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Paradise at Kendal Museum

Carol Davies, Natural History Curator, Kendal Museum

Introduction

Kendal Museum has quite wonderful collections of Victorian taxidermy. These collections resulted from the generous donations of Victorian and Edwardian benefactors to the museum, people who themselves were amongst the foremost natural historians of the day and active in the local natural history societies. Indeed the museum was founded by the Kendal Natural History Society in 1835 and built up with donations of individual collections and records by this and its successor societies during the rest of the century, donations which form the basis of the museum collection as we know it today.

The Kendal Museum support group has been a great help in my work with the collections and we have been able to work on small projects leading to new displays. Many of the support group members are inspirational people with detailed specialist interests in the field of natural history. In times of recent uncertainty one of the ways in which we can maintain an active cataloguing programme to promote the collections is to draw on this area of support.

Paradise

One such project has been the recent display together with the cataloguing and conservation of three magnificent cases of Birds of Paradise. These cases are attributed to H. Murray and Son and are part of our large collection of this celebrated late 19th century/early 20th century taxidermist.

In each of the three cases, the birds are arranged in a diorama setting. Although these are beautiful to look at, there were no names for the individual birds, the original records, if they ever existed, having been separated from the cases. Our first task was to name them all.

I am indebted to two members of the current Kendal Natural History Society who together, over several months, researched a full catalogue for these and several other cases of exotic birds.

My next job was to move/conservate and clean the cases for their new position in our World Wildlife Gallery. Our plan was to display the cases near the main Australian dioramas together with an information board. My intention is that this board can 'standalone' so that this display could have the potential to move out from the museum and form a small temporary display serving to advertise the museum collections if needed.

Finally we decided to produce a line drawing of each case naming the specimens, using the artistic talents of another of our supporters. As well as making attractive information sheets for the



Fig 1. Case 1 displaying 7 birds of paradise.



Fig 2. Close up of Raggiana Bird of Paradise *Paradisanna raggiana* in Case 2.

public, these have already proved useful for school projects!

Conclusion

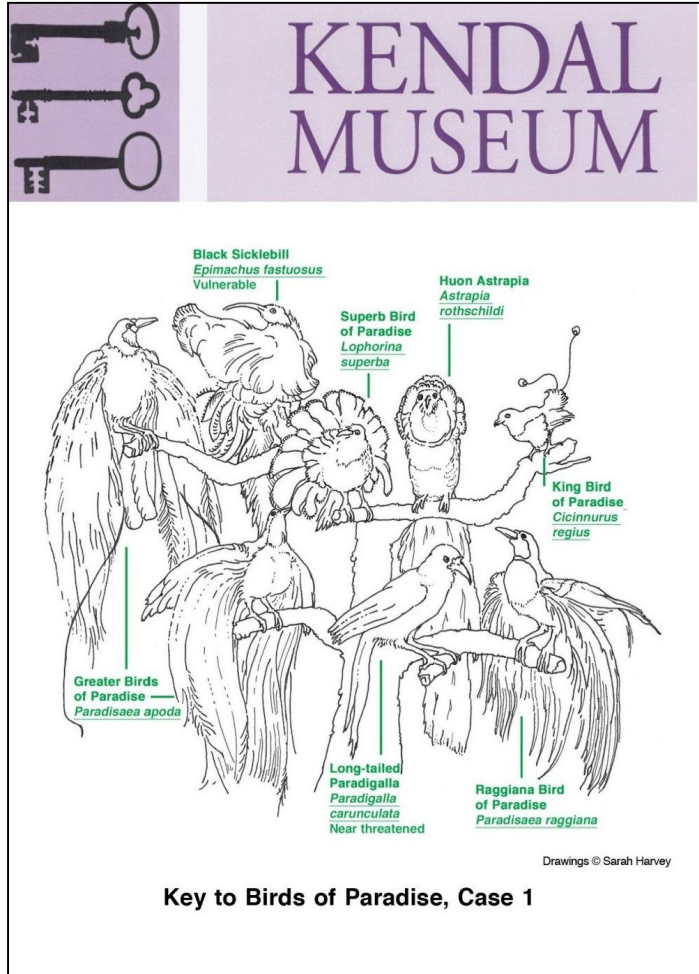
With each new project the promotion and celebration of the collections is very much in our minds, as we endeavour to appeal to a greater number of visitors.

We await the joinery needed to build the shelves on which the cases will finally be housed and bring together all the component parts but you will agree that these magnificent cases deserve to be shown off.

Acknowledgements

Mrs Judith Robinson: For help, advice and support for each stage of this new display and who, together with the help of Mr Gordon Clark researched the final catalogue for the Birds of Paradise.

Mrs Sarah Harvey: For the meticulous and quite beautiful line drawings used in the information sheets



Key to Birds of Paradise, Case 1

Fig 3. An example of one of the information sheets to accompany the newly revamped cases. Each sheet was specific to its case.

Birds of Paradise

About 40 species of Birds of Paradise are found in and near New Guinea. Their fantastic plumage and bright colours have attracted attention for centuries. The first species to be taken to Europe were the King Bird of Paradise and the Superb Bird of Paradise. The King Bird of Paradise was first taken to Europe in 1522 and given the name Bird of Paradise. The legs and wings had been removed from these birds and the birds were stuffed in the 16th century. It was said, tucked in the air, feet up, but their eggs in a hole in the back of the male, and never came to earth and they died.

