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The Wallace Egg Collection - Hidden Problems and Discoveries.

The zoological collections at Merseyside County Museums are presently being prepared for IRGMA analysis. Most of the collections were compiled in the North-West at the beginning of the century, and many of them have complete data and contain eggs of many species on the British list. Among the collections were two mahogany cabinets containing 481 clutches and with apparently no data nor information regarding the source of the collection. Closer observation of the collection revealed that a few of the eggs had some data pencilled upon them. A search through an old card index system which was compiled in the 1920's found a series of cards which corresponded to the clutches in the mahogany cabinets. The cards were labelled as the 'Dickinson Egg - collection' but contained no further information apart from name of specimen and clutch size. The Stock Books were searched and eventually reference was found to the Dickinson Egg-collection, but only 126 clutches were listed and those that were bore no resemblance to the card index system or clutches in the two cabinets. So back to the boxes of dusty files and manuscript material which had been virtually untouched since the war. After a great deal of time a small manuscript book was found which corresponded to the card index system and clutches in the cabinets. The title page of the Book was "The Wallace Egg collection". Further page by page searching through stock books and minutes of the Museum sub-committee meetings eventually revealed that the collection was purchased from Ritson Wallace of Thames Ditton on 3.7.1924 for £170 after being on loan to the Museum since 17.11.1916. The manuscript book gave details of the name of the species, clutch size, cost, name of dealer, and date obtained for every clutch. The book details 481 clutches though 56 of these were found to be missing from the cabinets. The collection was compiled by Wallace between 2.3.1894 and 21.5.1914 for a total cost of £355.13s.6d.

A list has been compiled of the dealers from whom Wallace obtained clutches and is presented below together with the number of extant clutches in the collection

Jeffreys	151	Bennet	5
Gorton	71	Cattle	3
Plumb	39	Rosman	3
Whitehouse	36	Berthing	3
Stevens (auctions)	35	Williams	2
Booth	28	Skinner	2
Marsden	23	Ernshaw	1
Wallis	14	Ellison	1
Saunders	7	Dewery	1

Clutches were also obtained from Beaumont, Taylor, Westell, and Norman but these are missing from the collection.

Copies of some of the Stevens Sale catalogues were traced by using Chalmers - Hunt (Natural History Auctions, 1700 - 1972, Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1976). Sale catalogues for 7 of the 35 clutches purchased through Stevens have not yet been traced. Of the remaining 28 clutches, catalogues revealed further data on 18 clutches, whilst catalogues for the remaining 10 clutches revealed no further information.

Copies of the Stevens Sale catalogues were obtained from D. B. Janson, 44 Great Russel Street, London WC1B 3PA. Those which are listed below are held at Merseyside County Museums.

18 and 19 May 1904
14 July 1904
5 December 1905
21 and 22 January 1907
9 April 1907
28 and 29 May 1907
28 October 1907
18 March 1908
21 September 1909
16 June 1914

In order to trace information on 7 further clutches the following Stevens Sale catalogues are required.

16 June 1904
17 April 1912
21 November 1912
13 March 1913.

Caution has to be taken when dealing with old egg collections regarding the identification of specimens. One of the eggs in the Wallace collection was labelled as 'Eskimo Curlew'. It was bought through a Stevens Sale for £3.3s.0d. The Sale catalogue stated that the egg had previously been owned by W. A. Wilkinson, and had been collected at St. Michaels Bay, Alaska on 2.6.1885. The egg was uncharacteristic for an Eskimo Curlew, and later was identified at the British Museum (Natural History), sub-department of Ornithology, Tring, as an egg of Hudsonian Godwit.

Some of the eggs in the Wallace collection are scientifically quite valuable. There are two eggs of Ivory gull, one collected in Greenland, and the other on the Jackson-Harmsworth expedition to Franz-Josef Land.

Should any museum have information on any of the dealers mentioned which may help to trace data for some of the clutches in the Wallace collection, and in addition any copies of the 4 outstanding Sale catalogues, then Merseyside County Museums would be glad to hear from them.

The completion of IRGMA cards for the zoological collections at Merseyside County Museums is being financed by the Manpower Services Commission's Job Creation Programme.

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