

HOW RATS STEAL FOWLS' EGGS

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Painting by artist Igor Maykov <http://maykov.lv>
With our thanks for granting publication.

Amazing stories are told of how rats can steal fowls' eggs and carry them off unbroken to their holes. This curiosity of animal behaviour has always perplexed many farmers and poultry keepers.

In old journals we can read debates on this, reporting on unbroken eggs in rat holes a half mile away from the nearest farm. How had the rats carried them there? Not only farmers, but also a housewife reported on a wooden croft partially filled with eggs, set on a wooden box in the cellar; one day the contents are intact, next day a number of eggs are vanished, with not a sign to indicate where or how they have gone.

In several old documents, rat-catchers say one rat can remove a full-sized fowl egg on its own by gripping it to its stomach and rolling over and over with it until it reaches its hole. Rat-catcher was an honourable profession in the old times; catching rats as a form of pest control, to prevent the spread of diseases to man, most notoriously the Black Plague, and to prevent damage to food supplies.

**Right: Jack Black, her majesty's ratcatcher, 1863.
Artist unknown.**

In Nature Notes, May 1898 we can even read several popular suggestions: the rats form a line and hand the eggs from one to another; they roll them along the ground with their noses and forepaws; they hold them under their chin and hop along on their back legs; and finally the old story, that one rat lies on its back, clutching an egg to its belly while another rat draws it along by the tail.





Left: Rats stealing eggs. Detail of a taxidermi by Potter in the (former) Bramber Museum (UK).

Walter Potter (1835-1918) was an amateur taxidermist who built tableaux that became icons of Victorian whimsy.

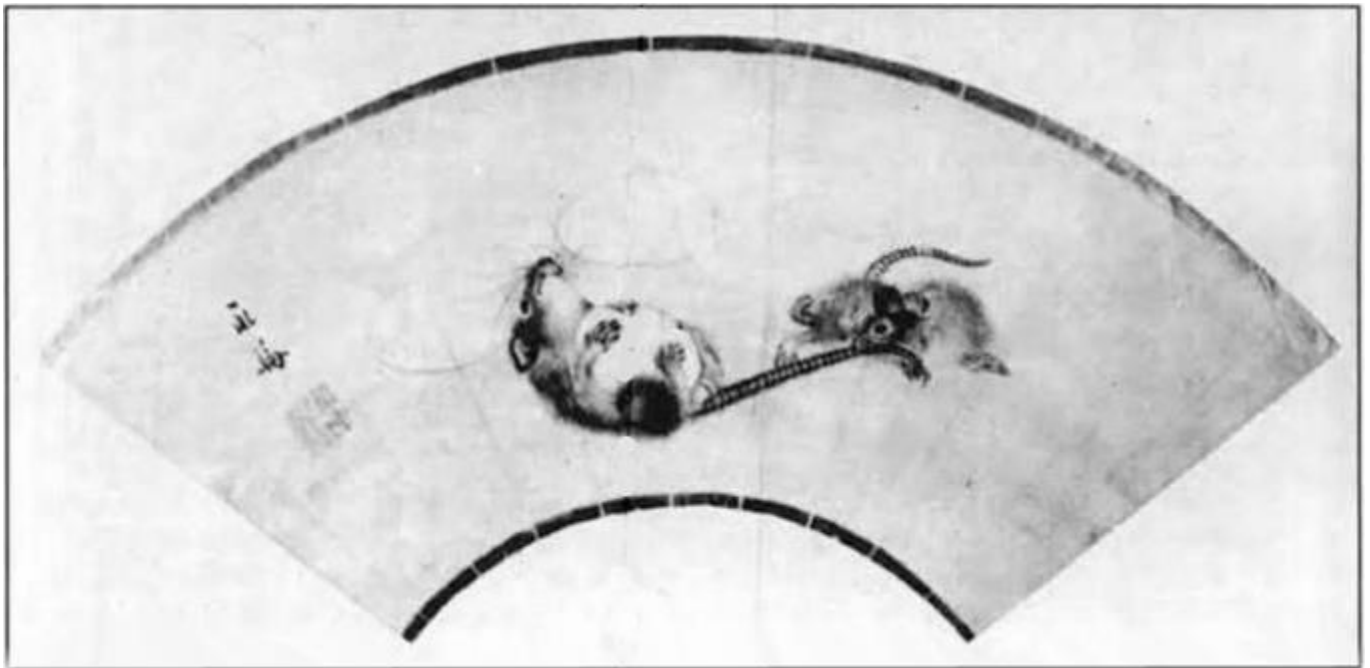
The following extraordinary tale I copied from the Australian newspaper Barrier Miner, NSW, Saturday 18 June 1932. Here a Mr. C. T. Clayster, one of the City Council rat-catchers, states:

"I had often heard how rats stole fowls' eggs, but it was only when I was staying at Narrung, not long ago, that I was able to

verify the story with my own eyes."

