

## Press Release

# *Research to Show Why Polly was More Than Just Pretty*

New research at the University of Sheffield is setting out to discover how over some five centuries the European passion for birdkeeping has nurtured important scientific discoveries.

Around the turn of the 20th century half the homes in England kept a cage bird, and the European tradition of keeping and observing birds goes back to the earliest historic times. Now the Leverhulme Trust has awarded Professor Tim Birkhead a three year grant worth E75,000 to track changes in European bird-keeping and discover how new ideas from the observation of birds made their way into mainstream scientific thought.

Professor Birkhead explained: "Modern scientific ornithology only came into being in the 1920s, and itself grew out of amateur birdkeeping. But, even in the 20th century, crucial discoveries based on subtle observations of bird behavior by their keepers could take decades to filter through into mainstream science. Scientists still regarded amateur bird-keeping as a largely irrelevant subculture.

"One good example of what bird-keepers could have told scientists about is the nature/nurture debate and the interactions between genes and the environment, particularly with regard to bird song. In the 1920s, long before professional scientists recognized that genes and environmental factors often work together, bird keepers had figured this out for themselves.

"Birds have proved to be ideal subjects for the study of several major aspects of animal biology including evolution, ecology and migration. Bird-keeping allowed close and detailed observation long before binoculars were available or field observation was possible."

In his preliminary research Professor Birkhead has already investi-

gated a number of source documents in national libraries and in the hands of private collectors. The Leverhulme Trust grant will enable him, with the help of a research assistant, to identify, scrutinize and analyze many more sources.

Notes for editors: Tim Birkhead is Professor of Behavioral Ecology and Evolution and Behavior Research Group leader in the University's Department of Animal and Plant Sciences.

For further information: please contact Tim Birkhead on 0114 222 4622 or Jon Pyle, head of media relations, on 0114 222 1038. ❖

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