A BOOK IS GOOD, BUT MUSEUM SHOWS THE REAL THING!

By AUSTIN L. RAND
CHIEF CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

OUR ANIMAL EXHIBITS do not constitute a "dead circus," nor are they "cabinets of curiosities." Rather they attempt to portray the wealth of variety of animal life—to show the order and arrangement that pervades nature's profusion of organisms and to show how animals live, how they get along with or depend on each other and their environment, and how they are spread over the globe.

This is a tall order. In trying to meet it, we must remember that the possession of the real objects is the Museum's unique feature. Fascinating charts, diagrams, and models may be made, but to present the real objects is the Museum's main function. Our exhibits must be real, not fake. Ideas and theories can be found in books; schemes and models and diagrams can be found elsewhere. Only in a museum can one see the real thing. Not that color and design and models have no place in our exhibits, for they do. There is no reason why an arrangement cannot be pleasing as well as tell a story; why colors cannot be chosen for effect, and background design made attractive. Charts, models, and diagrams can emphasize and expand the story told by the real objects. Models must be used sometimes, but a single genuine feather, for instance, would add tremendously to the importance of the model of the dodo we display.

THREE TYPES OF EXHIBITS

However, one can get a surfeit of matchless treasures. Variety is needed, not only in presentation but also in approach. To meet this requirement we have three types of exhibits in the bird halls: the systematic series; the idea exhibits, each expressing a different biological principle; and the habitat groups.

The systematic series is the backbone of museum exhibition. It portrays the basic data: these are the kinds of things there are in the field. But there's no need to go off the deep end and try to present every single species and every single variant when a synoptic series will do. Our series of birds of the world (Hall 21, Boardman Conover Hall) is such a synoptic series. These exhibits are laid out at the family level. There are 300 species in the sparrow family, but we have chosen twelve as sufficient to show the range of structure and color pattern in the family. The drongo family, of 20 species, is represented by two species. Continuity in this series is the one of evolution. The families are arranged in a sequence with the nearest relatives together, from the most primitive to the most highly evolved, from penguin and ostrich to sparrows.

There are occasions when a complete representation of part of the field is advisable, as in our North American bird series. Enough people are interested in identifying our local birds to justify having what is in effect a study collection on exhibition.

AVOIDING MONOTONY

It is in the systematic series that monotony, the curse of museum exhibition, is most difficult to avoid. We've tried to relieve monotony by design and color and by the introduction of collateral material:

On the two pages that follow, the story of some of the more important steps involved in preparation of the Museum's exhibits is told graphically in a series of drawings by Staff Illustrator E. John Pfiffner.

a tailor-bird's nest with the Old World warblers; a picture in the exhibit of weaverbirds of one tying a knot; a picture of oxpeckers on a cow with the starlings.

In addition, through the systematic series we have scattered exhibits with a different approach, the biological exhibits, as we call them. These go beyond simple relationships and portray other principles, such as the one illustrating the dependence of all living things on the earth for material and the sun for energy. Some organisms get these directly as do plants; others get them second-hand, as do mice that eat the plants; some at third-hand, as the owl that eats the mouse. The chain could be indefinitely extended through parasites and predators until bacteria turned the final predator back to the soil for plants to use again. Other such exhibits show reproduction, nests and eggs, growth, speciation, hybridization, and migration.

This variety is important, for the interest-span of humans is short. Only the serious student on duty will concentrate for long. Most of our visitors are on vacation or in holiday spirit. They are strolling through our halls to see new and different things, usually with no particular interest in a specific field. We cannot expect them to examine systematically all our material spread out for them. The comparison comes to mind of a special feast held one evening a week in the Manila Hotel when I was there last year. Great rows of delectables were put out. I couldn't do more than sample a small portion of the dishes each time. In our Museum we have spread an intellectual feast, and we strive to meet the challenge to make the items attractive and interesting enough that the casual visitor will find at least a few things here and there to stop and sample.

FASCINATION OF THE FAMILIAR

The great amount of new material spread before the first-time visitor to the Museum may make him feel like a stranger in a convention whose members, all labeled, he is meeting for the first time. Then to encounter in a Museum exhibit a robin such as nests in his own yard is as welcome as the sight of a face from his home town. One way we have capitalized on this human trait is to have an exhibit on bird-feeding stations, where familiar birds appear as actors in demonstrations of the methods people can use in putting out food, keeping water supplies from freezing in winter by electricity, planting for a garden, and providing nest boxes. It's one of the popular exhibits in the hall and an example of mixing the known with the unknown. Who knows; the person inveigled to stop at these familiar things may also look at the exotic pheasants displayed at one side and the exotic parrots at the other.

The habitat groups are an elaborate presentation of bits of countryside with their birds. They give the observer the impression that he is right there, looking into marsh, savanna, forest, or plain, with the birds going about their business undisturbed. Walking through our Hall of Bird Habitat Groups (Hall 20) is like embarking on a journey from continent to continent, visiting deserts, mountains, and coral atolls and looking at the birds there, all in the course of a half hour.

Dr. Karl P. Schmidt, Curator Emeritus of Zoology, has written in an earlier BULLETIN of the era of rethinking in museum exhibitions, of the change from accumulation of specimens to their more intelligent use, of the separation of the extensive study material and the selected exhibition material. He has also pointed out that this intelligent selection is hard work. But the ends justify it, as we hope visitors to our halls will agree.

Michigan Research Project

A project of digging and research of importance to three departments of the Museum was recently begun at Michillinda, Michigan, by George I. Quimby, Curator of North American Archaeology and Ethnology, and Dr. John W. Thieret, Curator of Economic Botany. The investigation centers upon a recently exposed bed of peat discovered by Harry W. Getz, of Moline, Illinois. Co-operating are two glacial geologists from the University of Michigan. It is anticipated that valuable information concerning fossil plant seeds, late glacial geology, and paleo-Indian environment will be forthcoming when the data are analyzed.