

ICEMEN AND LAMMERGEIERS



A heterogeneous row of curious pre-adolescent eyes peered at the contents of the assorted glass jars on the teacher's table.

"What are they?" asked a boy.

"Food pellets", answered the teacher with a grin.

"They look like lumps of poo", said another spotty-faced boy, provoking gleeful outcries from his classmates. The teacher smiled condescendingly – that was a comment he had come to expect whenever he produced food pellets in front of a class. He picked up a jar and turned it in his hand, studying the contents as if they were new to him.

"Does anyone know what food pellets are?" he asked the class.

"It's what owls puke up", said another boy, again provoking further collective mirth.

"Well, Albert's right, more or less", said the teacher, "Food pellets are balls of undigested material: fur, feathers, bones and so on that birds of prey "puke up" as he put it. All birds of prey produce them, not just owls, although we usually study owls' pellets because they're more interesting."

Manel, the spotty-faced boy chipped in again, "They still look like balls of poo to me."

The teacher eyed Manel in mock concern "Well, Manel, if your poo looks like this," he said, holding up the jar and pointing at its contents, "then I think you don't eat enough vegetables."

Satisfied with his quip the teacher let the jeering whoops of the pupils die down as he fished in his bag for another jar, his *pièce de résistance*. Again, he held it up for the class to see. Inside they were two broad-based roughly drop-shaped objects that looked like immensely oversized, misshapen furballs.

"These are food pellets too", he said, "but they're not from owls. Can anyone tell me what species they come from?"

"Eagle!"

"Fox!"

"Vulture!"

The teacher nodded approval "Well done Miriam! These pellets are actually from a kind of vulture, a very special vulture called the lammergeier, known by some as the bearded vulture, and by others as the more suggestive bone-breaker."

The lammergeier is one of the four species of vulture present in Spain, where nowadays it is restricted to the Pyrenees and pre-Pyrenees of Catalunya, Aragón and Navarra. Not more than 30 years ago it could also be found in the Sierra de Cazorla in Andalusia, but the 2-3 pairs that graced those mountains in 1980, and which by all rights should have been a focal point of local pride, were poisoned to extinction by 1986. Someone obviously failed to admire this bird's handsome physique, it's wingspan of almost 3 metres, it's characteristic, long, diamond-shaped tail.

For the average person though a sudden encounter with a lammergeier more often signifies a pleasing tingle of airborne electricity, the enjoyment of a visual treat. The lammergeier has straight, parallel-edged wings conveying a cruciform flight silhouette, and this, together with the ferrous orange coloration of the adult birds and their long bristles, which form a charismatic dangling moustache, greatly facilitate the task of correctly identifying the species, so that even relatively uninitiated observers may pluck the bird's name from its flying form with an unusual degree of confidence.

Including the 12-15 pairs on the French side, the Pyrenees are home to around 100 lammergeier reproductive units (a choice of expression which will be made clear shortly). That may not sound like much, but actually it represents about 80% of the species' entire European breeding population: elsewhere 14-16 pairs on Crete, 5-8 pairs in the Balkan mountains of Greece and some 8 pairs in Corsica are the hard-pressed remnants of a species that suffered widespread declines during the 20th Century. So all things measured, the evolution of the Pyrenean population over the last 3 decades actually represents the flip-side of the coin, a rare and welcome conservation success story. Just take a look at the figures: in 1980 there were only 26-30 pairs of this vulture in the Spanish Pyrenees, a population which increased to 61 pairs in 1994, and which in 2003 stood at a remarkably respectable 84 pairs. A positive demographic trend which has exceeded even the most optimistic of prognoses.

