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3-2008

Review of *Oology and Ralph's Talking Eggs* by Carrol L. Henderson

Kristin R. Johnson

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EGGS WITH STORIES TO TELL

Oology and Ralph's Talking Eggs. Carrol L. Henderson. 2007. University of Texas Press. Austin, TX. 177 pages. \$29.95 (hardback).

Ralph Handsaker was an Iowan farmer whose “ravenous curiosity” (page 4) about the natural world inspired him to become an oologist, or egg collector. This book tells the story of Handsaker’s eggs, contained in two large cabinets that remained hidden in the living room of his boarded-up house after his death in 1969, until they were rediscovered in 2003 and shown to the author, wildlife conservationist, and photographer, Carrol Henderson. Ralph’s eggs can “talk” by virtue of Henderson’s chronicle—using the eggs as guides—of not only Ralph’s own passion for natural history and egg collecting, but also the history of conservation and the network of fellow oologists from whom Ralph obtained many eggs from all over the world.

After a chapter that provides the background for the rediscovery of the Handsaker eggs, chapters briefly describe the early history of oology (including accounts from the field and descriptions of equipment, trading networks, books, bird trading cards, and journals), note extinct birds whose demise oologists may or may not have been partly responsible for, and explain how eggs are classified by size, shape, color, and marking. The heart of the book, however, is Chapter 6, in which the author uses Handsaker eggs from 60 different species, accompanied by beautiful photographs, to tell pithy stories about the birds themselves, relate anecdotes about collecting, and explain the birds’ current conservation status. These stories are interspersed with highlights in the history of conservation, correlated to the year in which Ralph collected the eggs of the bird being described.

Henderson points out that, because the eggs can no longer be legally sold or traded, “the real value of the Handsaker collection is in the scientific information contained with the eggs” (pages 6-7). Henderson’s account as a whole also demonstrates an additional merit in the collection’s nostalgic value. “Each time I sat down with the collection,” he writes, “the egg cabinets became time machines that transported me back to the era in which the eggs were collected” (page 8). This is not a book that tries to explain the changing cultural context of oology or provide the intellectual or cultural context for the rise of conservation, and certainly it never satisfactorily addresses the tension between egg collecting and conservation. But with its photographs, the accounts of egg collectors in the past, and conversational tone, this book helps transports its readers, too, to a bygone era.—*Kristin R. Johnson, Science, Technology and Society Program, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA 98416.*