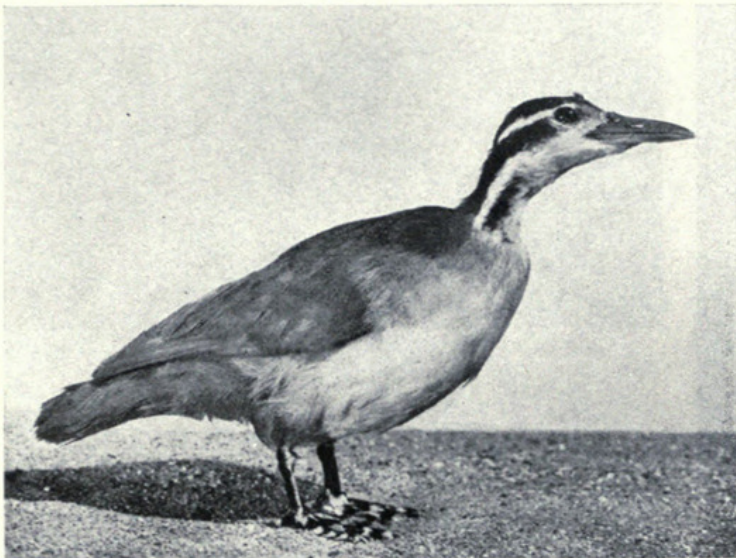


EXHIBIT COMPLETED

BIRDS of the WORLD

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American sun grebe (Heliornis fulica)

THE MUSEUM's Synoptic Series of Birds of the World is now complete with the installation of a new exhibit showing representative birds of 12 families that comprise the order Gruiformes. This cosmopolitan assemblage of about 200 species includes cranes, rails, bustards, and related families. Some live on a single island while others have a virtually world-wide distribution. All share fundamental morphological characters that indicate a common ancestry, but the several families, and the species of some of the families, may be quite different in appearance.

Rails, which include the gallinules and coots, are the most widely known of the families in this exhibit, as they are virtually cosmopolitan. Eight of the 132 species occur commonly in Illinois, but the local forms inhabit marshes and are very secretive; few Chicagoans other than the most dedicated bird watchers are likely to know them in life. Some rails live in woods or on dry plains; many species are active only at twilight or after dark. Some are highly mi-

