

# Bird Crime



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

*In recent decades we have unfortunately seen many cases of bird crime. Large egg collections have been confiscated, also many dead and stuffed birds, and systematic plundering of the eggs and young of birds of prey has been revealed. Most of this has been carried out by criminals from abroad. The crime has been of very varied form, and has been performed both by individuals and by well-organized groups. The crime has not only been directed at threatened and vulnerable species, but also at species of quite common occurrence. The following is a description of these different methods, of which species are involved, and also something of the background for the crime.*

Globally, environmental crime is an enormous problem. This type of crime is characterized by great variation, such as timber from rain forest, orchids, living and dead corals, exotic fish species, butterflies, living and dead mammals and birds, together with a great variety of products from these. The UN has stated that this illegal trade is only exceeded by the dealing in narcotics and weapons. Much of this activity is a real and direct threat to the survival of hundreds, maybe thousands of species.

In Norway such crime has to a large extent been directed at birds. There are several reasons for this, but the main one is probably that we have a varied bird fauna with elements of northern and eastern species. In addition, both dead and living birds have been easily traded at high prices during several decades, both in Norway and abroad.

All forms of illegal exploitation of nature must be regarded as environmental crime. The most serious part is often called fauna crime. In the publication no. 17 from Økokrim, the National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime in Norway, this is defined as follows: «Fauna crime is the violation of all rules that protect animal life (also game species). Examples of fauna crime are illegal hunting and capture and illegal trade in threatened species. Crime is

regarded as serious if the species that is hit is threatened or vulnerable. Breach of the formal rules concerning hunting (e.g. failure to pay hunting fee) and violation of a landowner's right to hunt, cf. penal code § 407, are not defined as fauna crime». It is important to note this because the police and prosecution are instructed to give priority to investigation of fauna crime. If one wishes to report such crime, it is therefore important to stress that the crime has involved threatened or vulnerable species.



*A young Gyr Falcon, taken in Sør-Trøndelag, and confiscated in Germany.*



*Some of more than 100,000 eggs confiscated in Germany in 1999. Several thousands came from Norway.*



*Eggs and mounted birds confiscated from a Finnish man in 2012*

## Egg collecting

Egg collecting is an old tradition in Norway, both for supplementary food and for collecting as “scientific” material. This was also a relatively common hobby, especially among young men, until the end of the 1960s. Although not necessarily harmless, this was scarcely systematic, and was no great threat to our most threatened bird species. Today’s illegal egg-collecting is far more systematic and is a direct threat to many species. Some of the reasons for this are that those who perform this are far more knowledgeable, are often part of a well-organized network and have the economy to travel almost wherever they wish.

Illegal egg collecting has much in common with philately i.e. stamp-collecting. For many it is important to find as many different species as possible, in the same way that many collect stamps. For these collectors it is also important to take all the eggs that the female lays, in other words the whole clutch. This means that they often have to visit the nest more than once. We know that previously they marked the nest by means of sticks, crepe paper, threads of wool, spray paint and many other ways. Today they presumably use GPS, which makes it easy to find the way back to the nest after first having located it. When the eggs are taken, it is important to extract the content of the egg. This is done by boring a hole on the “long side” of the egg. Then the content is sucked out with the aid of various kinds of glass tubes. In the collection the egg is placed with the hole beneath so that it appears to be intact.

There are many reasons why Norway, and especially Finnmark, is a popular target for Norwegian and foreign egg collectors. In Finnmark several eastern species breed

which have their main distribution in Russia and are therefore not easily accessible. Finnmark is also sparsely populated, which means that the risk of detection is small. Due to the midnight sun one can also work during the night, at times when most are asleep.

There have been a number of confiscations of eggs abroad, including Finland, Great Britain and Germany. Several thousand eggs have been seized abroad. Species such as Lesser White-fronted Goose, Gyr Falcon, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Long-tailed Skua, White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Red-throated Pipit and Temminck’s Stint are among the confiscated eggs as well as eggs of many common species. This has given us useful knowledge about this activity. The egg thieves have undoubtedly charted the breeding fauna of Finnmark very well, and they exchange information with each other.

From the confiscated eggs, it seems that the main period when they operate in Finnmark is from the second week in June until the transition June/July. Most eggs are taken between 10th and 25th June. The most attractive bird species are among the waders, and Finnmark is especially rich in these. This does not of course stop them from taking any others that they find. The eggs in themselves are normally of little value. They are most often only collectors’ objects which are exchanged between collectors.

