

BIRDS' EGGS ON "BIRD" STAMPS

It may seem pedantic to qualify that this item is about birds' eggs but naturalists will remind us that most animals produce eggs of one sort or another so this is just to underline that I mean those mostly oval shaped objects in a calcareous shell produced by birds all over the world. In the December issue (on page 51), I illustrated one example of how eggs are displayed (on bird stamps) with a set of four values from Tuvalu which were printed in 1985 featuring terns and allied species (Stanley Gibbons nos. 309 - 312).

I have done some preliminary research on seeking out other examples and I hope these will be of interest. I dare say most members will be familiar with the issues in question but I would also like to hear from anybody who knows of others I may have overlooked. So we start with a set of eight values from the British Virgin Islands published in 1990 (S. G. 732 - 739)



Obviously, as with most sets of bird stamps, the birds are not in scale with each other and thus neither are the nests or eggs in these examples. The Smooth-billed Ani shown on the 60 c value is a large member of the cuckoo family (30-35 cm) and only its head is shown whereas the Antillean Crested Hummingbird on the next (\$1.00 value) would be much smaller and have eggs about the size of a Tic-Tac peppermint. The Ani incidentally builds its own nest unlike many parasitic cuckoos but different females often share nests and compete to have their clutch on top; several "dead" eggs can thus accumulate in the nest.

The next set that I have selected also comes from the British Virgin Islands and are the consecutive miniature sheets to the previous set with S. G. Nos of MS 740a and & 740b. In these two cases the stamps themselves are devoted to the eggs of the Royal Tern and the Red-Billed Tropic Bird respectively while the birds are well illustrated having the benefit of the larger print area available; in both cases juvenile birds are shown with the adults. See next page for illustrations: -



This shows two adult Royal Terns (*Thalasseus maximus*) with a single chick and a picture of the species egg on the actual stamp. Royal Terns typically nest in large colonies but generally only lay one egg in the merest scrape for a nest.

The lower stamp illustrates an adult Red-Tropic Bird (*Phaethon aethereus*) with a single chick just starting to gain its adult plumage and as before a picture of the relevant egg is shown on the stamp. This species also has a very rudimentary scrape for a nest and only one egg is laid.



As mentioned on the previous page, this set of stamps is devoted to a vulnerable member of the Megapode family officially known as the Polynesian Scrub-fowl. These birds have an extraordinary nesting habit making huge mounds of vegetation akin to compost heaps or using burrows in geothermal soil thus generating enough heat to incubate the eggs. This species is a burrow nester and nest sites can range from 29 - 38 degrees Celsius. As many as twelve eggs are laid.

In this example the set of stamps does not show any eggs whereas the miniature sheet is itself an illustration of an egg hatching with two of the top values from the set making up part of the display.

Here are a few more examples. These are firstly a set of four values from Bulgaria issued in 1999 (SG 4273 - 4276). The species featured are Lesser Grey Shrike, Mistle Thrush, Dunnock (or Hedge Sparrow if you prefer) and Ortolan Bunting. I expect the first three are pretty familiar and in some parts might even be considered as garden birds. The Ortolan however has an awful (in the true sense of the word) reputation established by its greatest predator – mankind. Many of you may know the tradition (French) in which the birds are kept captive (typically in the dark to disorientate them) and allowing

them to gorge on grain whereby perhaps doubling their weight; supposedly Roman emperors actually put out their eyes. The fattened birds are then drowned in Armagnac effectively marinating them and then cooked whole after which they are plucked. Diners (guilty or not?) consume the whole bird covering their heads in a large napkin. Some say this is to concentrate the flavours while others suggest they hide their faces from God during such a despicable act; the more practical say that it allows the consumer to spit out the larger bones surreptitiously. Although widespread in much of Europe, the Ortolan population has declined significantly over the last couple of decades but don't necessarily blame the French!



My second offering is a set of four values from the Faroe Islands (approximately halfway between Iceland and Norway) issued in 2002 (SG 435 - 438) illustrating the eggs and chicks



of Whimbrel, Common Snipe, European Oystercatcher and European Golden Plover. Happily these are not normally eaten nowadays although some suffer the tribulations of seasonal migrations and so-called hunters' guns in southern Europe. More next time.

Tony Statham