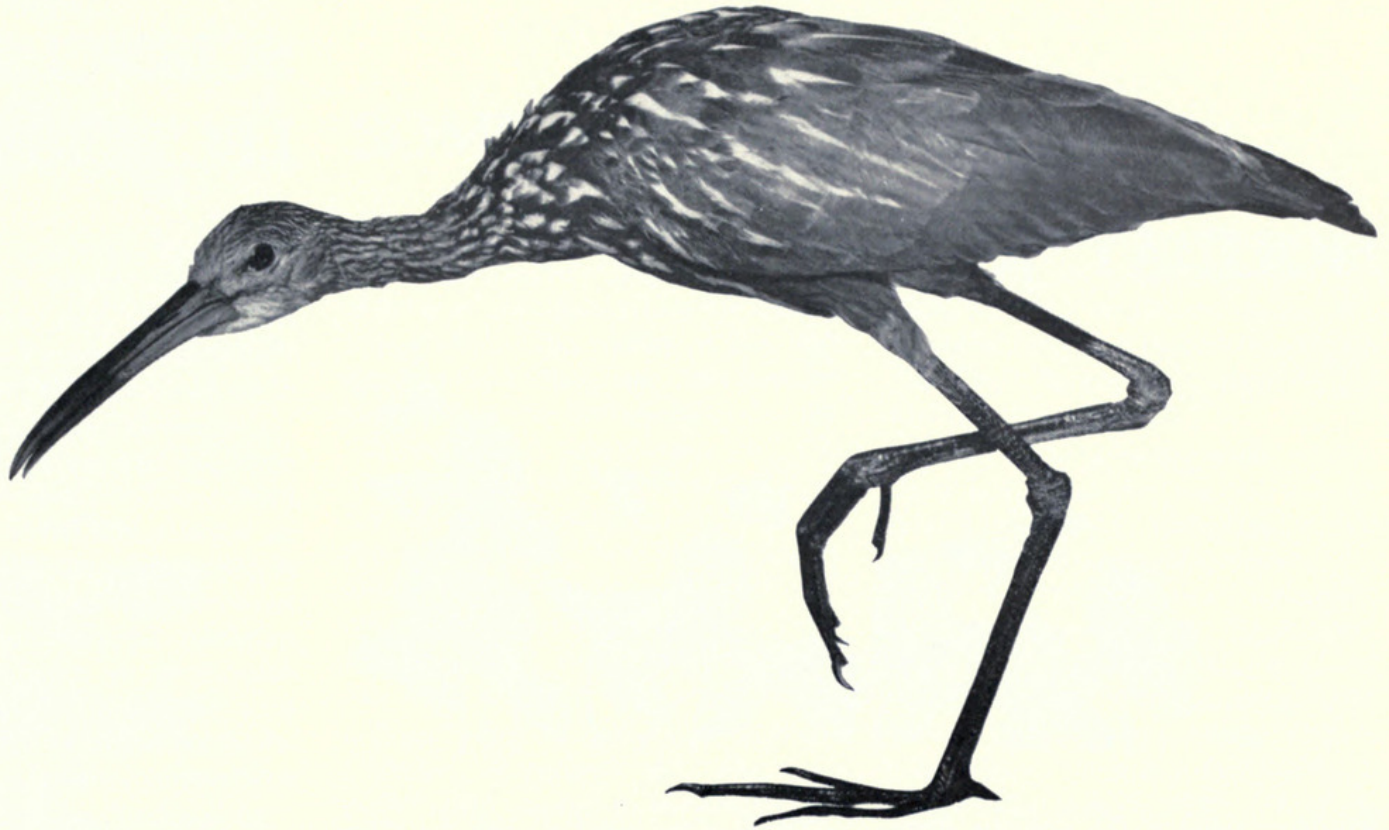


Gray-necked wood rail (Aramidaes cajanea)

gratory, but many island forms that normally have few natural enemies have lost the power of flight.

The cranes, a much smaller family with 14 species, include some of the largest birds capable of flight. They resemble herons superficially in having long legs and necks, but when in flight cranes, unlike herons, hold their necks fully extended. Graceful in the extreme, cranes are often portrayed in art, especially in the Orient. They characteristically perform elaborate and seemingly stylized dancing rituals, usually as part of the courtship ceremonies in spring. One particularly magnificent species, the whooping crane of North America, faces almost certain extinction as the total wild population now numbers only about 30 individuals.

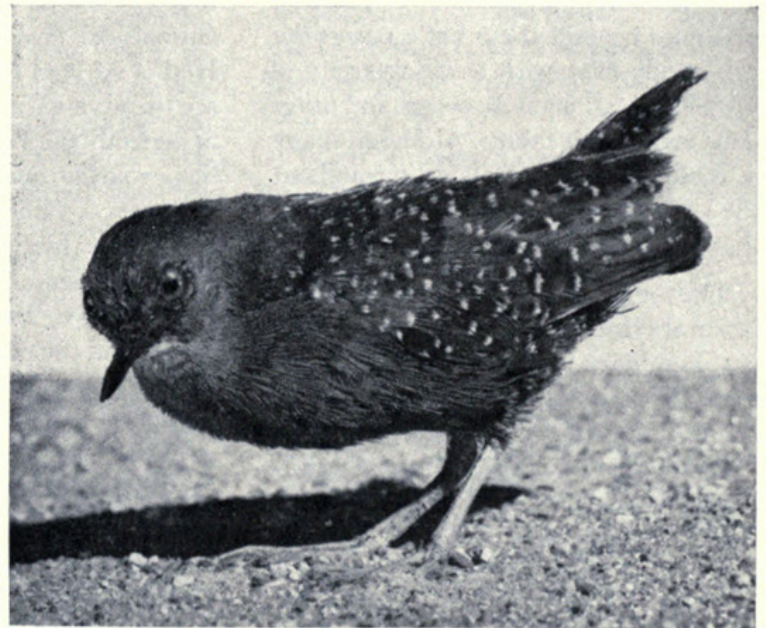
Several of the bird families represented in the new exhibit are endemic to tropical America. Especially noteworthy are the trumpeters, the three species of which live in humid lowland forests and are almost wholly terrestrial. Their calls, sometimes heard at night, include deep-toned,



ventriloquial cries and a prolonged cackle. Sun-bitterns are small heron-like birds restricted to the banks of streams and ponds in tropical forests; drab and undistinguished when at rest, they are revealed as strikingly beautiful when their wings and tails are spread in display. The cariamas of southern South America comprise a relict family most closely related to flightless, crane-like birds that are known only from fossil remains.

On display from across the world are examples of several other remarkable families of this order. The mesites, confined to Madagascar, are medium-sized, terrestrial birds of the forest. Although their well-developed wings appear functional, the birds lack clavicles and evidently are unable to fly. The plain-wanderer of Australia resembles a small quail but is more closely related to rails. As with phalaropes, the male is less brightly colored than the female, and incubates the eggs and raises the young. Similarly, the female bustardquail of Eurasia and Australia actively courts the male, may have several mates, and becomes extremely pugnacious during courtship although it is shy and secretive at other times. The rare and little-known kagu of New Caledonia has a most elaborate courtship display. As kagus are almost flightless they are in danger of extinction because of man and his predatory companions, the dog, cat, and pig.

The several other bird families represented in the exhibit are no less worthy of comment. But better than reading about them is a visit to the Museum's Boardman Conover Hall to enjoy the Synoptic Series in its entirety. This visual survey of the world's avifauna in its infinite variety occupies nine large cases that extend the length of Hall 21. The



Black rail (Laterallus jamaicensis)

550 mounted specimens were carefully selected as most representative of their respective families and of the 8,600 species known to science. By means of this synopsis one can, in a matter of minutes, view the full range of variability in birds, be it of size, form, color, or pattern. Whatever his interests, the perceptive visitor to the Museum and the completed hall can hardly fail to gain a new and lasting insight into the marvels of natural history and the world of birds. ■



Blake, Emmet Reid. 1964. "Birds of the World." *Bulletin* 35(12), 4-5.

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