In November 2011 a Finnish man was arrested for illegal egg collecting. At the man’s home about 9000 eggs were confiscated. According to his notes many of the eggs were taken in Norway, and almost all in Finnmark. From other seizures abroad it proves that eastern Finnmark is visited far more often by fauna criminals than western Finnmark.



### Collecting of living nestlings and fertile eggs

Live birds of prey have been in demand in large parts of Europe during several hundred years. Even after capture becoming illegal, plundering continued in Norway. In the 1990s a large league was exposed in Germany following a long period of investigation. These had probably taken several hundred birds of prey in Norway. Finnmark was one of the main areas for this plundering. The Gyr Falcon was especially in demand, but also Peregrine, Golden Eagle and White-tailed Eagle were also taken.

In order to transport live young birds requires little equipment, but good expertise. They need nourishment and are very quiet as long as they are fed. For fertile eggs, incubators are used that are coupled to the car's battery.

Earlier one thought that this only concerned birds of prey, but several new cases have shown that this is not true. In 2004 a German citizen was stopped by the Finnish customs at Karigasniemi on the way out of Norway. In his car there were more than 100 fertile eggs and young birds. He had several common species such as Meadow Pipit, Fieldfare, Common Redshank and Golden Plover.

Following the outbreak of avian influenza, the EU applied a ban on the import of wild exotic birds. This has led to a greatly increasing market for keeping common European birds as cage birds. Owls and ducks are also very popular, and there are several hundred private "duck parks" in many European countries. Even though many species breed well in captivity, they are nevertheless plundered in the wild. It is of course

cheaper to plunder, and one gets at the same time a new supply of genetic material. Plundering of these birds is of course restricted to the breeding season, but often these criminals visit the nest site before egg-laying in order to confirm that the birds have become established at the site. Unfortunately it is not only foreigners that commit such crime. We know that Norwegian criminals have not only helped foreigners with plundering, but that they themselves have performed the whole plundering for sale to foreigners.

### Hunting and capture

The most common form of fauna crime is illegal hunting. The background for practising this activity can vary. Lack of knowledge of bird species, for example, can lead to a pigeon hunter shooting a Goshawk in mistake for a pigeon, or a Gyr Falcon being shot in mistake for a grouse. With the intention of preventing such mistakes, the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management distributes a free booklet to all hunters, where species that may be hunted, and many that are protected, are shown in colour illustrations (Ree, V. 2008. *Feltbok. Bestemmelse av fugl og pattedyr under jaktsesongen*. Direktoratet for naturforvaltning, Trondheim.). The birds are drawn as they appear in flight, while deer and other mammals are drawn in their normal settings.

Illegal hunting can also be motivated by belief in "game management". Some hunters believe that if one shoots goshawks or destroys their nests, there will be more small game available for hunting. Similarly, Golden Eagles and Gyr Falcons are shot in the belief that the grouse population will increase. This is misunderstood



*Climbing equipment confiscated from an egg collector*



*Confiscated equipment used to empty birds' eggs*



game management. Nature functions in a balanced system, and a reduction in the numbers of birds of prey will most likely lead to an increase in other unwanted predators.

Illegal hunting for trading in bird species for collectors is thought to be a widespread problem in Norway. In most bird crime cases in recent years the demand by collectors has been the background for illegal hunting. After the birds are stuffed by a taxidermist they go into private collections, either in Norway or abroad. A characteristic of this kind of hunting is that it often takes place outside the prevailing hunting regulations, often in winter or spring which is the period when birds often are in breeding plumage. In cases of bird crime it has proved that the leader, often a taxidermist, has used sub-suppliers who shoot game for delivery to the taxidermist trade. In many cases air guns and rifles

with silencers are used. These make very little sound. A number of other means of capture have also been used. Some of these, such as crow traps, enable the criminal to kill the bird without causing any visible outer injury.

### Use of poison

Illegal use of poison is normally directed at predators and not at birds. Nevertheless it is often birds, and particularly birds of prey and crows, which are the chance victims of the illegal use of poison. If one happens to find several dead mammals and birds without obvious signs of injury, especially in a limited area, one should be cautious. Do not touch the birds, but contact the police. Some of the poisons in use are extremely deadly, and can also be dangerous for humans.

*This fact sheet is prepared by Terje Axelsen*



*In 2004 a German was arrested in Finnmark with equipment to incubate eggs in an incubator (upper right: a professional incubator, and lower right: a home-made incubator), and living thrush nestlings kept in a wooden box (upper left) and in egg cartons (lower left).*