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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

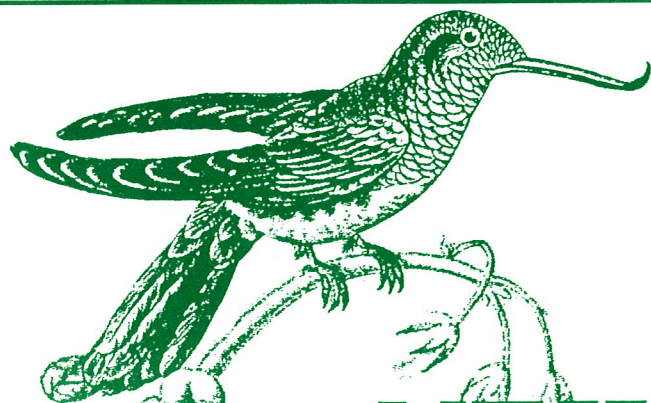
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NEWSLETTER

February 1993

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Editorial – Happy New Year !

In the last issue I intimated that in future issues of this newsletter there would be a short diatribe from the Editor on a matter of current moment. In the run up to the deadline for this issue I pondered on the possibilities – taxonomy, training, university collections, the national structure for biological recording, curatorial standards, green issues, the role of BCG etc. Then quite suddenly and quite literally all these were swept away when on Sunday 17 January, after heavy snowfalls and a sudden thaw, the River Tay (flow greater than Thames and Severn combined) burst through the flood banks and filled half of Perth with water. The museum stores on the ground floor were filled to a depth of 22 inches in the worst flood since 1814 (which was of course pre hydro scheme and dams on the river system). I cannot possibly describe the feeling of watching water spreading through the stores, rising up the storage units both new and old and lapping around for twelve hours before draining away as the waters receded. There are no previous records of flood water entering the building.

And now the good news! Our natural sciences collections escaped largely unscathed if a little disordered. Six mollusca drawers were soaked but specimens and labels have been stabilised, and as I write there is a lingering smell of decomposing turtle (from a specimen which was I suspect more of a souvenir than a museum specimen and which had, I now realise, not been properly prepared).

The museum is currently closed to the public as the display areas are needed to work through the social history and fine and applied art collections which were damaged but normal services will, as they say, be resumed as soon as possible. So why the editorial? Well, the point is this. If I had needed more specialist advice, where would I have got it? Where are the colleagues with experience of flood-damaged biological collections or the manual containing well documented and researched techniques for stabilising wet specimens? As I watched the teams of conservators from the Scottish Museums Council, National Galleries of Scotland, National Museums of Scotland and the Scottish Record Office all beavering away it did cross my sceptical little mind to wonder what would have happened if the natural history collections had been seriously damaged? So the point is ~~this~~ (trainers, researchers, writers and publishers please take note) we need more readily accessible sources of information, we need people who can be mobilised in an emergency, we need checklists of emergency procedures and we need proven recovery procedures. And if your museum has no disaster plan get one drafted. Experience of some form of incident is the best way of honing your own disaster skills but I hope that none of you ever get that experience and I earnestly wish that this will have been the only major disaster in my career. Thankfully events on this scale do not happen often and so most recent attention has focused on the problem of slow attrition of natural history material by neglect. It's easy to be wise

after the fact so let's start compiling information before the next disaster strikes. After all, it could be your turn next.

Correspondence on the topic of disaster control – or anything else for that matter to the editor please. And in case you're feeling down – a belated Happy New Year to you all !

Diary Dates

March 28 - April 4

Taxonomy and biology of parasitic hymenoptera – A week-long residential course at Sheffield University.

This will be the fourth in a successful series, initiated in 1989, run jointly by Mike Fitton of the Natural History Museum, London and Donald Quicke of the University of Sheffield.

The difficulties of identifying this most fascinating group of insects are well-known to museum entomologists. This course aims to give a broad overview of the parasitic Hymenoptera, especially their biology and systematics. It comprises an integrated combination of lectures and practicals emphasising identification and techniques. Participants on past courses have included curators from museums abroad, but so far none from Britain! Only a moderate background biological/entomological knowledge is assumed.

The full fee for the course is £550 (which covers tuition, the course manual, course notes, accommodation and all meals, except lunches) but we are able to offer bursaries to offset some of the cost to students and others (like most BCG members?) with limited finances. For more information please contact Donald Quicke, Dept. of Animal and Plant Sciences, PO Box 601, Univ. of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2UQ. Telephone: (0742) 768555 ext. 4628. FAX: (0742) 760159.

April 3-4

Natural History in the Field – British Society for the History of Science Meeting at Lyme Regis. Further details from Dr Janet Browne, West Grange, Church Street, Great Shelford, Cambridge, CB2 5EL.

April 16-19

Mammal Society Easter Conference and AGM at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Details from the conference secretary on 091 374 3348.

April 21

Caring for your natural history collections – Insect collections. Ipswich Museum. The first of three workshops organised by the Area Museum Service for south east England. Free to AMSEE members and limited to 12 places.

April 29-May 2

Glasgow. SHNH Scottish Conference dealing with Scottish Natural History and celebrating the bicentenary of John Hunter. Contributions from several BCG members. Details from Dr J. Gibson, Foremount House, Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire.

May 14

Conservation and the Herbarium – aimed at curators and conservators responsible for the welfare of Britain's 17 million herbarium sheets. Venue Liverpool, fee £40 for non-members of the Institute of Paper Conservation. Contact Nicola Walker, IPC, Leigh Lodge, Leigh, Worcs., WR6 6LB or further details from Tel 051 207 0001 ext 491.

May 19

Caring for ... Vertebrates. Booth Museum, Brighton. AMSEE workshop.

May 28-29

BCG AGM Inverness. Theme – Valuing Collections. Final programme in next newsletter but contact Steve Moran, Inverness Museum, Castle Wynd, Inverness, Tel 0463 237114, if you have any queries meantime.

June 2

Caring for ... Herbaria. Herbarium, RBG, Kew. AMSEE workshop.

April 20-22 1994

The development of International Communication in Natural History will be the theme of the next SHNH conference to be held in London.