"One night in a shed I saw two of them remove several full-sized fowl eggs to their hole without breaking one. This is how it was done. The first rat grasped the egg in its four paws, hugging it to its stomach, and then rolled over on its back, still holding the egg. Then the second rat caught hold of its companion's tail with its teeth and dragged him over the floor and down the hole. This was repeated several times, until all the eggs in the nest had disappeared.

And it is exactly THIS story that keeps popping up, also in our time. Recently, in 2010, this same myth is told by Bill Bryson in his book *At Home: "A Short History of Private Life"* situated in the Victorian rectory that Bryson and his family occupy in flattest Eastern England.



Above: It is a world-wide intriguing mystery. Here you see a 19th-century Japanese fan painting by Satake Eikai, showing rats carrying away a large egg.

Also in the December 2015 newsletter of the Rhode Island Red Club in the Netherlands is a small item devoted to this phenomenon. A man, Ben Bruin, describes how rats steal eggs from the stables of a commercial poultry keeper. As a boy he heard the story from his father and together with his friend he climbed upon a collar beam and waited and waited... and Yes! After some time the rats came in. One laid down on its back with an egg in its paws and the other pulled it away by the tail. A real true story, witnessed with his own eyes!

How do rats take hold of chicken's eggs and transport them considerable distances to their holes and dens? Early 1900's the question was put to the most famous of all American naturalists, John Burroughs, who according to the Scientific American, admitted that he didn't know, but that he had heard that explanation current among farmers but he couldn't say if it was a correct one.

Right: John Burroughs in 1909.

Naturalist and writer John Burroughs (1837–1921) was respected for his numerous nature essays. He was a literary naturalist with a duty to record his own unique perceptions of the natural world. Burroughs believed that the nature writer must remain faithful to nature as well as the personal responses to what they witness; the literary naturalist does not take liberties with facts.



So, the mystery how rats carry eggs is still unsolved after so many years. I myself tend to react the same way Edmund Daubery did in Nature Notes, May 1898: "Is it likely that any animal would quietly submit to the ordeal of having its tail nipped and being rubbed the wrong way into the bargain?"



Left: An engraving which shows three egg-carrying rats negotiating a step by delicately passing the egg one to another. Drawing by Harrison Weir.

That eggs are borne off by rats is proved clearly enough by the discovery of whole, uncracked eggs beneath floors and other hiding places. And over time, every now and then someone actually claims to have seen the rats at work.

These eye-witnesses of a most unusual thing say the rats hold the eggs between chin and forefeet, that he tumbles off elevations deftly protecting the egg if he falls, that usually there is a crowd of rats around to drag the 'egg rat' lying on his back, by the tail across the floor to the hole. Others say the rat holds the egg between folds of skin under the chin, without assistance. The general testimony however would explain such a conflict of opinion. It is agreed that rats work in

gangs with egg carrying, and that it is difficult to determine from a distance exactly what they are doing among themselves. It is said that there is always much squealing, but whether because some are getting hurt, or by contrast, they are hugely enjoying themselves, is not indicated.

Right: Fanciful scene of two rats stealing an egg while an animal watches. Oil on silk painting, early 20th century, unsigned. Below is a detail.



In our time, with all modern equipment, it should be possible to solve this mystery for once and for all. With your help! Climb the collar beams with your camera handy. Install a webcam in the chicken house or cellar. Send the video or photos to us and we will happily share them with our readers worldwide, giving you all the credit for answering the question: How rats steal fowls' eggs.

Sources:

The Milwaukee Sentinel, Sept. 28 1919.

Nature Notes, May 1898

Barrier Miner, NSW, Saturday 18 June 1932.

Red Nieuws December 2015, Clubblad van de RIR Club NL.

Unexplained Phenomena, by Bob Rickard and John Michell, August 2000.



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This is a publication by the online magazine www.aviculture-europe.nl

English edition ISSN: 2352-2445

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