



FRAGILE - BIRDS, EGGS AND HABITATS BY COLIN PRIOR

This month Wild Planet editor, Clare Disano, takes you on a guided tour through the beautiful new picture book by the acclaimed landscape photographer Colin Prior.

Fragile - Birds, Eggs and Habitats by Colin Prior

While landscape photography doesn't usually get much attention from Wild Planet, this book crosses the genre, mixing landscapes with habitat and, ultimately, wildlife in the form of birds.

From the very first image on the cover, all photos of bird eggs were taken ethically by Prior from a collection at National Museums Scotland (NMS), in Edinburgh, which holds one of the largest collections of bird eggs, many of which were collected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were donated by private collectors.

"The pleasure of walking through Scotland's beautiful landscape is greatly enhanced by the wild plants and animals found there."

The curator, Bob McGowan, writes about the significance of museum egg collections and explains that illegal egg and nest collecting was discouraged from use in exhibitions



JACKDAW HABITAT & EGG

and that they are now used for identification and, more recently, for research.

He goes on to explain the stigma of egg collecting and why it was increasingly seen to conflict with bird conservation. He continues to explain that two pieces of legislation that were introduced (in the United Kingdom) to protect both birds and their eggs saw heavy penalties given to offenders, leading to the eventual termination of illegal egg collecting

in the country. He covers this in great detail, along with several other factors that lead to breeding failure and also supplies a list of further reading on the topic.

The author himself asks "Perhaps the project serves as an atonement for the sins of the past?" and goes on to say that the habitats of birds have changed over time "leaving in their wake a tangible sterility and a greatly impoverished outdoor experience", ▶▶







CORN BUNTING HABITAT & EGG



▶▶ showing his own feelings of sadness for their decline.

An extensive essay by the environmentalist, Professor Des Thompson, reflects on the state of nature and the threat to habitats and biodiversity, giving insight into the problems facing many bird species.

Prior, who has almost four decades of experience as a landscape photographer, has detailed nicely his affinity with birds from

when he grew up in Scotland, giving insight into how his passion for the avian species' grew from childhood and how he honed his skills of wildlife and fieldcraft. He also tells us how, despite the activity of collecting eggs being popular with boys during the seventies, he found it "a rather inglorious end for such objects of beauty".

He goes on to explain how the idea for *Fragile* came about, the technical challenges

that he needed to overcome to photograph the eggs as he intended and the logistics of using an array of equipment to achieve the focus-stacking technique. Once his plan eventually took-off, he spent a lot of time choosing which eggs to photograph, and the way that he explains his process for taking the pictures shows just what an immense project this was to undertake.

The inner sleeve tells us that the author "set up a studio at the museum and spent more than five weeks photographing more than three-hundred eggs using the latest digital technology. Each photograph is a composite of between forty and

"The eggshell, so beguilingly beautiful in shape and colour, remains an enigma of nature. We owe so much to its resilience and allure."

eighty separate exposures that were then blended into a single image using specialist software. The final image is an almost three-dimensional rendition of the egg, pin-sharp from the front to the back".

To say they are pin-sharp is an understatement - they are incredible images that show the intricate details, patterns and hues of each egg and the combination of high quality reproduction, paper and printing gives the images a glossy-looking finish that really makes them pop out of the page. But it doesn't end there, the author has coupled the egg images with their colour-coordinated ▶▶



▶▶ habitat, showcasing them alongside a stunning array of landscape photos that are captured at a time of year when the dominant colours of the landscape most closely resemble those of the egg, marrying them together beautifully.

The chapters are arranged by habitat, such as 'Mountain and Moorland' and 'Seashore and Estuary' and detail the species found in each range. Both vernacular and scientific names are given in the captions along with the date the egg was collected, the size of the clutch and average dimensions.

At the back of the book is interesting data, including a chart of egg size and diversity of shell colour, along with information on the approach the author has adopted for the book's photographs.

It has taken the author around ten years of continual research and planning to bring this book to life. As well as telling us how he developed the concept for the book, he has cleverly used his photography to deliver a strong environmental message, while also explaining his creative processes and how he personally connects to the wild spaces that are featured in the book

Whatever your genre, many photographers will enjoy a stunning collection of images from this hardback book. For bird lovers and biologists, there is a wealth of information to be gained. There is plenty of avian knowledge to soak up in this book, which I, for one, find extremely absorbing.



LAPWING HABITAT & EGG

It is reassuring to know that these egg collections are held in museums, where they will continue to be used for research to help rectify the issues that face birds across the world and bring about positive change. Some research derived from seabird egg shells have lent themselves to their foraging habits and geographical distribution, while genetic studies have been derived from inner shell membranes

and there are plenty of other examples given in the book where eggs have played a pivotal roll in avian research, most notably though, the critical effects of global warming.

There are many facets to be gained from this title, aside from the fact that it will look good on any coffee table, but ultimately there is a clear message here that the author has set out to bring to the ▶▶



▶▶ fore; birds are in decline all over the world and rising awareness of this fact is key.

This is not only a celebration of the beauty and fragility of eggs, but also a reflection of the current environment. This beautifully printed hardback photo book not only makes for a wonderful gift for any bird enthusiast or photographer, but also has a wonderful story to tell. Fragile serves as a powerful reminder to protect the birds' natural habitats and, thereby, the birds themselves. ●

All photographs © Colin Prior



PUFFIN HABITAT

All images are taken from *Fragile: Birds, Eggs and Habitats* by Colin Prior (£40, Merrell Publishers) www.merrellpublishers.com