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## The Biology Curator

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may say more about me than the book but I'll let you discover that for yourselves. As a baseline recommendation, for anyone starting up in natural history this is an invaluable publication and should be read from cover to cover. For us old lags there is enough to jog our memories and remind us to change our bad habits.

Steve Woolfall, Grosvenor Museum,  
Chester

## PUBLICATIONS

**Natural Science Collections in Scotland** - this is the catalogue produced by the Scottish Natural Sciences Collections Research Unit in 1987. Now slightly out of date but still very useful. Anyone who balked at the original price of £25 can now pick up a remaindered copy for the unbelievable bargain price of £5 (incl postage), from the Publications Section, National Museums of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh.

**Checklist of the Cerambycidae and Disteniidae (Coleoptera) of the Western Hemisphere** - available from Wolfsgarden Books, P.O.Box 10716, Burbank, California 91510-0716, USA. Price \$84.60 incl. international postage.

**World Checklist of Seed Plants** - vol 1 parts I and II now available for 260 Swiss Francs from MIM Editions, Lakkorslei 114, 2100 Antwerp, Belgium.

## EXHIBITIONS

**Natural Curiosity** is a new and very interesting small exhibition in the entrance of the Royal Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh. It traces the history of Natural History in Scotland from the seventeenth century using historic specimens from the Scottish national collections.

**Feather, Fur and Fin: a look at taxidermy** is a new display at Chelmsford Museums Service tracing the origin and development of taxidermy using specimens of (mainly) birds, fish and other animals which have been included in the specimen conservation programme initiated eight years ago and which it seems, unfortunately, will be the swansong of the South East Museums Service conservators.

**Julius Brenchley, Gentleman Explorer** is a new exhibition at Maidstone Museum. This tells the story of JB's life and various travels

around the world using the natural and ethnographic objects he collected.

**The Centre for Understanding the Environment** is the latest development at the Horniman Museum and has been described as one of the most advanced ecological projects of the last ten years. Built from sustainable timber CUE is insulated with recycled newspaper, finished with non-toxic organic paint and topped with a living grass and wild flower roof. [This is crying out for a review, volunteer please - Ed]

**Bird Biology: an exhibition about birds** - a soaring Ruppell's vulture, *Gyps rueppellii*, has spotted a dead young antelope lying on the arid sands below. It circles above the carcass rapidly losing height and eventually lands nearby, the first scavenger to arrive at this meagre meal. After tearing through the thin skin, the vulture begins to feed on the soft internal organs while a marabou stork, *Leptoptilus crumeniferus*, watches on, patiently waiting for scraps. You could be watching this scene in Africa, but you are actually looking at this first spectacular exhibit in Bird Biology, a new permanent exhibition about the biology of birds, which opened to the public last October.

Bird Biology focuses on three main aspects on the biology of birds - flight, feeding and reproduction. It makes use of the extensive collection of mounted birds of the Natural History Department, many of which were formerly on display in the gallery next door. But instead of serried ranks of every conceivable bird on Earth, this new exhibition shows how the shape, structure, coloration and size of a bird are adaptations to help birds exploit virtually every food source in every habitat all over the world.

Intermingled with the older mounts are many new specimens, which have been mounted specially in dynamic poses to show particular behaviours. So now, you can see a lammergeier vulture, *Gyaepatus barbatus*, swallowing large lumps of bone like a sword swallower, a female wreathed hornbill, *Aceros undulatus*, which has incarcerated herself in a tree nest hole with a wall of mud, leaving only a small slit through which the male feeds her, and the bizarre courtship of the male houbara bustard, *Chlamydotis undulata*, which resembles a feather duster crossed with a headless chicken.

The introduction shows that birds evolved from small carnivorous dinosaurs and the function of the vital combination of feathers, skeleton and eggs which defines birds. It also shows the biggest living bird, the ostrich, *Struthio camelus*, alongside one of the smallest, the vervain hummingbird, *Mellisuga minima*, which is no bigger than the ostrich's eyeball.

The second section, Flight, shows how birds fly and, in particular, how wing shape affects the way in which they fly, whether it be a sparrowhawk in rapid pursuit of its prey or a pheasant taking off vertically to escape a fox. Many birds in a museum are shown sitting on a perch or on the ground, but Bird Biology shows a multitude of birds in flight. The apparently mysterious way in which birds successfully migrate over thousands of kilometres is also investigated. The highlight of this section is a newly mounted female wandering albatross, *Diomedea exulans*, which can be seen gliding over the ocean with her wings stretched fully to their three metre span - a truly magnificent sight.

The third section, Finding Food, aims to show some diversity of the birds of the world by looking at how they are adapted to feeding. By focusing on different diets (eg seeds, fish, nectar etc), it is possible to see how different bird families have evolved either very similar or very different solutions for feeding on a particular diet.

The fourth section, The Cycle of Life, looks in detail at the many different aspects of reproduction from nest-building to hatching from the egg and rearing of the young. In particular it looks at the wide diversity of nests and nesting materials and how these relate to the shape and coloration of eggs. It also focuses on cuckoos and other birds which parasitise the nests of other species and so avoid the labours of parenthood, and contrast them with many other bird species, in which young from the previous year help to rear their siblings.

