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## The Biology Curator

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### Why Museums Matter; Avian Archives in an Age of Extinction

#### A conference addressing museum avian collections

-A review-

During the weekend of 12-15 November, 130 people of about 25 nationalities attended a Conference near Tring on the theme 'Why Museums Matter: Avian Archives in an Age of Extinction'. The event, hosted by the NHM Bird Group in conjunction with the British Ornithologists' Union, British Ornithologists' Club and BirdLife International, was aimed at highlighting the importance of museum bird collections to both research and conservation. A wide range of talks summarized many facets of the use of avian collections at the turn of the century, from analysis of bird song to tissue sampling for DNA supported phylogenetics.

By the evening of Friday 12th most of the delegates had arrived for registration and dinner followed by a talk from Adolfo Navarro, Mexico. Titled 'Museums Working Together: the Mexican Bird Atlas' Adolfo introduced the subject of the entire weekend: co-operation between museums for a better understanding of data which is normally stored isolated at different institutions. The talk, impressively illustrated using powerpoint software, showed some amazing results of linking data gathered from more than 10 different museums.

On the morning of Saturday 13th the conference was officially opened by Robert Prys-Jones, head of the NHM Bird Group and followed by an opening address given by the U.K. Government Chief Scientist, Professor Sir Robert May.

The first main speaker of the day, Jürgen Haffer, a well-known German ornithologist, followed with his talk 'Zoogeography of Speciation and Colour Patterns in Birds'. His research is based on the traditional methods from previous centuries and enlarges Wallace's biogeographical work in the Amazonian basin to a broader scale. Nigel Collar (UK), BirdLife International, underlined the importance of Avian collections for conservation issues. He emphasized that in many cases the status of species are purely based on museum material. Under the title 'History versus Mystery' Pamela Rasmussen (U.S.A.) and Robert Prys-Jones presented examples of the reliability or non-reliability of museum specimen-data. Incorrect interpretation of information may arise from misleading data, be wrong through unintentional error, or simply from downright deliberate fraud. Most notorious among avian collectors was Richard Meinertzhagen, who heavily effected the Tring collections by changing labels and specimens during the first half of this century. Only after detailed and forensic studies of preparation methods together with register information have Meinertzhagen's machinations been proven. Per Alström (Sweden) and Richard Ranft of the National Sound Archives (UK) highlighted the use of sound recordings to answer taxonomical questions. One of the most complex Asian warbler groups, for example, has subsequently been split into several taxa. Rhys Green (UK) and Jörn Scharlemann (UK) emphasized the importance of time series

of specimens in collections, giving an example of their essential role in long-term ecological studies. An eggshell thinning of passerines due acidification is under investigation. Anthony Cheke (UK) demonstrated in no uncertain terms the unsatisfactory situation of the Mauritius Museum, where unique material including extinct giant turtles and endemic birds is suffering from the mismanagement of governmental officials and museum executives. Carlo Violani and Fausto Barbagli (Italy) gave a brief introduction to Italian bird collections focusing mainly on the historic collections of Northern Italy. Some of the Italian museums originate from the mid 18th century which house important type material and some of the oldest stuffed animals which are known to have survived from this period. Brad Livezey (USA), an authority in bird anatomy, showed the results of his recent survey of the rank of wet anatomical collections compared with other more heavily used collections of several major museums. The very interesting results demonstrated the discrepancy between the known need of such a collection and the actual preparation practises in use, as shown by the holdings of museum collections. On a very similar theme, Storrs Olson (USA) discussed the uses and importance of avian skeleton collections, also giving interesting statistics from major museums.

Sunday 14th November began with three smoothly-linked talks concerning the subject of bird illustrations, from the perspective of a publishing house (Andrew Richford of Academic Press, UK), to the views of an artist (Martin

### NEWS FROM SHEFFIELD

Derek Whiteley, Principal Keeper of Natural History, is to leave Sheffield Museum early in 2000, after 25 years at the museum. He will pursue a freelance career based from home, and look after daughter Phoebe born in September.

Derek will remain a member of BCG from his home address

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The Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust's decision to outsource all conservation work means that Paul Richards moves across from Natural History Conservator to Assistant Curator Natural History. Paul now works part time Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesday mornings.

Gaynor Boon remains as geologist and meteorologist with a new title pending.

Sheffield Biological Records Centre has been centralised at the City Ecology Unit

which left the museum in 1998 and is now under Sheffield City Council Leisure

Services Department at Meersbrook Park. Jean Glasscock is the Senior City Ecologist.



