

An Edwardian bird specimen from Glasgow University Zoology Museum is able to bring the past into the present. This female hen harrier, a bird of prey, was once killed in Reay Forest in Sutherland. Here, Kate Foster's description enlarges on the information provided by the museum label.



ZOOL. COLL. UNIV., GLASGOW

A Zoological Museum has stored bird skins in its collections, which as 'cabinet skins' are tubular re-arrangements of feathers and skin, set on sticks and bagged. Other skins have been 'mounted' into lifelike poses through the skill of taxidermy. I look for hen harriers, absent birds of moorland. One particular specimen, acquired in 1926, has a clutch of labels declaring her provenance.

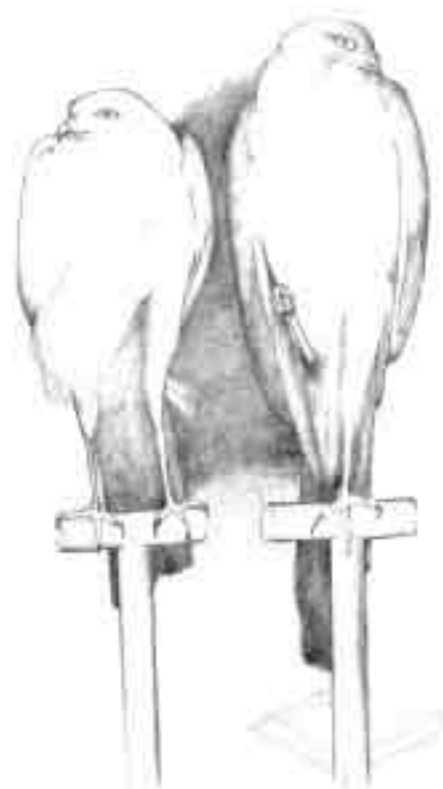


Name CIRCUS CYANEUS (HEN-HARRIER)

Circus cyaneus, Harrier of Hens. Chicken-thief in Dutch. No longer officially classed as vermin, these birds are still accused of poaching red grouse – quarry reserved for table and trophy. Described for science by Linnaeus in 1766, harriers are now all but eradicated from their haunts in heather moorland.

Sex Female

An adult female – perhaps once paired, won by a sky-dancing white mate. Her plumage a blend of moorland colours so that she may blend to the ground in a nest of sticks.



Loc. Reay Forest, Sutherland, Scotland.

'Deer forest' - preserves of red deer, treeless vastnesses of mountainous moorland. Reay Forest, in the far north-west of Scotland, bought in 1921 by the Duke of Westminster from the Duke of Sutherland. Westminster Tweed, manufactured by Hunters of Brora, a livery of camouflage for ghillies. Estate tweeds are unique weaves designed to allow the disappearance of hunter into particular ground.



purch. Macpherson Inverness



A specimen purchased from Macphersons, Inverness, foremost Sports Suppliers and Taxidermist of the Northern Highlands. Falling out of business in the 1970s, Macphersons' workaday material legacy was acquired by Inverness Museum. Now in storage, the workshop contents include photographs of the chief taxidermist, John MacDonald, in his deerskin apron alongside the tools of his trade. The craftsman's choice: Japanese gut, wire gimp, a handbook of Chemical Magic, "FLIT" flyspray. Tools of the trade, animals passing through turned inside out and back again, bound into shape and groomed - fit for the best collections, the highest walls. These remnants now dislodged to the perimeters of interest, with skins strewn empire-wide. Stuffing Books offer but a partial record.

Drawings and text © Kate Foster

For a full account of this artwork visit <http://www.meansealevel.net/topicmode/51> including collaborative publications with historical geographers Merle Patchett and Hayden Lorimer.

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Postscript by Hayden Lorimer: As a news item it flat-lined in almost the very same moment it flared [...] Two Hen Harriers plucked out the sky as they quartered their hunting ground, running the border where the Dersingham Nature Reserve backs onto the Sandringham Estate. The reserve warden spoke of hearing the shotgun's muffled retort, then another soon after. As each sound echoed, a bird fell. Expert marksmanship. The local constabulary came knocking with questions that demanded answers. The Prince, his shooting chum and their gamekeeper-consort had the same story. It was straight. Duck hunters only, duck hunters all. A thin-lipped statement from Clarence House confirmed the official line. The police decision to terminate inquiries dropped the whole thing stone dead. No ballistic evidence. No forensics. No eye-witnesses. No charges to be brought [...] By certain countryside economies, the Hen Harriers' real value is neither as hollow-eyed study skin, cabinet trophy or living treasure, but rather as discarded dead thing. They are "lamped" in ground roosts then shot under the cover of darkness. They are poisoned, trapped, bagged up and bumed. The keeper's secret cache: a discreet job, best dealt with behind the back shed, leaving no mortal remains.

(Extract from "Two down, third in line" by Hayden Lorimer - for a full version of this joint publication see <http://www.antennae.org.uk>)



sketching image inspired by Balfour, 1967

