



HOW TO COLLECT BIRDS' EGGS

The best way to commence a fascinating outdoor hobby

By CECIL MAYLOR

THE collection of birds' eggs, while hardly suitable for persons of the proportions of the redoubtable Billy Bunter, is ideal for those with a love for tree and cliff climbing, and for walks on heaths and moors, and who have an interest in the nest-building habits and egg tints of different birds.

The outfit entailed is only some form of knapsack or lined case in which to carry the eggs—which might get broken if put into the pocket—an old suit of clothes, a cabinet for filing specimens, and some white printers' card, glue, and ink.

The cabinet can be easily made out of an old tea chest, or any light case of three-ply wood laid on its side. Grooves or racks are made on the sides at four-inch intervals to support trays, which need not have sides, but should have high fronts, so that when all the trays are closed a fairly dust-tight front is presented. A study of the cabinet shown in the sketch will make clear the details of its construction.

Into this cabinet the birds' eggs will be indexed; but, first, the "decayable" contents of the eggs must be blown out. To do this, a very small hole at the small end of the egg should be made with a needle, just large enough to admit the passage of sufficient air to expel the contents, while a vent-hole is made on the side of the egg between the great end and the line of greatest diameter.

When the contents have been very cautiously blown out of the egg, it is advisable to clean the interior by immersing the vent-hole in a solution of boric acid and water or Milton and water, and then sucking some of the liquid into the shell, shaking well, and expelling. This process can be beneficially repeated two or three times until the solution comes out as clear as it goes in, after which the shell can

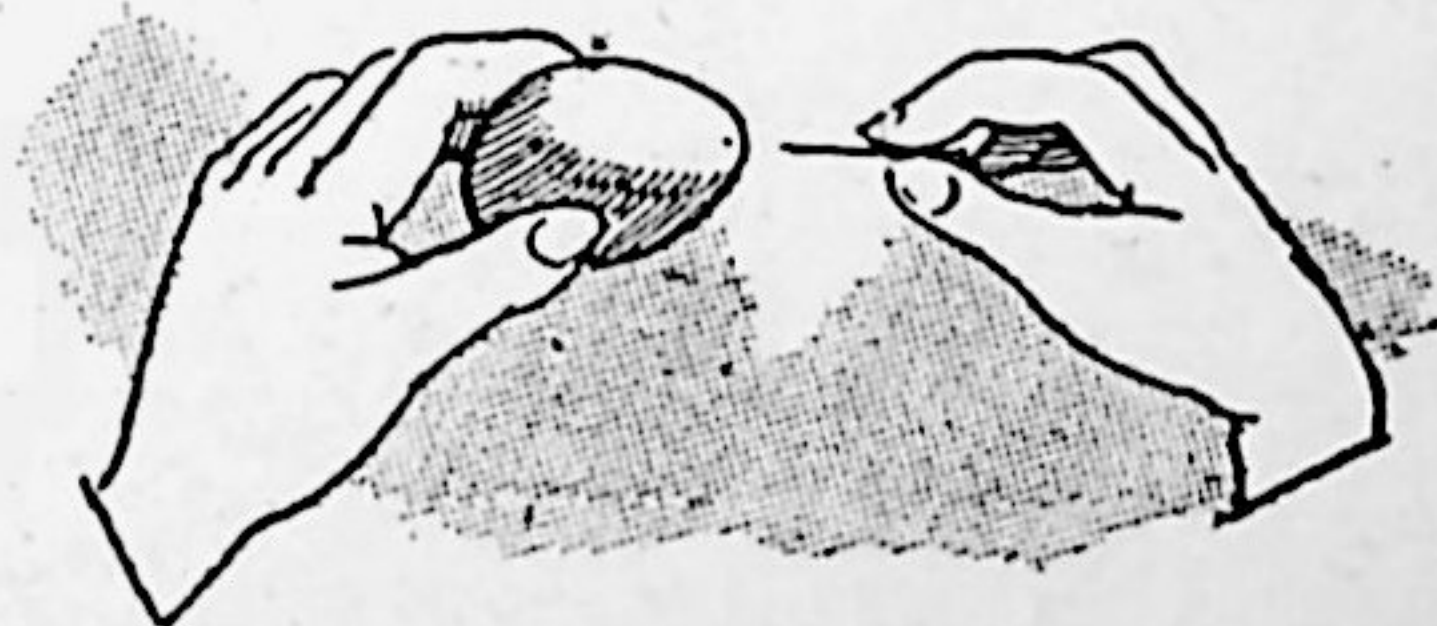
be placed on blotting paper in an airy, but not sunny, place to dry, the vent-hole being arranged downwards so that any moisture remaining will roll out.