The lion's share of this success should be accredited to the establishment of a supplementary feeding program in the Pyrenees in 1986. Since that year there has been a growing network of artificial feeding stations providing lammergeiers with a predictable food source, on a more or less weekly basis from December through to April or May. The menu is normally made up of 90% succulent sheep extremities and 10% delicious domestic ungulate skeletons, available at any one of the chain of vulture restaurants, thoughtfully located in steep, quiet settings with very little human disturbance and hunting pressure. In addition to providing birds with a safe, poison-free food source they also help to fix young, erratic birds, some of which are openly invited to stay on until they reach sexual maturity and set themselves up as breeding birds. The effectiveness of artificial feeding in aiding the recovery of the lammergeier in the Spanish Pyrenees is beyond all doubt: just compare the juvenile mortality rate of the species in South Africa, 88.5%, to that of the Pyrenees, 21.4%; or to put it another way, there has been a substantial increase in pre-adult survival with 60% of fledged young reaching maturity.

The lammergeier is well-known for its specialist diet of bones, and both its Catalan and Spanish names make allusion to its habit of breaking them open in order to get at the nutritious bone marrow and to splinter them into smaller fragments, more easily swallowed. Although the term "bone-breaker" when applied to a human being conjures up the image of a fearsome figure, a scar-faced prison inmate with an offset nose and a square undercut jaw, this avian version going by the same name is a far call from being the beak-nosed, "Crusher Jim" equivalent. At a recently discovered corpse where groups of blood-smearing griffon vultures crowd hunch-backed, cackling and lounging ill-temperedly at their neighbours the refined lammergeier will usually be the last bird to get its fill, looking on from the sidelines with haughty distaste for the uncouth behaviour of its thankfully distant relatives.

The teacher, satisfied that he had as much undivided attention as he was ever likely to get from any class went on, "And how do you think the lammergeier breaks the bones it eats?", he asked.

A pretty girl with a pony-tail thrust her hand into the air, "With its beak?" asked Sara.

"Well, it might break up small fragments with its bill now and then, but it would be hard-pressed to break a big, heavy bone in that way."

"With a hammer!" came another reply: it was, of course, from a boy.

The teacher regarded him pensively, “Not with a hammer, Joan...with an anvil.”

All adult lammergeiers make use of natural “anvils”, flat areas of rock on slopes of more than 45°, a characteristic which aids the bone breaking procedure due to successive impacts. In fact many birds repeatedly use favoured areas for this purpose, these usually exposed to dominant winds to aid flight and to avoid the accumulation of snow which would otherwise impede their bone-fracturing function. Hardier bones are broken in an operation which may be repeated up to 20 times, whereby the lammergeier, flying horizontally at 33-40 km per hour lets go of the bone at a height of anywhere between 20 and 1,250 metres. The bird then descends with rapid, spiralling flight to reclaim its meal. The lammergeier has a predilection for bones from the extremities of average-sized ungulates: sheep, goats and chamois mostly, although it has also turned its grateful attention to marmots, which are now quite abundant at a number of its Pyrenean haunts. Tortoises, where they occur, are also dispatched with the same ignominious treatment, their captors seeing no reason to make subtle distinctions between them and a large, enticing bone.

Since biblical times, when the lammergeier was, perhaps providentially, classified as an unclean bird, an animal that could not be eaten, a lot has been said about its dietary habits. This, the only osteophagous bird in the world, was more often than not cast in a negative light, and its demise over much of its former European range was surely due, in part, to the widespread belief that the species would readily take young lambs, snatching them up from their flocks, lifting them hundreds of metres into the air, dashing them on the rocks below and rushing down to hungrily devour their still warm entrails. In fact, the word “lammergeier” itself comes from the German “Lämmergeier”, meaning “lamb-vulture”.

“Oh great! Look! There’s a lammergeier!” I once exclaimed to the Swiss group I was leading.

Stephanie looked at me, confused, “A what, you say?”

“A lammergeier! Up there! Look!” I replied with some urgency – it was the first one we had seen on the trip, and I didn’t want anyone to miss it. Instead of heeding my directions though and, - it must be said - at Stephanie’s instigation, the 5 or so Swiss ornithologists within immediate earshot completely baffled me by engaging in a hurried conference. Speechless, I gazed at the group until a few moments later Stephanie emerged as the spokeswoman and approached me in earnest. I was all ears.