Birds of Paradise are believed to be related to the crow family. Their closest relatives are the birds of Australia and New Guinea. Some of the New Guinea birds are very colorful and used to be classified as birds of paradise, which may explain why a specimen of the Plumbeous Kingbird was included in one of the cases of Birds of Paradise in the Museum. Most species inhabit inland forest in New Guinea, where the male displays his plumage, while all nest building and care of the egg and young is left to the mainly brown females.

The display of the male birds of paradise are as strange and varied as their plumage. Some species display by dancing on the ground in areas, which they carefully clear and defend. They raise crests, ruffs or tassels of feathers, posture and flash brightly colored patches or open their beaks to display colored linings. Some bounce on branches, swing their plumes, which may extend from their heads, their tails, their shoulders or their wings. In some species, the male displays on a branch or forest floor arena, while in others, the male performs group displays in the high canopy, where the full females gather and are mated by the one male which has, by its display, won the most favourable position.

In the highlands of New Guinea are some mainly black birds of paradise. The Sicklebills and Astrapias mostly have long tails, some exceedingly long. Riflebirds, named from their black and green plumage, appeared to resemble the tailfeathers of army rifles, have iridescent throat patches but no long plumes.

There are also some mountain species, such as the Long-tailed Paradigalla Paradigalla Carunculata, in which the males are no different from females. Here the plume of food for the male to show in the work of nest building and rearing of the young, so preventing the evolution of extravagant plumage and behavior. These birds appear closer to the crow-like ancestors of all the birds of paradise, but have white or yellow wattles on their heads.

The King Bird of Paradise (Cicinnurus Regius) is the smallest of the family. From its tail plume two long wires ending in circular green discs. To display it hangs upside down below a branch, swinging the wires and disks above it. The related Magnificent Bird of Paradise (Cicinnurus Magnificus) is also small but very colorful with two long curved tail feathers and an elaborate courtship display. Wilson's Bird of Paradise (Cicinnurus Wilsoni) occurs only on a few remote islands. It keeps its eyes closed and, when dancing, displays a green crest or ruff and iridescent colors, as well as an unusual blue and black head-pattern.

The male Black Sicklebill (Epimachus Fastuosus) dances alone, adopting extraordinary postures, and showing off its improbable capabilities. With its extraordinarily long tail, it measures well over a meter and is the longest of the Birds of Paradise. Due to habitat loss and hunting for plumage and food, it is classified as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The male Magnificent (Cicinnurus Magnificus) dances alone, showing off its brilliant green breast shield to the female. The female is typical of many female birds of paradise in being mainly brown on the back and barred below. This Victoria's Riflebird was discovered in 1848 and named after Queen Victoria.

The word taxonomy comes from the Greek taxis meaning fixing or arrangement, and nomia meaning law.

Birds of Paradise: The Taxidermy

The cases of Birds of Paradise in Kendal Museum have been presented by one of the most celebrated taxidermy artists of the 20th century, taxidermist Mrs. H. Murray & Son, Specialists in Natural Taxidermy. This was a small family concern, founded in 1872 and based locally in Carlisle from the 1890s. Naturalists in Carlisle and in having one of the finest collections in the country of the taxidermy of H. Murray & Son, acquired during the heyday of Victorian collection, a time of great discovery in the scientific and natural history world.

Birds of the World by Oliver J. Austin, Birds of Paradise

The black and blue coloring appears to belie its name but, when displaying, the Superb Bird of Paradise (Lophorina superba) raises a variety of capes, extends a breast shield of iridescent blue and performs an amazing dance on its forest floor arena.

The black and yellow 12-winged Bird of Paradise (Satanstoeus melanoleucus) has wires attached to the end of its tail in an upward triangle. The male displays near the top of trees on vertical tree branches and uses the wires to brush the face of the female before mating.

Birds of Paradise: The Taxidermy

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RANCH, ON THE LONDON CHARWALK, W. 186, January 9, 1899
 "THEY COULD NEVER LIVE THE LITTLE BIRD OR REDNECK MODEL, IT BECOMES SUCCESS VERY WELL."
 "GIVEN TO BE IN THE HOUSE, BUT PREVIOUS HER COMPANY AS A MOTHER FROM MANY COURTESY"

Emily Williamson, the wife of a Manchester solicitor, became disturbed by the number of birds, both in home and abroad, that were destroyed to satisfy the military trade in suitable feathers for aviators. She formed a society in 1898 to advocate in order magazines and discouraging consumers from buying feathered hats. By 1908 there were 172 branches and 10,000 members nationwide. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was founded in 1901. An Act was passed protecting the importation of plumage, cutting a major end of the original society.

Greater Birds of Paradise (Paradisaea Apoda) display in grassy near top of high trees in canopy, hanging upside down to show off their plumes. The males display the colorful plumes when about six years old. The dull younger males dance too but it is always one of the older males which gets the female.

Wilson's Standard-wing (Satanstoeus Melanoleucus) occurs only in the Milneburg or Spice Islands. It displays in groups in trees, vented by blue-green crest and raising its standard feathers, which protrude from the front of the wings.

12-Winged Bird of Paradise (Satanstoeus Melanoleucus)

Fig 4. The standalone board with detailed information about the history of birds of paradise and why they were collected.