It is possible to obtain patent blowers for the eggs, but the amateur will most likely get better and cheaper results with the above method.

If the egg is very dirty, it may be gently cleaned with cold water. Some eggs, such as dabchicks' from the Essex marshes, are sometimes so engrained with dirt, thanks to the parent bird's muddy footprints, that all efforts to restore the original colours prove fruitless, for while the cleansing operations on a white egg can be drastic, coloured eggs must be treated as gently as coloured silks, for the colours are rarely "fast," and frequently the coloured spots will come away with the dirt. After cautious cleansing, the egg, as a precaution against strong light and dust, can be varnished with a little of the "white" of the egg itself.

The preparations for keeping finished, the egg can be mounted on a piece of white card for placing in the index cabinet. The egg is placed on its side so as to cover the vent-hole, and then secured in position with some water-gum.

The name of the egg, where found, what kind of nest, and the number of eggs observed,



Piercing the shell with a needle before "blowing."

and the date should all be written on the card. Delightfully pretty effects can be obtained by the use of printed characters and printers' coloured inks contrasting with the colours of the eggs. Sometimes, writing in red, yellow or white poster paint on black card is very effective. Artists' shops will supply the necessary materials.

"How to index" is the problem that must be solved by the egg collector himself, the simplest method being to give the eggs their common or garden names—greenfinch, house sparrow, wren, etc.—and index them according to alphabetical order or to whether they are "hardbills" (seed eaters) or "softbills" (insect eaters).

Big collectors, however, index their specimens according to their *species, family and class* under Latin names, and the amateur not adopting the Latin or scientific system may at a later date find himself "at sea." In it, the birds are divided into five main classes—Raptures (prey catchers), Insectores (peckers), Rasores (scratchers), Grallatores (waders), and Natatores (swimmers)—which in turns are subdivided into further classifications.

Atkinson's "British Birds' Eggs," or Yarrell's "British Birds," which can be borrowed from most public libraries, will give those desiring to adopt the scientific system complete guidance. It entails a little extra brain-fag at first, but if a big collection is aimed at it is worth while. On the other hand, those only desiring to collect for the prettiness of the eggs, and the knowledge gained of the habits of the birds in the locality, need hardly trouble.

The question of where to look for eggs is often raised. The answer is "Everywhere," for birds have been known to nest even in moving machinery. The ledges of rocky cliffs and walls are popular with many varieties,

such as the hawk, martin, eagle, heron and buzzard families, but holes in cliffs and ditches, forks in tree branches, thick shrubs, in hedges, under low bushes, and rabbit and mouse holes are places used by British birds. In short, any crevice or cranny can always be suspected.

The situation of the nest and the number of the eggs therein should always be noted, as the marking and the size of eggs vary greatly, and the former two points are guides which often tell the collector what his specimen is in case of difficulty. Atkinson's book contains a chart giving the favourite nesting-places of 324 types of British birds.

A good idea is to encourage the birds to nest in one's garden by providing bread-crumbs, salt and water, and suitable sites such as coconut shells cut in half.