“Steve, please, ve don’t vant that you say lammergeier for zis bird. This means it is eating the baby sheep, you know....”

“Lambs?” I offered.

“Yes. The lambs. And this is not true you know. Only the stupids people are saying that.”

An explanation that I had employed the *English* name, however unjust it was, sprang to my mind but, well, it could wait.

“And what is the right name for the bird that is now disappearing over that mountain ridge?” I asked.

Stephanie answered, unruffled, “It is the *Bartgeier*. You know, the one wiv ze beard.”

Actually, bearded vulture is also another English name for the lammergeier, although it is rarely used these days, at least by the British. For the dictionary buffs there is also the old English term “ossifrage”, literally bone-breaker, a

name which, somewhat inexplicably, was later transferred to the image of the osprey, or ospray, as it was known centuries ago. “The ossifrage ..or dispised eagle..” begins one scholarly elucidation of the term by a 17th Century author, leaving the reader to wonder which of the two raptors would be most “dispised” at the time: the osprey for stealing fish from rivers and ponds, or the lammergeier, notorious for its malevolent dedication to searching for climbers looking for eggs on the crags, and knocking them off the ledges to plunge to their deaths. Additionally, those who suffer from a certain degree of alopecia would be well advised to heed the warning implicit in another legend, which asserts that the Greek playwright Aeschylus was killed by a tortoise dropped on his bald head by a lammergeier which mistook it for a stone.

“Now, the reason why I’ve brought these particular pellets is that there’s a very interesting story concerning a lammergeier and a human corpse,” *now that should have enough morbid appeal*, the teacher told himself. “Perhaps you’ve heard about it – it was on the news and in all the papers about 10 years ago.”

“10 years ago I was only 2! I couldn’t read then!” said Manel.

“You can’t now either,” replied Albert.

“Ha-ha! Very funny.”

“OK, lads, keep calm. I know you were all very young at the time, but I thought that maybe your parents would have mentioned it to you.”

“The only papers my dad reads are the sports papers,” said Joan.

Finally, the prompt the teacher had been awaiting came from Albert, “And what was the story then teach?”

“It’s the fascinating account of the Iceman of Aneto...”

The mountain of Aneto rises to 3,404 metres, and as such is the highest peak in the Pyrenees. It is also boasts the largest glacier in Spain, although that is rapidly succumbing to global warming: the rather sobering statistics point out that the Aneto glacier has waned from the 692 ha it covered in 1894 to less than 160 ha at present, and that in the last 20 years, the two decades that I have been living in Spain, it has more than halved in size. Fortunately I have accepted the probability that I will never set eyes on a Spanish glacier, as the only thing that would give me enough impetus to conquer such an elevated summit under my own steam (and there’d be a lot of that if I tried to climb Aneto) would be to track down an elusive high-altitude bird, like a snowfinch.

To search for snowfinches was the main purpose I had in mind when, one summer, I drove along the long, windy road that leads past the village of Aneto up to the banks of the Llauset reservoir. It was mid-July, school was out for summer, and my 9-year old son Alex had accompanied me on the understanding that we would be back home in the evening with enough time for him to return to his Gameboy. Llauset, a stony-banked reservoir dammed for hydroelectric power, which is reached by passing through a poorly-lit tunnel of nearly 2 kilometres in length, had appealed to me as the ideal destination basically because of the existence of a road which led up to the considerable altitude of 2,100m. From there, I reasoned, it would be a thankfully short haul up to the heights where snowfinches could be hoped for.

We parked overlooking the dam, and had barely left the car before the unmistakable form of the lammergeier was spotted sailing overhead. As we both watched through our binoculars another two came into view. I tried to gauge Alex’s enthusiasm for the sighting, inciting him to respond, “Wow! Look Alex! Three lammergeiers at the same time!”

