

Where an Owl Egg Is Worth More Than Ivory or Rhino Horn



Posted by [Darcy Ogada](#) of [The Peregrine Fund](#) in [Explorers Journal](#) on October 4, 2016

Nine years ago I was regularly in the field in central Kenya studying Mackinder's eagle owls (*Bubo capensis mackinderi*) and promoting their conservation among the local community.

The reason we had to promote the conservation of owls is because they are widely despised, not just in Kenya, but throughout Africa and many other parts of the world.

In Africa a widely held belief is that if an owl lands on the roof of your house someone inside will die. Their hooting calls during the dark of night instill fear and a sense of dread. It's no wonder then that owls are regularly stoned or killed.



Mackinder's eagle owl, a species studied by the author, has been hugely affected by the owl egg trade in Kenya. (Photo by S. Thomsett)

In the western world owls are more often seen as beloved, wise creatures and their symbolism inspires many seemingly ordinary people into a collector's frenzy. For those who love owls, a home can soon become a warehouse for all things "owl": owl cups, owl plates, owl toilet seat covers. Even the food on their plates may be owl-shaped. Not to be forgotten are the falconers who specialize in keeping owls. Once word got out about our owl project I received no end of emails asking me how I could help someone abroad acquire a Mackinder's eagle owl under the guise that they would be breeding them to boost their populations in the wild. I won't go into why I felt their noble cause was actually more of a self-indulgent personal agenda.

Unsolicited emails and phone calls to acquire owls also came from within Kenya, but for very different reasons. Kenyans were not looking to acquire owls so much as their eggs. Those in possession of owl eggs asked about where they could sell them.

Due to the superstitions around owls, they are widely used in Africa for witchcraft. The exact beliefs surrounding the use of owl eggs are not well known, but calls I received generally came from well-educated individuals seeking to cure a relative of cancer or HIV-Aids. Many indicated that their Tanzanian witch doctor had prescribed the need for fresh owl eggs. Tanzanian belief in witchcraft is strong and their witch doctors are held in high esteem here in neighboring Kenya.

Even the collection of the eggs from a nest is a superstitious ritual that involves first sprinkling the eggs with maize flour then subsequently collecting the eggs without touching them directly, but by using black-and-white cloths.

Over the intervening years what started as a few inquiries per year about owl eggs quickly became a landslide. *Why?* Money, of course.

Taking an average of prices cited in a [2011 news report](#) and solicitations in online forums from 2014, an owl egg in Kenya can be expected to fetch \$3,796. This works out to about \$89/gram. The cost of [ivory in China in November 2015 was \\$1.10/gram](#) and that of [rhino horn in Vietnam in September of 2016 was \\$35/gram](#). With full acknowledgement of the difficulty of knowing actual black-market prices, and the fluctuations in those prices year to year, the overall picture is still clear: Owl eggs can cost more than twice the price of rhino horn and about eighty times the price of ivory.



Owls eggs are superstitiously sprinkled with maize flour prior to collection. (Photo Anonymous)

Someone recently asked me, “but who are these people in Africa that have the kind of money to buy a high-priced owl egg?” I assured him there are plenty of people with that kind of money. Economic growth has surged in many African countries. According to a recent report by New World Wealth, Africa is now home to more than 160,000 people with personal fortunes worth in excess of \$1m, which represents a twofold increase in the number of wealthy individuals since the turn of the century. Add to that the fortunes of the political elite who are pushing the demand (and in turn the price) of owl eggs through the roof. Owl eggs are now consumed to boost a politician’s chance of winning the next election.

Sadly, I can no longer study owls in the wild because by searching for owls you become an unsuspecting cog in the informal wheel of the owl egg trade. Your motives for looking for owls will be questioned, your every moves followed, and you endanger the very owls you seek to conserve.

No matter where you go in Kenya (and I mean absolutely everywhere) there are people scouring the landscape for owl eggs. Some sell to middlemen from across the border. Others have just heard of the lucrative trade and are seeking information on where to sell the eggs.

Because the trade in owl eggs is illegal, it is completely underground, which makes finding out about it very difficult. Due to the huge amounts of money that are involved, snooping around is risky business.



The pearl-spotted owlet is another species affected by the illegal trade in owl eggs. (Photo by D. Ogada)

Stealing owl eggs from a nest is probably one of the easiest forms of wildlife crime. No shots are fired, and no carcasses are left behind. Unlike elephant tusks, you can hide eggs in your pocket. If you are caught with eggs, very few in authority would know the difference between owl eggs and chicken eggs, so you can claim they are the latter and just walk away. And because owls are widely despised, there's little public sympathy for their plight.

There is no doubt that Kenya's owl populations are collapsing. Every owl species is targeted and since collectors even work inside national parks, nowhere is safe for an owl to nest. The fact that

one owl egg brings returns to the local collector that are more than four times the average monthly income guarantees that the number of offspring actually hatching is exceedingly small.

The population I studied from 2004-7 has not produced a single chick in over two years. I also believe that locals are capturing owls in an unsuccessful bid to try to breed them. This is only resulting in more heartbreak as they have no idea how to care for owls and they end up starved to death.

Unlike the trade in ivory and rhino horn, owl eggs are being harvested mainly for local markets. Some sources have mentioned a market in the Middle East, particularly Dubai, but the existence of a trade in owl eggs to this region has yet to be substantiated.

What we do know is that we need to stop this illicit trade before it wipes out East Africa's owls.

While the focus of the illegal African wildlife trade is primarily on species that are trafficked to the Far East, we also need to raise awareness of the massive impact of the wildlife trade on species trafficked within Africa, species whose eggs or body parts are worth more than ivory and rhino horn combined, species of which owls are just one of many.

With prices as high as these the stakes are high and these species don't stand a chance without urgent intervention.

Darcy Ogada thanks an anonymous source for information that contributed to this story.

Keywords: eggs; Ivory; Kenya; owl

<http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2016/10/04/where-an-owl-egg-is-worth-more-than-ivory-or-rhino-horn/>