FOREWORD

AS A CHILD of ten, my parents were invited to a friend's house where, in the corner of the living room, I discovered a most wonderful thing: a curiosity cabinet! It was filled with birds beyond my imagination. I had shown an interest in birds since the age of eight, but this collection far surpassed anything I had ever seen. Glowing greens and reflective red, gold, and blue shimmered through the glass doors. South American hummingbirds, many with their tiny intricate nests were complete with pea-size eggs inside! It boggled my mind. Later that spring, as chance would have it, a friend showed me a Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest he had found. Perched atop a low-hanging branch, it looked like a lichen-covered knot on the limb, but as I peered into its plant down lining there was a tiny white egg.

I was hooked on nests and would search for them everywhere I would go in the world over the next forty-plus years. Indeed, the list that I am most proud of is not my life list of birds of the world or of the United States. In May of 2004 I watched a Lucy's Warbler building a nest in the broken-off limb of a willow tree—my 500th species nest in the U.S.!

My adventures in nest hunting have been many, but the importance of finding nests and eggs of species is summed up in a statement by my good friend Yuri Gluschenko, a Russian ornithologist. We had just found the nest of the handsome Amur Falcon in a woodland of Russian Ussuriland on the edge of Siberia. Yuri had rapidly climbed the 60 feet to the top of the aspen with the excitement and glee of a young child. As he held the egg aloft for me to view, he yelled down what I had been telling my ornithology students over the past thirty-four years: "You must see the egg and nest to truly know the bird." By finding a nest and its beautiful contents, one knows so much more about a species than by simply looking at it through binoculars and checking it off a list. You know habitat, time of year for breeding activity, and habits of the species, and of course you have the added bonus of seeing how the nest is made and often the beauty of the eggs.

Since early times, our knowledge of ornithology was formed by the intrepid bird collectors and oologists who gathered and documented data from around the world. Their information on location, time of nesting, numbers, and morphological features of species led to the foundation of the first books written on birds that eventually would evolve into our present-day field guides. Proper collection of full sets of eggs were also conservation measures that the oologists were aware of. A full set taken at

the right time of year assured a reset of eggs and no impact on the species. I can imagine the thrill Ralph Handsaker must have felt in building his collection and his enjoyment of the “hunt” and the excitement of adding a new species to his ever-growing list. The meticulous collection of data would be a gateway to exchange with other oologists who desired what he had found and would leave an important record of what the bird populations were like during those early years. Such baseline data would allow us to see the changes that have come about in bird populations over time, but, as with all data, to make such information useful, there must be someone who can bring them all together to show its importance. Carrol Henderson has done this to perfection with Ralph Handsaker’s collection. There is a lot to tell, and he has artfully woven the adventures of the past into present-day research. He has given timelines to show important steps that have taken us from egg collecting to unprecedented interest in birds that now involve millions of people across the United States.

So take time to look and enjoy the beauty of the eggs while you ponder what life was like in the past during the field adventures of the oologists and the importance of their collections. Sit back and listen to what Ralph Handsaker’s eggs have to tell us.

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