The final section, Attracting a Mate, completes the cycle of life by showing the different ways in which birds attract mates using songs, brightly-coloured plumage and often bizarre displays. It shows that birds have two main mating strategies - most are monogamous, but a few are polygamous with either males or

females benefiting from multiple partners to increase their reproductive successes. The importance of choice is illustrated to good effect with a reconstruction of the display ground or lek of a wading bird, the ruff, *Philomachus pugnax*, where the female has come to choose a mate from the many displaying males. This section also features an audio-visual programme, which allows you to hear the songs and calls of birds from around the world.

Bird Biology is a spectacular mix of the old favourites and the new, and will provide an interesting and popular insight into the often bizarre biology of the birds of the world.

*Andrew Kitchener, Natural History Department*

*National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh*

[The above is reproduced, with thanks, from an article which appeared in the National Museums of Scotland's *Reporter* for autumn/winter 1994]

#### **A POINTS STANDARD FOR AUDIO-VISUAL PRESENTATIONS: A Rating system for slide presentations.**

[*Editors Note: This talk was given last April at the Manchester Conference on the Value and Valuation of Natural History Collections. I thought those members of BCG who were unable to attend might appreciate reading it*]

It is suggested that from next year, all speakers have to submit audition videos in advance of giving an audio-visual presentation. Everyone starts with 1000 points. A score of 500 is needed in order to be permitted to speak. You have been warned!!!!

- 100 Use of any of the following buzzwords: buzzword, bottom line, target date, cost-effective, interface (as a verb), human resources, state-of-the-art, impact (as a transitive verb)
- 50 Blaming slides/lighting/collections/museum/planet on director/curator/collections manager/janitor
- 500 Opening with "I want to take you on a little slide tour of my museum, which has never been represented at these meetings before"
- 100 Use of any of the following phrases:
- "Let me tell you a little bit about my background."

- "Let me tell you a little bit about my museum."
- "As I was putting this talk together last night..."
- "Why did I put this slide in here?"
- "This talk made sense when I put it together."
- "I know that slide is in here ; somewhere. Well, we'll just get to it later."
- "Oh! Forgot that slide was in here."
- "I should have used this slide earlier."
- "What is this? Oh, this is a closer view of the object in the previous slide."
- "Now, this is an SEM shot...wait, maybe this is the topo map."
- "I should have used this slide for the last point. I guess I forgot to forward it, eh?" {Americans: read "eh?" as "huh?"}
- 1000 Saying "Oh! My God!" and staring at the screen for more than 5 seconds.
- Saying "Well, I guess that everyone has days like this, huh?"
- Saying "I was going to write my talk up in advance, but I decided to wing it instead. I know you'll understand."
- 5000 Saying "The next speaker's not going to be here, so they asked me to put a few slides together for you."
- 20 Dropping notes.
- 50 Saying "oops" after dropping notes.
- 5 Dropping microphone.
- 100 Knocking over lectern.
- +100 Choreography after knocking over lectern.
- +15 Each minute under the time limit.
- 100 Sunset slides
- +10 Musical background
- 20 Soft jazz musical background
- 50 Use of overheads
- 500 Combining slides and overheads without practising the use of either
- +10 Use of videos
- 20 Slide upside down or reversed
- 50 Stopping talk to flip slides
- 100 Telling audience that slides are upside down or reversed
- 20 Slide with vast quantities of data in illegibly small type
- 100 Telling audience that it is not expected to be able to read such a slide
- 20 Underexposed or overexposed slides
- 100 Informing audience that slide is too dark (or light) to be seen

- 75 Trying to convince audience that slide is not overexposed, but is instead archival
- 200 Slide of something dark floating in a pan of indeterminate liquid with someone's finger pointing to an indeterminate feature.
- 100 Group shot of entire staff looking uncomfortable and artificially posed
- +100 Group shot of entire staff looking entirely too comfortable and artificially relaxed
- 50 Inappropriately dirty pictures
- +100 Appropriately dirty pictures
- +500 Appropriate phone numbers
- 50 Aerial shot of building from satellite orbit level

#### **AUTOMATIC DISQUALIFICATION**

- Photo of any living relative (photo of cute child will result in a 2-year suspension)
- Photo of pet
- Photo of speaker's cluttered desk
- Photo of food
- Photo of museum parking lot
- +100 Cartoon no one has seen before
- +100 No overheads
- 50 Thumb or lens cap in photo
- 75 Out of focus
- 100 Misidentification of slide taken by speaker
- 100 Going back to any previous slide
- 200 Leaving slide up on screen until it melts
- +100 Handouts
- +200 Snacks
- +500 Taking audience to bar
- 500 Spending too much time in bar before presentation
- 10 Taking the first 5 minutes to show slides of work area 66 when talk has nothing to do with it
- +1000 Taking the first 5 minutes to give audience drink vouchers to use in bar when talk has nothing to do with it
- 10 Forgetting name of the organization to which speaker is speaking.
- 10 Giving a boring talk
- +50 Admitting the talk is boring

*John Simmons, Collections Manager, Herpetology, Museum of Natural History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas USA, and Sally Shelton, Director, Collections Care and Conservation, San Diego Natural History Museum, PO Box 1390, San Diego, California 92112, USA.*