“Yes” he replied, tonelessly. After a moment’s thought he posed me a question, “Dad, if there was a fight between a lammergeier and a golden eagle who would win?”

“Well, er...the lammergeier’s bigger than the golden eagle, but then the golden eagle is probably more agile and...er, more aggressive. The golden eagle, I suppose. Although I don’t expect they spend much of their time fighting each other.”

He studied the birds through his binoculars again, probably hoping that an irate golden eagle would appear on the scene and engage one of the lammergeiers in a talon-to-talon aerial battle, the result of which would either conclusively repudiate or confirm my prediction. I had a quick look around, but no, there was no eagle in sight.

“Dad, why has one of the lammergeiers got a black breast?”

Jolted, I studied the birds again, and sure enough one of them had a sizeable dark stain on its lower breast region.

“Yes, that’s very interesting Alex. I expect he has just been having a sand bath.”

He looked at me to see if I was joking, “A sand bath?”, he asked, incredulously.

Lammergeiers take between six and seven years to reach sexual maturity during which time their body colour goes from a dull grey to attain a deep rufous buff tinge. This rich adult coloration, however, is not a result of moult, but rather derives from the adult bird’s fondness for indulging in sandbathing activities. Birds impregnate their body feathers with iron oxides which they rub off the walls of crevices and overhangs where such compounds are available dissolved in water. Often this comes off as a dark stain which the bird then proceeds to spread around its body feathers with the help of its bill. In times of drought, when such compounds become scarce and difficult to replenish, the buff on the body of the Lammergeier will gradually fade to a pale, whitish colour, a phenomenon which is also widely observed in captive birds. The most plausible explanation for this behaviour seems to lie in the protection of the plumage, the oxides adding rigidity to the feathers’ barbs and barbules, thus increasing their resistance to the biting wind and high humidity so typical of their mountain haunts.

“Oh,” said Alex, after listening quite attentively to my explanation, “so those 3 lammergeiers are all adults?”

“Yep. You can see they all have that deep, buffy orange colour on their bodies.”

“And can you tell if they’re men or women?”

“Male or female?” I corrected, “That’s more difficult. You can’t usually tell just by looking at them.”

Slowly he drew his lips into a coy smile, “Unless they’re doing...you know....naughty things. Making love,” he said.

In reality if you happened to catch a couple of lammergeiers in the act then the only thing you could assert with any certainty would be that the one on top was a male. You wouldn’t necessarily know if they were the components of a normal breeding pair, or of a polyandrous trio. Polyandrous trios are breeding units composed of one female and two males, both of which copulate with the female and collaborate in nesting duties. This *ménage a trois* was first recorded in the Pyrenees in 1979, and nowadays between 15% and 20% of lammergeier

territories in the Spanish Pyrenees are occupied by trios, a figure which rises to a surprisingly high 32% in the autonomous region of Aragón. There was even one nest where 4 birds were observed to be in attendance! To spice things up even more, diligent observation of the activities of the members of these trios has revealed that male-male mountings are far from uncommon, accounting for 26% and 11% of all the mating attempts recorded in two different trios studied in different years. Apparently it's a release for male aggression.

Investigators have been puzzling over the possible explanations for this rather Bohemian sexual conduct and believe that the phenomenon of polyandrous trios could have important implications for the conservation of the species. It has been variously attributed to biased sex ratios - there being a relative shortage of females -, high breeding densities, or low food availability. Genetic kinship between the males may also play a part, but as yet there has been no solid evidence to support any one particular theory. However unconventional this arrangement may be, the male members stand to benefit from sharing out their breeding efforts, thereby increasing their longevity and overall reproduction success. Secondary males have an additional benefit in that they may occupy the territory on the death of the dominant male occupant who, all things considered, would be well warned to keep an eye out for falling tortoisises.

