



By: Catriona M. Munro, TA Editor in Chief

Operation Easter Egg



A surprising number of people are not aware that it is illegal in the UK to collect, steal, pinch, or purloin birds' eggs.

On the tiny island of Rum in the inner Scottish Hebrides in 2011, a nature reserve warden reported to the very sparse police contingent on the island that a man was illegally endangering—that is, stealing—eggs.

The New Yorker magazine commemorated Easter this year by publishing an account of Matthew Gonshaw, Britain's most notorious egg collector. The warden reported that he was "dancing about in a seagull colony". "Thank God you've come", sobbed the egg thief to the warden. "I just can't stop".

Apparently, a Scottish newspaper got wind that one of the egg fanciers in his zest had fallen out of a tree. The fall actually killed him, but this failed to deter the Daily Mirror from printing the headline "Nest in Peace".

One report of egg thefts per day

The policeman who stopped the addictive collector said that around the time (2013–2015), there was nearly one report of egg thefts per day in Scotland, but also in England.

Apparently, they were largely reported by disgruntled wives and girlfriends who disliked being left alone by their twitcher partners. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) even resorted to planting listening devices in trees.

When Gonshaw was tried, he pleaded guilty to egg collecting and possession. On his day of sentencing, he dressed in an army green mesh mask.

He was sentenced to 6 months' imprisonment by the judge and was told he was not allowed to put the stolen eggs in a museum like he wanted. He had a separate trial later in Scotland, where he was doled out another 6 months. Both trial judges slapped an ASBO on him to boot.

I have a story worth sharing from a friend's father, who is and was a learned ornithologist.

Back in the 1980s, he was invited to accompany a police squad up in the Scottish Highlands on a raid on a premises in the woodlands, suspected of being engaged in illegal bird collection. Before they embarked on the raid, he stopped off at a local police station to be briefed. He queried why there were so many cannabis plants on the window sill.

"Oh, that's so the boys can recognise them if they come across them".

"Really? So, what about the 8-foot cannabis plant by the staircase?"

"Oh, I didn't notice that..."