

CULTURE

# Inside the Bizarre, Secretive World of Obsessive Egg Thieves

Audubon talks with filmmaker Tim Wheeler, whose documentary exposes the underworld of Britain's illegal egg collectors.

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Why do some people who love nature end up destroying it? That's the question documentarian Timothy Wheeler explores in his new award-winning film, *Poached*, which investigates the strange British subculture of illegal egg-collecting. While collecting eggs is necessary for some forms of scientific study, that's not the motivation behind the fanatics Wheeler exposes in his film. Instead, these individuals enthusiastically roam huge swathes of Britain's countryside to find eggs, often scaling gigantic trees or abseiling down perilous cliffs to raid nests. The precious tokens are then pierced and the contents blown out to leave the exquisite, collectible casings behind. The resulting collections could tangibly hurt populations: Individuals have been known to amass hoards of several thousand eggs, posing such a danger to species that in Britain, collectors are prosecuted with prison sentences and fines of up to £5,000 (\$7,400).

Wheeler worked with the U.K.'s Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the country's National Wildlife Crime Unit to gain access to some of these individuals, both practicing and reformed, including Britain's most notorious egg thief, Matthew Gonshaw, and a man known only as "Mr. X" who conceals his identity with a crow skull mask, boasting about his personal collection of 3,500 birds eggs.

Through the characters, it becomes clear that egg collectors aren't nursing a hobby, but an addiction. "You watch people as they really struggle with their addiction and try to have a healthier relationship with nature," Wheeler says. "We get to experience what that is like for them."

*Audubon* spoke to Wheeler about how a boyhood hobby transforms into an adult obsession—and how nature feeds this unlikely addiction.

The film, which premiered last March, will be released on iTunes on January 15th, and is [available for pre-order](#).

**Audubon: How do people get into egg collecting?**

**Wheeler:** It seems to stem from a childhood fascination with birds. There's this weird relationship they have with nature: all of these egg collectors are in fact true bird lovers. But as with any type of addiction, they are somehow able to rationalize their behavior because the lust for the egg becomes more important to them than seeing that they're actually harming the very thing they love.

**A: What kinds of eggs do collectors typically look for?**

**W:** They're trying to get the rarest egg, just like a stamp collector would want the rarest stamp: the rarer the bird the more attractive the egg. They're also attracted to "big stick" birds, the Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, or the Osprey—very large birds you might have to abseil down cliffs or climb high trees for. Some of them are attracted to what they say is the beauty of the eggs as well. When they're looking at one, they'll salivate over it as if it's a drug; there's almost a sensual aspect to it too, which is quite bizarre.

**A: This surely poses a serious threat to certain species?**

**W:** The way it's been described to us is that the egg collector can be the final nail in the coffin. Birds may be under threat mostly because of other environmental reasons, but they are therefore rare which makes them more attractive for the egg collector. So for example the Red-backed Shrike [a bird on the RSPB's Red List]: there's known to be one pair that comes back to the UK and it's always uncertain whether they're going to return—yet that one pair has been targeted [by egg collectors].

**A: The documentary reveals what viewers may not expect: egg collecting is often high-octane and incredibly dangerous—so are people in it for the thrill?**

**W:** It is absolutely about the adventure. They're not as interested in acquiring mass collections of eggs from other collectors; they're interested in the pursuit, and that each egg has a story. It's kind of like the adrenaline rush of extreme sports. Egg collectors are some of the most expert tree climbers in the world. It is absolutely fascinating and scary to watch them: they'll free-climb a 100-foot tree. And some are extremely anti-authoritarian; some are aroused by the thrill of the cat-and-mouse game with the police. They have to find covert ways of covering their tracks, hiding eggs in safe houses, in floorboards under their homes or in secret rooms. They get into the secrecy of it, much as any drug addict or a sex addict may get into the secrecy of their habit.

**A: Why do people keep doing it even when they know it's destructive?**

**W:** What I've got from all of them is that this is what they do best. It's a very difficult thing to go out and to find these birds—whether you're talking about climbing a 100-foot tree, or being in Dartmoor and finding a nest in that expansive landscape, or locating hard-to-find birds like a Tree Pipit—they find real value in that process and that's what they're best at in life.

**A: Collectors face harsh prison sentences and severe fines. But, you make an effort to reveal the human side to these crimes, as well.**

**W:** It's important to not vilify these people. At the end of the day we all have our secrets, though some are obviously worse than others! These are all people that are valuable contributors to society, maybe in other ways, but they have this historical struggle, a collecting addiction that ultimately does harm. We have to understand a psychology like this in order to really combat it.

**A: Should other countries become more aware of this issue?**

**W:** I don't want to plant the seed that this is some rising, monstrous problem, but an egg collector can have a devastating impact. There have been major cases in Norway, Sweden, Bulgaria, and I have heard from egg collectors themselves about a couple of potential collectors in the United States. I think it's important that authorities have this on their radar, because it does exist in other parts of the world.