"That's very interesting, but I thought you were going to tell us about the Iceman of Aneto," admonished Sara.

"Well, I am, but I thought you'd like a little background information before starting," explained the teacher. He looked at his pupils whose faces told him that he would do better by skipping any further introduction.

"Very well," he said, "let me tell you about the Iceman".

One day two university students were analysing the content of lammergeier pellets, just like the ones I have here, for their final year project on the relationship between lammergeier diet and agricultural activities in the Pyrenees of Spain. Each pellet was opened up methodically and the bone fragments identified according to species: this one from chamois, this one from marmot, this other from a bird, etc. In one of the pellets they found a bone that didn't correspond to any of the species they knew, but which they remarked looked very much like a human phalange, or fingertip bone. Curious, they took it to a medical student friend who confirmed their identification: it did indeed look like a human fingertip, but why was it so discoloured? They had no explanation.

Being the concerned citizens they were they took the evidence to the police, where at first they had a hard time trying to convince some rather sceptical law enforcement agents of the authenticity of the bone in question. Nevertheless, they prevailed and the police took up the investigation. Where had they found the pellet from which the bone came? On the slopes of Aneto, they answered. While the bone was sent off for analysis the police consulted other sources. They went to the wild fauna recovery centre in Lleida and asked the vet, was it possible that a lammergeier had ingested part of a human being? It wasn't impossible, said the vet, in India for example human corpses are often left to float down the Ganges where they would be consumed by vultures. Although in Spain the opportunities for any kind of vulture to feed on human remains are limited to say the least. So is there any way of tracing this bone to the rest of the body, if it does indeed exist? Well, said the vet, it wouldn't be easy: presuming the pellet came from one of a known reproductive pair the search could be

limited to the within the boundaries of their territory, since reproductive pairs were completely sedentary; however their home ranges were enormous, covering between 300 and 4,800 square kilometres of some of the most inaccessible terrain in the whole country. And what if it wasn't from a known territorial adult? Then the only possibility, albeit remote, was if the bird was carrying wing tags. Wing tags?

From 1987 onwards more than 33 young lammergeiers have been wing-tagged: coloured tags have been attached to the leading edges of both wings in a unique combination which would unambiguously identify the holder and provide useful information about the bird's movements. Juveniles are known to disperse widely over the Pyrenees, first of all undertaking exploratory flights within 8 kilometres of the nest. Several months after their maiden flight they may have wandered up to 20 kilometres from the nest and may stay in the same area for more than a week, rarely feeding themselves, preferring to parasitise from the anvils of visiting adult pairs or else to beg for food. After that they may cover distances of up to 140 kilometres in a straight line, and eventually, when 3 years old or more they may range over the whole of the Pyrenees. The average home range for 13 of those tagged young was 4,932 square kilometres, with one bird ranging over an eye-opening 10,294 square kilometres!

The police interviewed the students once more. Had they actually seen the bird producing the pellet? Yes, or at least that's the way it seemed, since they saw a bird perched on a ledge producing a pellet and when they went to search the area there were in fact several of them. Good. Was the bird marked with wing tags? Well, yes, in fact it was. We wrote down the combination in a notebook but haven't got round to consulting it yet. Here it is: a yellow tag on the left wing and a blue one on the right. Who marks the birds and keeps records of their movements? The rural agents of Catalunya and Aragón should be able to provide all the necessary details.

Duly consulted the rural agents of Aragón were of great help: the wing tag combination corresponded to a 4 year-old bird called Eva, which had been spending the last few months on the slopes of Aneto. In fact, the bird had been observed with certain regularity, uncharacteristically for the species, feeding near the peak of the mountain itself, on the glacier. Following that information an expedition was organised to the area, and after an exhaustive search a human body was discovered, an arm and part of the head protruding from the ice. The exposed parts were a little frayed at the edges, missing fingers no doubt having served as canapés to satisfy Eva's peckishness, but the body was remarkably intact for one which had spent an estimated 5,000 years in a frosty mountain-top tomb.

