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The Vertebrate collections at the Colchester and Essex Museum

A small quantity of skeletal material survived from the early collections included some specimens from the collections of C. R. Bree more noted as author of 'Birds of Europe not occurring in the British Isles'. His ornithological collections went to W. H. Harwood, a Colchester dealer in Natural History specimens and their present whereabouts is unknown to us.

The osteological collections have been extensively developed since about 1970 and now include several hundred bird and mammal skeletons which are used to identify remains in owl pellets and stomach contents and also bones from Archaeological sites. Any specimen that is unsuitable or not required for the display or study collections is skeletonised, if in excess of this museum's requirements it is passed on to another museum or area service.

Using corpses of vertebrates found dead or legally shot by the donor, we have been able to develop our displays and study collections from nothing in 1957 to over 2,000 specimens today. Almost all our sea birds are from oiled birds found dead on local beaches, for which we developed cleaning methods many years ago. The network of "Body Snatchers" founded by Clifford Owen has been developed and enlarged during the years so that it now yields up to 200 corpses a year.

These study collections are used extensively to teach bird identification and by artists needing colour notes and feather details as well as providing data for scientific projects.

We have supplied cuckoo guts to one research worker and owl weights to another and are at present ourselves studying the grit and food contents of local ducks and geese. As most specimens are prepared in the museum we are able to extract, on a routine basis, samples of liver for analysis at the University of Essex.

Reptiles and amphibia are mainly represented by fluid preserved specimens, we have decided to use phenoxetol based preservatives as there is a considerable fire hazard in the museum.

Fish are grossly under-represented, a situation which we hope to rectify in our new displays, and at the same time to develop our study collections.

To back up our collections we have an extensive series of colour slides and access to the C. P. Rose collections of black and white negatives which are on long term loan to the museum from the present Colchester Natural History Society.

Being able to preserve most specimens in the museum has enabled large reserve collections of mounted material to be accumulated. These are used to produce a series of changing exhibits which enable us to show a variety of different species in the small area we have available for display. This results in a steady return flow of local visitors. The cost of producing such display using outside contractors would have been prohibitive (if we could have found anyone to produce them) but we feel sure that the time involved producing them 'in house' is well spent.

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