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The 11th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting - Conference Report

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Abstract

The 11th Biennial European Bird Curators (EBC) Meeting was held at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History in Tel Aviv, Israel, from September 24th to 26th, 2019. In this conference report the packed programme of talks, posters and discussion is summarized under three general themes – (i) natural history museums, bird collections and conservation in Israel; (ii) historical investigations to create data rich specimen records; and (iii) new collecting. The objective of the EBC meetings, to promote cooperation, dissemination of best practices and new techniques in the curation, management, and research of bird collections, was comprehensively achieved. Expressions of interest were put forward to host the 12th and 13th EBC meetings in Gothenburg, Sweden (2021), and Liverpool, UK (2023), respectively.

Keywords: Birds, Ornithology, Curating, Israel, Conference; Collections

Introduction

The Biennial European Bird Curators (EBC) meetings grew out of eBEAC (electronic bulletin board for European avian curators), an “online community of European bird curators and associates who look after the vast collections of bird specimens in museums and institutions across Europe” (Scharlemann, 2003; Russell, 2019). eBEAC is maintained by the Natural History Museum, London (Russell, 2019), and provides “an informal forum to exchange information and facilitate cooperation and collaboration between European bird curators, collection managers and researchers”. Likewise, the Biennial Meetings are not managed by a formal scientific society or commercial organisation but informally by curators themselves.

The objective of the EBC meetings is to promote cooperation, dissemination of best practices and new techniques in the curation, management, and research of bird collections. Presenters in the scientific programme often include curators, collection managers, ornithological researchers and also representatives of initiatives like the Biodiversity Heritage Library (Sheffield, 2013). The first EBC meeting was held in Tring, UK (1999), and more recently, the EBC meetings have been held in Prague (2013), Moscow (2015) and Paris (2017). The 11th EBC meeting was held at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History (SMNH) in Tel Aviv, Israel, from September 24th to 26th, 2019. There were 33 registered attendees representing museums in Wider Europe (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Norway, Russia, Switzerland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and also North America (Canada, and the United States) (Figure 1).



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Figure 1. Attendees of the 11th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting held at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv, Israel, between 24th-26th September 2019. (Image by Daniel Berkowicz)

Day one of the meeting opened with an introduction to the SMNH followed by an overview of the museum's bird collection, including its applied uses, and the notable collection of Ernst Schmitz. This was followed by a group of talks covering other natural history museums and ornithological research in Israel. In the afternoon we were treated to a group of talks on egg collections (including a talk on the development of the Online Database of Hungarian Egg Collections by Tibor I. Fuisz, of the Hungarian Natural History Museum) and a guided tour of the SNHM's public galleries and collection store rooms.

Day two of the meeting began with two sessions of talks, followed by a full assembly discussion and poster session after lunch. We ended the day with a traditional celebration of the Jewish New Year on the museum's terrace and expressions of interest were put forward for hosting the 12th and 13th EBC meetings in Gothenburg, Sweden (2021), and Liverpool, UK (2023), respectively. Day three was a full-day birding excursion to the Dead Sea; bird sightings were recorded in eBird (Sullivan et al., 2009) (Figure 2).

Natural history museums, bird collections and conservation in Israel

The meeting was opened with an introduction to the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History (SMNH) by Tamar Dayan, Chair of the Museum (Figure 3). The talk detailed how the new museum building only opened to the public in July 2018 and houses the natural history collections held by Tel Aviv University. Although the SMNH is part of the

university and the curators are also faculty members, the collection is designated as a "national collection". The museum welcomed 200,000 visitors in its first year of operation.

Amos Belmaker, the Chair of ECB 2019 and curator of birds at the SMNH, presented an overview of the SMNH's bird collection, exploring the taxonomic, temporal and geographic diversity of the collection. Some of the curatorial challenges and innovations were also described including advantages of bagging bird skins - labels and barcodes can be stuck onto the plastic bags – and "flat" skin preparations – space saving and flexibility. Daniel Berkowicz introduced the SMNH's egg collection and Yohai Wasserlauf elaborated on the importance of bird tissue collections in enabling



Figure 2. Attendees of the 11th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting on a bird watching excursion to the Dead Sea on 26th September 2019. (Image by Laurent Vallotton)



Figure 3. The Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv, Israel, designed to resemble Noah's Ark, opened in July 2018. (Image Laurent Vallotton)

molecular phylogeographic research. The SMNH's feather lab was introduced in a talk by Avigail Ben-Dov Segal illustrating the important applied uses of the bird collection, focussing particularly on efforts to mitigate aircraft bird strikes. This a pressing concern in Israel, a small country with heavy pressures on airspace. Yossi Leshem of Tel Aviv University, spoke about the bizarre rediscovery of the Father Ernst Schmitz zoological collection (Friedman, 2018) which is now on permanent loan and display at the SMNH.