I studied the map in some detail and pondered the possibility of taking a short cut to gain height more rapidly up a steep, grassy slope that lay beyond an area strewn with large boulders.

"Do you fancy climbing up there?" I asked Alex.

"OK!" he answered, always keen on clambering up heights.

We leapt from rock to rock and were soon chided by a couple of marmots, their shrill alarm calls echoing off the mountainsides. We paused to observe an alpine accentor perched on a rock before tackling the grassy slope, pulling on tussocks and grappling rocks to heave ourselves upwards. We arrived at the top, panting heavily, and sat down to rest on the grassy shores of a small lake.

“Hungry?” I asked, knowing that he would have to be quite ill before turning down the offer of something to eat, especially if it was something sweet.

“Oh yes!” he answered eagerly.

We bit into our chocolate bars, happy to let the cooling breeze work around our hot bodies. Alex made very short work of his snack and followed it with a few gulps of water. During our rest a number of small grasshoppers had leapt about in different directions and Alex’s fear of these insects had put him ill at ease. I thought I would distract him with some lammergeier facts.

“Did you know that lammergeiers usually lay two eggs, but there’s only ever one chick which grows into an adult bird?” I asked.

His eyes met mine and with a degree of aroused curiosity he asked, “No, why’s that?”

“Well, one egg hatches before another so that there’s always one chick which is bigger than its brother.”

“Like me and David” he observed.

“Yes, like you and David,” I said, “So the parent birds, like mama and papa, have to feed two hungry mouths.” Alex smiled.

“But the difference is that it’s very difficult for lammergeiers to find enough food to feed both chicks, and when they bring food to the nest it’s nearly always the big brother who gets to eat it.”

Alex frowned, “Why don’t the parents share it out equally?” he asked.

“Because there isn’t enough food for both - if they did that then both chicks would die. So as the big brother gets bigger and stronger the little one gets weaker and often dies of hunger.”

Alex’s sense of justice was offended, “I wouldn’t let my little brother die,” he said, accusingly.

“I know you wouldn’t. But then again, you’ve never been hungry. In fact the big chick often gets so hungry that he will sometimes peck and kill his little brother and then eat him!”

My son’s eyes widened in horror, “Eat his brother!” he exclaimed, with vehement distaste.

Mother lammergeier: Hi kids!

Lammergeier chick: Hi mum!

Mother: Where’s junior? Junior! Junior! Oh dear, he must have fallen from the nest! Oh my!

Chick: Eh, no mum, he hasn’t fallen.

Mother: Well where is he?

Chick: Here (points to stomach).

Mother: What do you mean...I can’t see him.

Chick: That’s because I’ve eaten him.

Mother: What? All of him?

Chick: Well, you know with this bad weather, and we hadn’t eaten for 2 whole days - I was so hungry I could have eaten a horse. And besides, you kept on at us about starting on solids.

Mother: You little rascal! What an appetite!

Chick: You’re not angry with me are you mum?

Mother: Angry? No, of course not dear. Why should I be angry? That’s what little brothers are for, you know.

There’s a name for this phenomenon: it’s called cainism, after the biblical Cain who killed his brother Abel. Taking advantage of this Spanish researchers have hit on the idea of saving some of the second chicks just after hatching to

create a genetic pool of captive birds, ready for future reintroductions whenever and wherever they are considered necessary. In this way it is hoped that the lammergeier can be safeguarded against possible extinction in the wild.

Puzzled, I looked at the map once more and tried to work out exactly where we were. It was evident that I had misjudged the scale. It was getting late, and the sensible thing to do was get us safely back down the mountain and back to the car. But I didn't want to backtrack – it was one of my personal aversions.

“All we have to do now is climb up that rocky area to the top and then walk down the other side, it's not so steep. Do you think you can do that?” I asked.