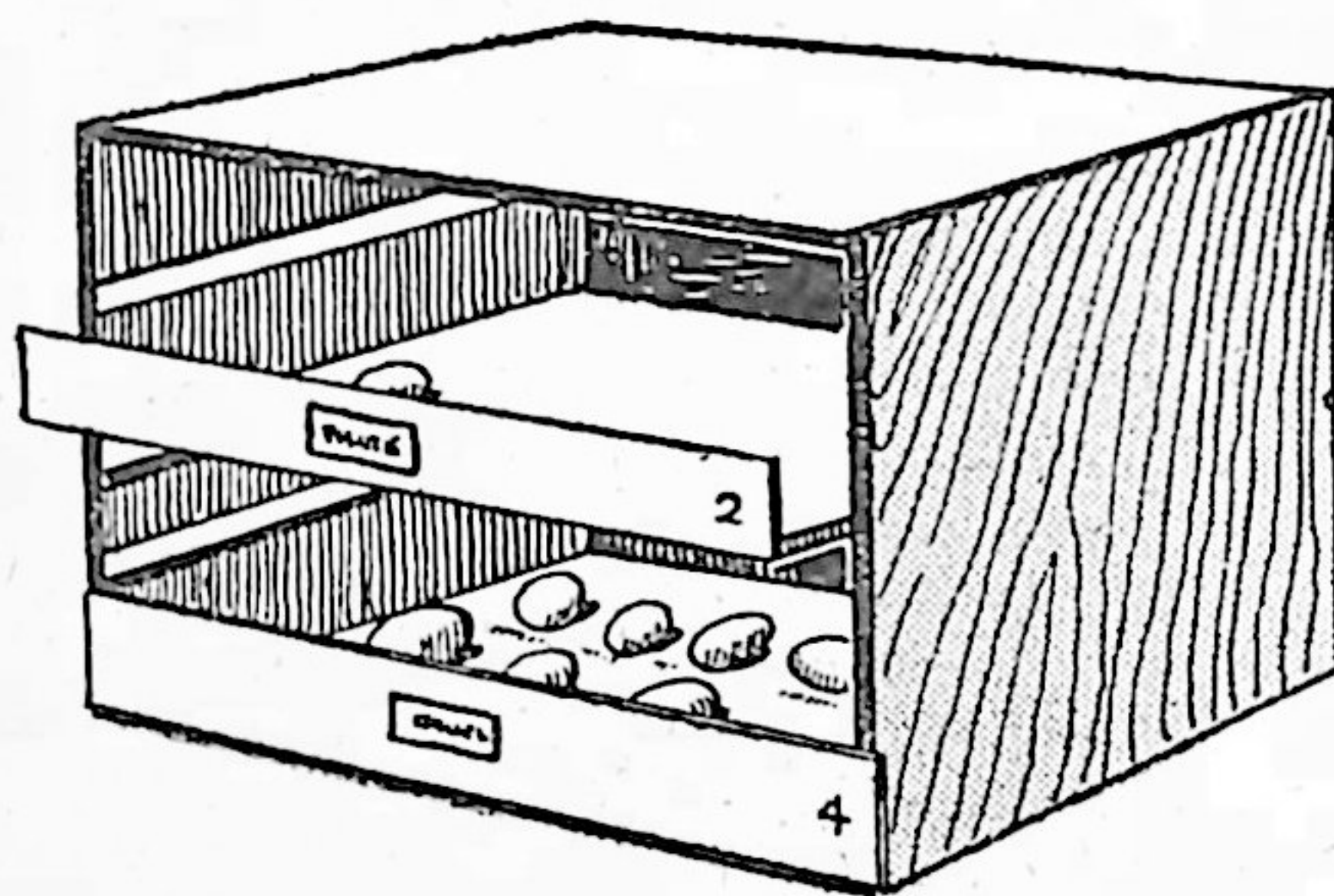
A warning must be expressed against thoughtlessly causing cruelty by carelessly pulling branches apart so as to injure or expose the nest, or by taking more than one egg from each nest. It should be the amateur naturalist's aim to do everything possible to preserve our British wild birds. For

this reason a nest should never be needlessly robbed, or a sitting bird disturbed.

One egg from a "clutch" is all that the collector requires. In taking it, it is kind to the mother bird to be as careful as possible. Neither the nest nor the other eggs in it should be disturbed; if the nest is left, to all intents and purposes, as it was found, the bird will not be alarmed—and it is most unlikely that she will miss the egg which has been taken.

If the distinction between collection and robbery is carefully maintained, it will lead to the enjoyment of healthy walks, an intimate knowledge of local songsters, and a collection of beautifully coloured eggs.

THE END



This simple cabinet can easily be made to hold your collection. Two of the drawers are left out to show the racks on which they slide.