Woodcock, UK) and the contributions museums can offer (Jon FjeldsÅ, Denmark). The overwhelming tone was to maintain moderate bench fees, the need for new material and the importance of specimens series. Jon FjeldsÅ, himself a bird illustrator, collector and curator, seems to be able to offer larger collections of newly collected material from both Europe and further afield. His collections at Copenhagen Museum are therefore some what unique for the general situation in Europe.

Townsend Peterson (USA) promoted the idea of a world-wide avian specimen data-base in his talk 'Distributed Data-bases over the Internet'. Already initiated in the United States he welcomed the inclusion of world-wide institution. With his knowledge and experience European museums will gain valuable assistance in building up a network of their Avian collection holdings. The final two talks touched two completely different aspects: Clemency Fisher and Effie Warr (UK) spoke about 'Museums on Paper' giving several examples of the importance of the paper/art work associated with specimens and collections; and Les Christidis and Janette Normann (Australia) summarized DNA studies using museum material. Subsequently a discussion concerning sampling policies developed.

In addition to the high quality lectures, delegates could learn from posters around the conference centre concerning aspects of collections and research in a variety of European museums. Posters covered a diversity of topics including extinct and endangered specimens in the Sofia Museum; specimens of the Reunion Starling in Italian collections; an overview of the birds collected by Charles Darwin during the voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle; the amount of data attached to specimens at Sarisska Museum (Slovakia); research projects connected with the skeleton collection at Tring (Gibraltar caves/Mascarene Island subfossil bones); microscopic feather identification; and bird communities of the Indian Ocean Islands. Bookshops were also present, representing the British Trust Ornithology, British Ornithologists' Club and other publishers, offering plenty of literature for the scientific community.

Following immediately from the conference a day-long Workshop was held entitled 'Increased Co-operation between Museum Bird Collections, especially in Europe'. Approximately 55 professional bird curators, representing almost every major European bird collection as well as others world-wide, remained behind to participate in this more informal but structured discussion. The event proved both stimulating and productive, bringing together people who in some cases had been in contact for years without having ever met.

The main subjects divided into five separated sessions were: the current state of co-operation between collections; the potential for electronic catalogues of types and extinct & endangered bird specimens; the implications of DNA sampling and how it should be regulated; and collecting policies and the importance of adding to the collections. Of the many issues and points raised, the overriding conclusions were: i) to initiate a European network of collection information via the world-wide web; ii) to generate a 'global' electronic type catalogue for all bird taxa (to be maintained by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington

D.C.); iii) to unify the regulations for DNA sampling policies; iv) to focus on active collecting to enhance species time series and improve breeding bird representation in collections; and v) to more openly engage in exchange programs between institutions. Already since the conference several institutions have agreed to specimen exchange programs

It was also agreed that an informal common media (e-mail chat group) should be established to share general curatorial issues. This could be based, and even linked to the existing American forum 'Avecolí'.

Additional talks introduced other topics for discussion: Sylke Frahnert (Berlin) explained the CETAF network (Consortium of European Taxonomic Facilities); Fausto Barbagli (Pavia) presented the European governmental funded 'Extinct and Vanishing Animal' list, where museums in Europe listed their holdings of rare specimens; and John Cooper (Wildlife Health Service, Wellingborough) asked for more involvement of vet science in museum matters, especially welcoming more material from zoos, bird parks and veterinary surgeries being incorporated into scientific collections.

The conference and workshop were seen to have been very successful and it was agreed that European curators should hold subsequent meetings on a two-year basis. Curators from Bonn, Germany, volunteered to host a 2001 event and Leiden, Netherlands, was suggested for 2003.

A published Proceedings of both Conference and Workshop will appear in 2000. For further information about the conference proceedings please contact Robert Prys-Jones, The Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, Herts HP23 6AP, e-mail: <rpp@nhm.ac.uk>. Tel: 0207-942-6158.

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## Scottish Marine Collections at the National Museums of Scotland

In recent years the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) has acquired several large and scientifically important collections of marine invertebrates. This article outlines the way NMS has collaborated with government, academic and commercial institutions in order to obtain these specimens.

### Collaboration with government institutions

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) became fully operational in 1996. Amongst SEPA's many duties is the control of discharges to tidal waters out to a three mile limit. SEPA monitors the environmental effects of these discharges by taking biological samples for laboratory analysis, and therefore collects, preserves, sorts and identifies large numbers of marine invertebrates each year.