

THE BIRD SKINS COLLECTION AT THE MANCHESTER MUSEUM

by Ian McKerchar



Above: a tray full of Lapwing skins including chicks, collected from 1860-1980s. (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)

Like many birders, I had often read in identification articles and books of the use of bird skins in collating data and for assessing features but had never experienced it for myself, probably due to never really having the need to! A coincidental combination of receiving details of the collection at The Manchester Museum and at last, my requirement to study skins for an identification article I was working on led to me to contact Henry McGhie, Head of Natural Sciences and Curator of Zoology for The Manchester Museum. Henry was only too pleased for me to visit the bird skins collection and during June 2007 I met him at the museum for a short visit and study of the required skins for my article.

Bird skins may not be to everyone's taste, the majority are from old collections at a time when bird identification involved shooting first and studying later but the wealth of information they hold and quite frankly, the beauty in studying them so close is not to be underestimated. Many of the skins, including some full collections are from almost legendary ornithologists of a bygone era and I have to admit to being fascinated by their history as explained by Henry. The collection room was, for me, akin to being a 'kid in a sweet shop', scattered with glass cases filled with all sorts of mouth-watering displayed bird skins, whilst the racks of plain looking tall wooden 'cupboards' contained rows and rows of draws when opened, filled with a quite staggering total of approximately 15,000 skins, involving some 3000 species.



Above: Just a few of the hundreds of draws filled with bird skins, here containing many species of beautifully coloured Rollers in absolutely pristine condition. (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)

During my visit, the study of my intended skins allowed me access to check and compare features which not only supported my field observations but often surpassed them and is a resource I fully intend to use again in the future and one I heartily recommend to those interested or more specifically to those carrying out similar study work. Henry's enthusiasm and knowledge of the bird skins and their origins (not to mention his impressive memory of where each species is in the hundreds of un-labelled draws!) was truly infectious and made my now, anything but short visit even more enjoyable, I could easily have stayed all day and then come back the rest of the week!



Above: Henry McGhie at work! The bird skins in the collection provide invaluable research for birders, ornithologists and scientists alike and here Henry is sampling feathers from a Rhinoceros Auklet from the 1860s to send to an American researcher studying changes in diet and oceanography. (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)



Above: It is a strange feeling to behold a tray full of extinct bird species as is the case here but an awe-inspiring one also, never more so than for this pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)



Above: One of my favourites was this tray of no less than four Slender-billed Curlews (and three eastern Curlews of the race *orientalis*) though it seems likely that holding the skins is as close to the real thing as I am ever likely to get! (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)



Above: The skin of a Slender-billed Curlew whose stark white base colour to the underparts and beautiful, almost heart shaped spots on the lower breast and flanks are plain to see. (Photo courtesy of The Manchester Museum)

Although the practise of shooting birds for study and identification have thankfully ceased, the skins collection at the museum can and should still grow through the likes of us birders donating any freshly dead birds we find, the likes of which we have all come across at least once or twice. Should you find a freshly dead bird or have reason to visit the skins collection at The Manchester Museum, you should contact Henry at the following address:

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(Honorary Scientific Associate in the Faculty of Life Sciences)
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I would sincerely like to thank Henry for my visit and intend to find any excuse to visit again in the not too distant future!

Ian McKerchar, July 2007

www.manchesterbirding.com