Alex eyed the rock face in question and the disturbing void below it with some doubt but acceded, putting trust in my judgement.

Five minutes later I was wishing he hadn't.

“Alex, just move your arms and legs one at a time, get a firm hold and don't look down,” I said, trying to convey a serenity that I didn't possess.

“Dad, I'm afraid!” sobbed Alex. So was I. I was holding onto a rock with my right hand and pushing my son's bottom with my left, all the time having to make a concerted effort to stop my knees from trembling. Immediately below us was a steep, boulder-strewn slope lying at an angle that I didn't think we'd survive if we lost our grip. We were in such a compromised position that it would have been the ideal moment for a vengeful lammergeier to exemplify the legendary notoriety of its kind and to stoop out of the heights, batter us with its strong wings and make us fall to our dooms. What a grim vision that would make for a passing excursionist: stumbling on a lammergeier feeding on the still-warm entrails of the corpses of father and son!

Alex and I reached the car with a sigh, tired but relatively unscathed. In fact the only external sign of our harrowing experience was on our reddened palms, scratched and scraped by sliding down the steep slope to the banks of the reservoir as if we had been riding a sledge, only without the sledge. When Alex had made the final effort to heave his body up onto the grassy turf crowning the rock face we were scaling I had been assailed by enormous relief, but that had now been surpassed by a tremendous feeling of guilt at having led my son into such a perilous undertaking. I had mortgaged my parental responsibilities and only the whims of good fortune had saved me from having to pay an unpayable price. I thought of how horrified Florinda would have been if she had seen us, clinging to that rock face, both of us praying to whatever forces we hoped would deliver us to safety.

“Er, Alex.” I began.

He lowered his binoculars and looked at me, “Yes, Dad?”

“I was thinking – we don't need to tell mama about our little rock climbing adventure, do we?”

“No, she'd only get into a fuss.”

What a bright boy! “Exactly,” I said, content that he saw things my way.

“Do you know something, Dad?” he said.

“No, what?”

“I think that after today I'm never going to be afraid of grasshoppers ever again.”

“And from that day the nearby villages organise festive acts coinciding with the date of discovery of the world-famous Iceman of Aneto.”

The teacher leant back in his chair and studied his students' faces. For a moment one could almost hear a pin drop. But only for a moment. Miriam was the first to break the spell of silence.

"What I don't understand is why lammergeiers lay two eggs if there's only ever one chick that survives."

"That's a very good point, Miriam," responded the teacher, "Some scientists believe it's a kind of defence strategy against losing an egg, while others think that it may be due to "evolutionary inertia", which means that lammergeiers started out laying two eggs a long time ago and just haven't got round to evolving to lay just one."

Albert was next, "Why didn't that lammergeier, Eva, go to a vulture restaurant instead of eating bones that were 5,000 years old? They must taste like old socks."

Most of the class laughed out aloud, and Manel interpreted this as sign for him to say something even funnier, "Was the iceman's willy sticking out of the ice too? Did the bird eat that?"

The class's response was raucous, but forced. The teacher, standing up, took the reins once more, "I have a question for you that's related to this account, which is the following "Did American astronauts really step on the moon in 1969?"

The students were obviously at a loss to see any relationship between lammergeiers eating Icemen's fingers and Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind.

"What's that got to do with it?" was the forthcoming question.

"Well," replied the teacher with only the slightest hint of a knowing grin, "For some time now the belief has been growing that man was incapable of conquering the moon back in 1969 and that the moon landing was an elaborate "show". Your homework for next Friday is to find out what evidence has been forwarded to withhold this opinion. I would also like you to think about the discovery of the Iceman of Aneto, decide if you believe it or not, and to give *good* reasons for your choice."

"You mean that what you've told us isn't true?", asked Miriam, almost offended by the possibility.

"At the moment *that* is for me to know, and for you to find out. See you next week!"