

Ornithological Literature

Edited by Mary Gustafson

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER: AVIAN ARCHIVES IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTION. Edited by Nigel J. Collar, Clemency T. Fisher, and Christopher J. Feare. Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club, vol. 123A—Supplement. 2003: 360 pp., 21 contributed papers (selected contributions at <http://www.boc-online.org/bulletin.htm#bul>). ISSN: 00071595, £22.00–24.00 (paper).—This volume stems from a meeting of the same name held in November 1999 in Tring. The meeting was the first of its type, and now is the first in a series, meant to bring members of the European avian collections community together in an effort to enhance international cooperation among museum biologists. In the New World, we have the annual meetings of the American Ornithologists' Union and the list serve AVECOL (established by J. Van Remsen, Jr.) that seem to promote a degree of interaction that had not yet been achieved among European institutions. The breadth of participants (130 people from 25 countries) and authors (36 people from 13 countries, many outside of Europe) demonstrates a success that reaches well beyond Europe.

This is a dynamic time to be a museum biologist—although the title of this volume reflects some of the community's angst—as we continue an inexorable transition from the description of avian diversity and distribution to a more diverse array of scientific pursuits. The collection of papers in this volume is rather eclectic, which is to be expected given the great diversity of materials that museums preserve and the variety of ways in which these materials are used in avian research.

The bulk of the volume treats traditional collections of skins, skeletons, fluid specimens, eggs, and associated paper (labels, catalogues, journals, etc.). DNA, proteins, tissue collections, databases (Christidis and Norman, Rajkowski), and sound collections (Alström and Ranft) are also included, as are two chapters on the electronic amalgamation of museum data (Peterson et al. and Navarro et al.).

The highlight of the volume is C. S. Ro-

selaar's *An Inventory of Major European Bird Collections*, which, at 85 pages, is the longest contribution. He summarizes 109 larger collections (the A-list) in some detail, and another 151 are listed in much less detail (the B-list: collections of <4,000 skins, or <5,000 bird items, or institutions that did not return the questionnaire that served as the basis for his paper). A long reference section and three appendices provide additional details that make this heterogeneous assemblage of collections accessible to researchers everywhere. I consider the data presented in Roselaar's chapter to be the hallmark of the meeting; the paper coalesces the collaborative, broad interest of museum biologists and is a summary of lasting value to collections-based ornithology.

Those eager to see data from museum labels made available electronically and to use these data in analyses will do well to read Rasmussen and Prŷs-Jones' paper *History vs Mystery: The Reliability of Museum Specimen Data*. Museum collections generally contain rich and accurate data, but there are many ways in which data quality is compromised, and museum personnel are accustomed to uncovering errors using clues such as specimens and handwriting that are unavailable electronically.

Collar and Rudyanto, in *The Archive and the Ark: Bird Specimen Data in Conservation Status Assessment*, demonstrate how important museum specimens can be in conservation (Peterson et al. and Navarro et al. extend this notion for Mexico). They also point to the decline in the number of specimen-based taxonomists and systematists (important in their case at the "twig" level) as being detrimental to conservation. Collar and Rudyanto's paper is important both for conservation biologists and museum administrators. The authors see molecular studies growing at the expense of more traditional studies in taxonomy and systematics, and suggest that this emphasis has begun to "marginalize specimen collections in the eyes both of space-stressed administrators pondering their budgets and of result-oriented

academics planning their immortality.” The authors recognize that the complementarity between these areas of study is important; however, I would go further and suggest that specimen-based science itself is changing. There is much important, traditional, avian taxonomic work to be done, but such studies are no longer viewed as being central in the reward structures of scientific institutions: it is expensive work, for which it is very difficult to receive grant support, and it is not publishable in top journals. Many of those who continue to pursue traditional taxonomy do so because they love it and recognize its importance—despite annual performance metrics that often focus on grant dollars brought in, journal impact factors, and citation rates. This is a situation that requires attention, and perhaps a partial solution is that of cross-appointments between conservation organizations and museums.

There are many excellent reasons why all museums should forge stronger ties with library archives and link specimens to associated paperwork in an accessible manner. Fisher and Warr, in *Museums on Paper: Library and Manuscript Resources*, provide a series of well-illustrated examples regarding the importance of being able to access the paperwork associated with museum specimens. In *Egg and Skin Collections as a Resource for Long-term Ecological Studies*, Green and Scharlemann provide a good, brief survey of nontraditional uses for traditional specimens.

For all of its successes, I feel that the volume overall is not adequately forward-looking. For example, reasons for continued growth of collections (and there are many) are expressed in fewer than half the contributions (e.g., Olson, Livezey, Christidis and Norman, Green and Scharlemann, Kitchener and McGowan). Reinvigoration of collections-based ornithology throughout Europe will require active, vibrant collections that continue to grow and become available for, and relevant to, a changing array of research questions. The final contribution—a summary of post-meeting workshops by Cooper and Steinheimer—shows that the future of avian collections is tremendously important to the meeting participants; however, their brief summary of the most dynamic areas in this

business make it clear that it is just a first step and that more is needed.

This volume will help the museum community and its increasingly diverse clientele understand some of the positive and negative aspects of past and present specimen-based ornithology—and in some cases it outlines directions for the future. There is not an adequate summary of the dynamic landscape of museum biology, however. An introductory overview would have helped to summarize the diverse messages that the symposium authors provide and would have given more cohesion to the whole volume. The lack of an overview, however, does not detract from the volume’s successes, particularly insofar as the symposium establishes a new forum for continued meetings and discussions among members of the European avian collections community. But if these meetings and symposia are to be effective in changing extrinsic factors impinging upon specimen-based ornithology, reaching out beyond our community is imperative. This volume is a good beginning.—KEVIN WINKER, University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, Alaska; e-mail: ffwksw@uaf.edu

ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS OF THE SALTON SINK: AN ENDANGERED ECOSYSTEM. Edited by W. David Shuford and Kathy C. Molina. *Studies in Avian Biology* No. 27. Cooper Ornithological Society, Camarillo, California. 2004: 169 pp., 43 figures, 42 tables, 9 pen-and-ink sketches, 8 maps, 8 black-and-white photographs, 7 color photographs. ISBN: 1891276379, \$17.00 (paper).—This book is an organized collection of scientific articles assembled together in a single volume, the objectives of which are to present baseline biological/ecological data on the Salton Sea’s avifauna and elucidate the long-term perspective of these works; emphasize the importance of the Salton Trough to avian populations; and describe the Salton Sea’s connectivity with the Colorado River Delta and Pacific Flyway. Although there are no chapter headings, the articles can be generally classified into three sections—ecological and historical perspectives, species assemblages, and species-spe-