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*Poached* has partnered with several Audubon chapters and other environmental groups to screen this film to a wide audience, including the following:

**January 13, 2016, 7:30 - 9:30, Free Screening followed by a Q & A with Director Timothy Wheeler**

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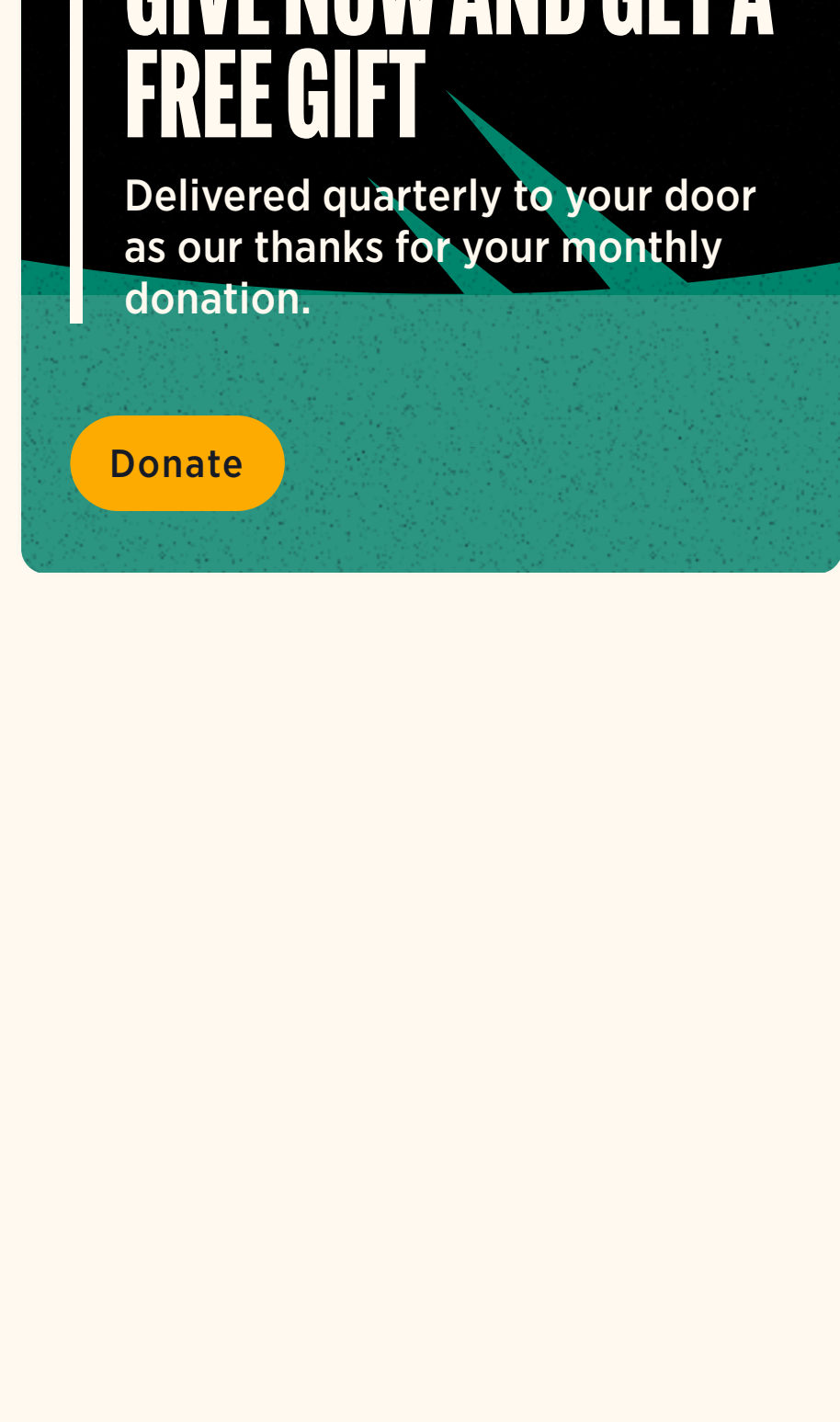
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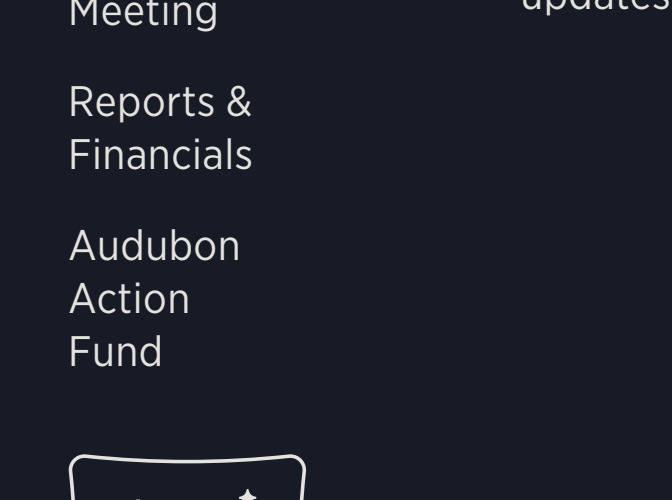
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