Eshel Ofir presented an introduction to the other "national collection" of birds, held by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and in particular the founding collection made by Professor Israel Aharoni (Sapir, 2014). Sa'ar Nudel shared an analysis of similarities and differences between two peripheral natural history museums that he manages - the Houses of Ussishkin and Shturman - located at kibbutzim in northern Israel. Ohad Ha'zofe, of the Israeli Nature Reserves Authority, spoke about bird conservation initiatives and challenges - for example, draining wetlands to combat malaria is starving the migrating pelicans, leading to pelican feeding by the nature reserves department.

Historical investigations to create data rich specimen records

Many of the talks on day two emphasised that a major task of bird curators and collection managers is undertaking historical research into specimens and their collectors. The goal is to add value to the collections under our care by creating data-rich specimen records. Paul Sweet, of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), showcased his work with students in the AMNH Science Research Mentorship Program. The students have

been geo-referencing specimen records from the museum's Whitney expedition to the South Pacific Islands through reviewing the expedition logs and collector's journals (Langas, 2019).

Ulf Johansson, of the Swedish Museum of Natural History, explained his process for enhancing specimen records for birds in the museum's extinct bird collection. Jiri Mlikovsky, of Charles University, Prague explored the provenance and collection history of bird specimens exported from Russia during the time of Johann Friedrich von Brandt (1830-1880). Douglas Russell, of the Natural History Museum, UK, described his research into the collections made by Captain C. C. Abbott in the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas), stemming from investigations into a mystery egg previously suspected to have been collected by Charles Darwin. My own talk was part of this theme, examining the influence of colonial history on the bird collections from Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore held in World Museum Liverpool (Wilson, 2019).

New collecting?

As a useful precursor to the full assembly discussion, Thomas Trombone, of the AMNH, presented his analysis of the taxonomic and geographic representation of the AMNH bird collection. This was deemed a necessary prerequisite to guide and justify further collecting by museum staff for the AMNH collection. Similarly, in his talk about needs and trends in European bird collection management, Magnus Gelang of Gothenburg Natural History Museum, showed examples of very limited, opportunistic, local, collecting to fill gaps in the museum collection. For me, this highlighted the importance of "combining museum databases" through publishing data to the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF: the Global Biodiversity Information Facility, 2019), for example, to determine not only gaps within home institutions, but gaps across the museums collections nationally and internationally.

The perennial topic of the ethics of new collecting, the needs, and the legal constraints (Minteer *et al.*, 2014; Rocha *et al.*, 2014), occupied most of the time allocated for full assembly discussion. While the general consensus among attendees was broad support for new collecting, most meeting attendees came from countries and institutions where collecting new material is very challenging. Amos Belmaker shared the example of the SMNH whereby new collections come almost exclusively from salvaged material from nature reserves and national parks, and the importance of maintaining close relationships with staff at these sites. The

issue of lack of trained preparators and conservators, and support for these careers and skills, was also brought forward as a limitation on new collecting and the growth of bird collections.

With ever improving methods of capturing standardised images, and the development of analyses which can be conducted on non-lethally and non-invasively collected biological material, it may continue to be harder to justify “traditional” collecting and to shape public opinion in support of such pursuits. The classic bird study skin, while representing state of the art science of the time, may not be the main specimen type accessioned during future growth of bird collections. Therefore museums are increasingly recognising their role in the storage and preservation of new types of collections associated with bird biodiversity, be that digital data (images, video, sound recording, scans) or biological tissues and samples which are suitable for diverse types of analyses (exemplified by the update on two large-scale avian DNA sequencing projects: B10K and openWings, presented by Peter Hosner of the Natural History Museum, Denmark, and the 64-author poster presented by Friedrike Woog of the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Germany, on the European Raptor Specimen Bank; Movalli *et al.*, 2019) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Poster session at the 11th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting held at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv, Israel, on 25th September 2019. (Image by John-James Wilson)

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