the ‘cultures of natural history’, to the collecting of natural history specimens by individuals and museums.¹¹ The roles of specific collectors in shaping our perceptions of different parts of the world (in terms of both physical and cultural geography) have also been noted.¹² Oology has received scant attention in this literature, and only brief and piecemeal treatment in historical surveys of British ornithology and natural history.¹³ A specialist publisher, Peregrine Books, has published two sets of profiles of notable collectors which provide useful biographical information, a book on egg dealers, and privately printed reproductions of the collecting diaries of some past collectors.¹⁴ In human geography, a recent article by Hayden Lorimer gives a short summary of early to mid twentieth-century egg collecting in his study of naturalist and oologist Desmond

Nethersole-Thompson.¹⁵ The historical popularity and subsequent trajectory of oology from respectable pastime to wildlife crime has not, however, received more dedicated critical attention. The *OR* proves to be a crucial source for recovering this history, with the dates of its publication covering the period in the 1920s and 1930s when debates over the validity of egg collecting were at their most fraught, the outlawing of the practice in 1954, and its decline thereafter.

This paper contributes to literature on ‘cultures of nature’ by considering how one such culture, of oology, was organised and represented through a specialist publication, the *OR*.¹⁶ The *OR* provided a space where oologists, often widely separated geographically, could come together to delineate, celebrate and defend their chosen pastime. Fine defines an ‘idioculture’ as ‘a system of knowledge, beliefs, behavio[u]rs, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction’.¹⁷ This paper seeks to understand how the *OR* provided a means and a mechanism for an ‘idioculture’ of oology to exist (and eventually to die) as egg collectors interacted through the medium of print. How did the periodical work to shape a culture of nature around oology?

This paper also contributes to geographical literature on ‘cultures of enthusiasm’ by considering birds’ eggs as objects of both enthusiasm and scientific research.¹⁸ Oologists claimed that they were engaged in scientific enquiry which they sought to establish as a sub-field of ornithology, with the *OR* as one of the key spaces for disseminating their research. At the same time, however, the pages of the *OR* reveal that eggs also inspired a much more visceral form of enthusiasm, demonstrated through collectors’ tales of derring-do out in ‘the field’, and occasionally by their expressions of sheer delight in the beauty of birds’ eggs. This paper traces these various relationships between enthusiasm and science in oology, with different motivations for egg collecting neither completely opposed nor fully aligned, but interacting in various ways and always requiring a negotiation of their relationship. Oology presented the unusual case of a self-styled ‘science’ seeking to justify its existence as it came increasingly under attack from other interest groups, the public at large and, eventually, the law. In the light of these contestations, how were the relationships between enthusiasm and science negotiated in oology?

In this paper the chief concern is how specialist interest in oology was recounted within the pages of the *OR*, and the literary styles and genres deployed, rather than a principal focus on matters of the journal’s ‘production, distribution and consumption’.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the ‘spaces of the text’ such as the journal format, the availability and location of authors, and the intended audience, carry certain conventions and constraints which affect ‘the spaces

⁷ For example, E. Parker, *Ethics of Egg-Collecting*, London, 1935.

⁸ For example, S. Eden and C. Bear, Reading the river through ‘watercraft’: environmental engagement through knowledge and practice in freshwater angling, *Cultural Geographies* 18 (2011) 297–314; H. Lorimer, Herding memories of humans and animals, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006) 497–518; H. Lorimer, Guns, games and the grandee: the cultural politics of deerstalking in the Scottish Highlands, *Cultural Geographies* 7 (2000) 403–430. Quote from O. Jones, (Un)ethical geographies of human–non-human relations: encounters, collectives and spaces, in: C. Philo and C. Wilbert (Eds), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human–Animal Relations*, London, 2000, 268.

⁹ D. Matless, P. Merchant and C. Watkins, Animal landscapes: otters and wildfowl in England, 1945–1970, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005) 193.

¹⁰ For example, J. Elsner and R. Cardinal (Eds), *The Cultures of Collecting*, London, 1994 and S.M. Pearce (Ed), *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, London, 1994.

¹¹ Jardine, Secord and Spary (Eds), *Cultures of Natural History*.

¹² For example, S. Douglas and F. Driver, Imagining the tropical colony: Henry Smeathman and the termites of Sierra Leone, in: F. Driver and L. Martins (Eds.), *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, Chicago and London, 2005, 91–112 and J. Hill, Travelling objects: the Wellcome collection in Los Angeles, London and beyond, *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006) 340–366.

¹³ D.E. Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History*, Princeton, 1994 [1976], 214; P. Bircham, *A History of Ornithology*, London, 2007; S. Moss, *A Bird in the Bush: A Social History of Birdwatching*, London, 2004.

¹⁴ A.C. Cole and W.M. Trobe, *The Egg Collectors of Great Britain and Ireland*, Leeds, 2000; A.C. Cole and W.M. Trobe, *The Egg Collectors of Great Britain and Ireland: An Update*, Leeds, 2011; A.C. Cole, *The Egg Dealers of Great Britain*, Leeds, 2006.

¹⁵ H. Lorimer, Homeland, *Cultural Geographies* 21 (2014) 583–604.

¹⁶ Previous articles in the *Journal of Historical Geography* provide precedents for using specialist publications to scrutinise particular interest communities. For example, C. Philo, ‘Fit localities for an asylum’: the historical geography of the nineteenth-century ‘mad-business’ in England as viewed through the pages of the *Asylum Journal*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 13 (1987) 398–415; S.G. Cant, British speleologies: geographies of science, personality and practice, 1935–1953, *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006) 775–795; C. Bressey, Reporting oppression: mapping racial prejudice in *Anti-Caste and Fraternity*, 1888–1895, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 401–411.

¹⁷ G.A. Fine, Small groups and culture creation: the idioculture of Little League Baseball teams, *American Sociological Review* 44 (1979) 734.

¹⁸ For examples of recent work on enthusiasm, see H. Geoghegan, Emotional geographies of enthusiasm: belonging to the Telecommunications Heritage Group, *Area* 45 (2013) 40–46; R. Craggs, H. Geoghegan and H. Neate, Architectural enthusiasm: visiting buildings with The Twentieth Century Society, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013) 879–896.

¹⁹ M. Ogborn and C.W.J. Withers, Introduction: book geography, book history, in: M. Ogborn and C.W.J. Withers (Eds), *Geographies of the Book*, Farnham, 2010, 10.

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