

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: The Bird Collection of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

Author(s): Boot, K. J.

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The bird collection at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, has long been recognised as one of the finest in the country. Containing approximately 9,000 specimens the collection represents a valuable reference and research resource. The collection is world-wide in coverage and of particular interest are the collections from the Americas and Australasia. Although the majority of the specimens have come to Exeter direct from individual collections a large number are from the collections previously housed in other museums. This reflects the collecting policy of the RAMM, in the past. Exeter was still actively collecting foreign material at a time when many other museums were disposing of it. The present collecting policy is somewhat different. Foreign material is 'passively' collected i.e. by donation only and not by purchase or other active methods.

The majority of the collection is in the form of study skins. These are housed in one room in standard cupboards on metal racking. Each cupboard contains drawers of differing sizes enabling even the largest birds to be incorporated into the system. Each specimen is protected from dust and adjacent specimens by means of polythene tubing. Mounted specimens are by their very nature more difficult to store conveniently. Various rooms containing cupboards and boxes house this part of the collection. Within this system the birds are theoretically arranged and named according to the B.M. (N. H.) catalogue. Since the original sorting in the 1940s many more specimens have come into the museum. The existing system was not always adhered to with the result that many birds are in the wrong place. In addition nomenclatural changes and alteration of taxonomic positions have further diminished the ease of retrieval and hence the usefulness of the collection.

This haphazard arrangement is also reflected in the various lists and catalogues pertaining to the collections. The accession registers contain the all too familiar 'see attached list', what list? The 'master catalogue', constructed by Willoughby Lowe in the 1940s has not been kept up to date with either acquisitions or disposals.

In order to restore this collection as a useable resource, I have embarked upon a complete re-storage and re-cataloguing project. Much of the collection, including all of the study skins, have recently been fumigated by Rentokil using Methyl Bromide. Continuous 'protection' is afforded by the use of a combination of PDCB and Thymol paper. It is hoped a further fumigation will take place in the near future enabling the remaining material to be absorbed into the main collection. Exeter is at present investigating the possibilities of installing its own fumigation chamber. Such an asset will help clear the backlog and provide for the immediate cleansing of new material in the future. Infestation will then be reduced to the absolute minimum. For economic reasons storage will follow the existing system for the present. The possible removal of the entire collection to an adjacent building precludes expenditure on storage at this stage.

MDA cards are being used for recording and documentation purposes. At least my successors will know which sources I used for reference. The taxonomic arrangement is as laid down in Gruson. Identification is facilitated by the use of the most up to date monographs and regional works available - an ever present drain on finances.

The large size of the collection precludes the publication of a complete catalogue. As each group is processed relevant workers and institutions will be circulated with the resulting information. In addition I intend to place a summary of these results in the BCG Newsletter for the information of colleagues. The first summary is included with this article.

References:

B. M. (N. H.). Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum (Natural History) 1874-1895

Gruson and Forster. Checklist of the Birds of the World. Collins. 1976.

Bower Birds - F. Ptilonorhynchidae

Thirty-two specimens representing five genera and eight species. Species present are:-

Ailuroedus crassirostris (Paykull)
Amblyornis macgregoriae DeVis
Amblyornis subalaris Sharpe
Sericulus aureus (Linn.)
Sericulus chrysocephalus (Lewin)
Ptilonorhynchus violaceus (Vieillot)
Chlamydera maculata (Gould)
Chlamydera cerviniventris Gould

Birds of Paradise - F. Paradisaeidae

One hundred and eighteen specimens representing fifteen genera and thirty species. Species present are:-

Loria loriae Salvadori
Manucodia ater (Lesson)
Manucodia chalybatus Pennant
Phonygammus keraudrenii (Lesson et. Garnot)
Ptiloris paradiseus Swainson
Ptiloris magnificus (Vieillot)
Semioptera wallacei (Gould)
Seleucidis melanoleuca (Daudin)
Paradigalla carunculata Lesson
Paradigalla brevicauda Rothschild et. Hartart
Drepanornis albertisi (sclater)
Epimachus fastosus (Hermann)
Astrapia nigra (Gmelin)

Astrapia splendidissima Rothschild Astrapia stephaniae Finsch et. Meyer Astrapia rothschildi Foerster Parotia sefilata (Pennant) Parotia carolae Mever Parotia lawesi Ramsay Pteridophora alberti Meyer Cicinnurus regius (Linn.) Diphyllodes magnificus (Pennant) Diphyllodes respublica (Bonaparte) Paradisaea apoda Linn. Paradisaea raggiana Sclater Paradisaea minor Shaw Paradisaea decora Salvin et. Godman Paradisaea rubra daudin Paradisae guiliema Cabanis Paradisaea rudolphi (Finsch)

Many of these specimens are accompanied by data. Others, notably zoo specimens and those imported for the plume trade, are not.

The collections of Ptilonorhynchidae and Paradisaeidae are made up from donations made by the following people:-

Cooper, Dr. H.J. Lyme Regis Downall, Miss Frood, Dr. Topsham 1907 Gunn, Mr. T.E. Norwich 1941 Heath, Mr. J. Bristol Hynes, Mrs D. M 1960 Ipswich Museum Knowle, Devon 1948 James, Mrs. Budleigh Salterton 1919 Lightbody, Mr. J. H. Lyons, Mr. P.E. London 1947 London et. Torrington 1939, 1940, 1946, 1949 Maxwell, Mr. P.H. Milton, Mr. A.M. 1940 Nicholls, Mr. R.P. Kingsbridge 1915 1956 Norwich Castle Museum London 1938 Peard, Miss. Peek, Sir W. Bart. Rousdon 1907 Peel, Mrs C.M.V. 1932 Pickard, Col. R. Primley (Paignton) Zoo 1940 Rashleigh, Mrs Okehampton Rowan, Mrs H. B. Hemyock 1931

Exeter

1940

Chelsea 1924

Exeter 1924

St. James' Palace 1916

Smee, Mr. W.J.N.

Stamfordham, Lord Veitch, Sir H.J.

Whiteley, Mr. H.

White, Vc. Adml. R.W.

University College of the South West 1906

White, Mrs

Anybody requiring further information about the above or the collection itself, or indeed anybody able to supply information to me, is welcome to write to:-

Kelvin J. Boot, Curator of Natural History, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Queen Street, Exeter.

