

The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century

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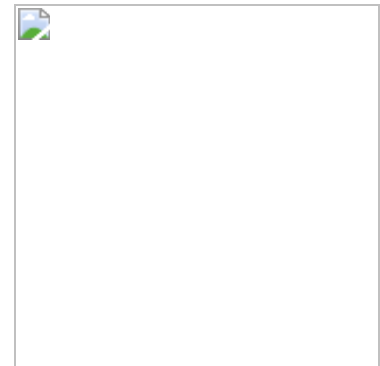
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The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century

Kirk Wallace Johnson

It's hard to believe that people can become obsessed with tying fishing flies. But that's exactly the tale that Kirk Johnson weaves in *The Feather Thief*. A professional flautist and an obsessive salmon fly-tier, Edwin Rist broke into the Tring Museum of Natural History in Tring, UK, and stole hundreds of preserved bird skins, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Johnson spent five years tracking down the story. *The Feather Thief* is Johnson's book about the obsession and his search for understanding and answers.

The hundreds of birds Rist stole from the museum were some of the most exotic and colorful in the Tring collection. They included the King Birds of Paradise, Superb Birds of Paradise, Magnificent Riflebirds, Flame Bowerbirds, Blue Birds of Paradise, many of them gathered with great difficulty in the forests of New Guinea and the Malay Archipelago 150 years earlier. Many of the exotics had been gathered by Alfred Russel Wallace, the naturalist and collector who nearly co-opted Darwin on the origin of species theory. To steal these specimens and destroy them to sell the feathers represents destroying history and destroying data invaluable to science.



Johnson takes us through an account of Wallace's efforts to find and identify for science the magnificent birds of paradise. It was only with the greatest luck that Wallace's specimens made it back to the British Museum. To preserve the specimens, the Museum moved the collection to Tring during the London bombing of World War II. But the collection contained exotic bird skins with their feathers, making them the object of Rist's theft.

The plumes of exotic birds, as well as abundant birds, were an obsession for the fashion industry in the late 1800s, when women's hats were decorated with plumes and even entire birds. The killing and the path to extinction for many of the birds led to the founding of the Audubon Society and the passage of the CITES act to ban the trade in endangered species. But, as Johnson reveals, the fly-tiers were not amused.

Fly-tying was recorded by a Roman author in the third century AD, but it didn't become an obsession until the Victorian Era. The sport was salmon fishing, generally reserved for the wealthy. With all the feathers being traded for hats for women, the male salmon fishers could

show them off on hooks. But these salmon flies, created out of the most exotic feathers, were never used for actual fishing, we learn. They are today exhibited at conventions and photographed by collectors. Edwin Rist became obsessed in his teens and became one of the most accomplished fly-tiers, winning awards for his creations.

The Feather Thief is an intriguing mystery story. We follow Johnson in his quest to understand the obsession and to figure out what happened to many of the stolen skins and feathers. Some of the birds from Rist's heist were recovered but most disappeared into the hidden, expensive, underground world of salmon fly-tiers.

If you like a good mystery story, you'll enjoy *The Feather Thief*. But you are also likely to be a bit upset by the obsessive efforts of the salmon fly-tiers to get the most exotic and expensive feathers for their creations. That people are still dealing in exotic feathers in the 21st century amazed me. But we continue to hear stories of people catching and selling birds for those obsessed with owning them, if not for pulling off their feathers. I wonder just what our cultural priorities really are. Protecting our environment and the creatures that occupy it alongside us has never been more urgent. *The Feather Thief* gives us a good idea of what we are up against.

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