

BIRD LIFE OF MOUNT CAMEROON REGION, AFRICA, ILLUSTRATED IN HABITAT GROUP

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In the African alcove in Hall 20 there has recently been placed on exhibition a habitat group of birds of the Mount Cameroon highland rain forests. The group was presented by Mrs. Oscar Straus, of New York, and collected by the writer and Mrs. Boulton during the Straus West African Expedition of Field Museum.

Mount Cameroon stands on the west coast of Africa in the corner of the Gulf of Guinea. The expedition attained the summit of the mountain where, at an altitude of 13,353 feet, it is possible to look down into the sea only eight miles distant. The peak of the mountain is devoid of vegetation. Only a little moss, nurtured by constant mist, finds a precarious living in the cracks in the lava and among the volcanic ash that spills down in long desolate tongues into the alpine grassland of the upper third of the mountain.

The mountain rain forest occupies the middle third of the massive pile of cliffs, ridges and peaks that comprise Mount Cameroon. It is this section, with its luxurious tangle of dracaena, lianas, ferns, amaryllis, orchids and wild figs, that is reproduced in the setting of the Museum group. In the background can be seen the giant interdigitations of mountain forest and alpine meadow. Where the ravines conserve moisture, the forest climbs up to 8,000 feet, and where the exposed ridges are desiccated by wind, the grassland descends as low as 6,000 feet. The site shown in the group is on the edge of a ravine at 5,000 feet. Below in the valley is shown the upper edge of the lowland rain forest that extends unbroken for a thousand miles through the low country of the Cameroons, the Gabon and the Congo.

The isolation of Mount Cameroon and the environmental conditions of its mountain

rain forest have enabled a number of unique kinds of birds to evolve. Twenty-one are endemic—found only on the mountain. Six of these species are shown in the group: a thrush, a sunbird, a babbler, an oriole-finch, a woodpecker, and a shrike. Mingled with these and, like them, attracted to the bounteous supply of fruit that the wild fig tree supplies, are three neighboring species that are widespread in the lowland rain forest. They include a green fruit pigeon, a fly-catcher and a flock of the red-tipped plantain-eaters.

In spite of the fact that seventeen specimens of nine species are shown in the group, only the plantain-eaters are conspicuous.



Birds of Mount Cameroon

African group, recently added to the Hall of Birds (Hall 20), showing a great variety of feathered inhabitants of the region, characteristically gathered around a wild fig tree. Specimens for this exhibit were collected by the Straus West African Expedition under the leadership of Curator Rudyerd Boulton.

Even though mountain rain forests support an abundance of species and individuals, it is difficult to see birds, much less collect them. The extreme density and luxuriance of the vegetation usually form an effective screen to their activities.

Contrary to the indication of their name, plantain-eaters never eat plantains. They are exceedingly fond of wild figs, and any fruiting tree in a suitable location is sure to be visited by plantain-eaters or touracos as they are often called.

Six of these gorgeous birds, which are distantly related to the cuckoo family are gathered about the fruits on a branch of the wild fig. One of them, in the immediate foreground of the group, is shown in flight, displaying its gorgeous carmine wing feathers. A discerning observer may see that there is a fleck of pale yellow in the red of one of these feathers. Touracos are especially notable for the characteristic red that generally is to be found

in the wings. This is caused by an organic pigment, turacin, that contains 7 per cent copper. It can be dissolved in slightly alkaline water. A slight amount of ammonia added to water in which these feathers are washed will cause the red to disappear. This curious state of affairs, to be found only in this family of birds, has given rise to many incorrect statements about turacin. The water that touracos normally encounter is not alkaline, therefore they do not lose their color. The Mount Cameroon birds live in one of the wettest places in the world, where as much as thirty feet of rain falls in a year, yet they stay red because the water is pure. The occasional non-pigmented feathers that are found in these birds are due probably to deficiency of pigment during the growth of the feathers, not to the fact that the bird has taken a bath and changed its color. When the color has once been lost, it cannot be regained.

The group was prepared by Staff Taxidermist Arthur G. Rueckert; accessories were made by Preparator Frank Letl, and the background was painted by Staff Artist Charles A. Corwin. This is the third habitat group of African birds recently installed.

PRIBILOF ISLAND EXPEDITION
RETURNS WITH SEALS

With forty specimens of fur seals, of which it is planned to use thirty-five in a proposed habitat group in the Hall of Marine Mammals, and five of which will be added to the scientific reference collections, Staff Taxidermist C. J. Albrecht returned to Chicago about the middle of September. He has been on an expedition to the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, off the coast of Alaska, since the first of June.

Mr. Albrecht obtained his collection of seals without firing a shot or lifting a har-

poon. During the breeding season, severe strife exists among the large bulls in their competition for cows to add to their harems (usually consisting of about twenty females), and in the combats not only many of the bulls themselves are killed, but also many of the females and young who as "innocent by-standers" frequently meet accidental death. Mr. Albrecht selected from those thus freshly slain the specimens he needed, made necessary plaster casts for taxidermic work, skinned the seals on the spot, and preserved the pelts for mounting.

The expedition was made possible by permits for collecting granted by the United

States Department of the Interior, and by the cooperation of the Bureau of Fisheries of that department which provided transportation from Seattle on its own survey ship, and whose representatives on the island assisted Mr. Albrecht in many ways.

In addition to the seals, Mr. Albrecht collected auklets and other birds found in the islands, and these will be mounted in the Museum group to complete the natural setting. The group will illustrate the "home life" of the seals, reproducing a rookery or breeding ground. The collection includes large bulls, cows of various ages, and pups or young seals.



Boulton, Rudyerd. 1937. "Bird Life of Mount Cameroon Region, Africa, Illustrated." *Field Museum news* 8(10), 3–3.

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