

## ADVENTURES ABOUND IN MUSEUM 'LABS'

BY AUSTIN L. RAND  
CHIEF CURATOR OF ZOOLOGY

ONE DAY an editor said to me, "Let's call this new Museum bird-story of yours 'Vicarious Adventures of a Bird Man.'" "Oh, no we won't!" I said. It was the "vicarious" part I objected to. Adventure is a misunderstood word. To many, the thrills of adventure are associated only with travels to the ends of the earth; some people get vicarious thrills reading escapist literature; a few find thrilling spots in their work—"adventures of everyday life."

"Adventure" of course, has several shades of meaning, for adventure is a subjective thing. Those adventures with the element of danger or risk are the ones expected of returning explorers. But they're the ones the wandering naturalist tries to avoid. However, try as he will, in spite of forethought and preparation and care, there will always be some. I've had them myself. Going down Mozambique Channel in a dhow during the Northwest Monsoon once, trying to dodge the squalls, we had the sails blown off. Another time I narrowly escaped losing all the expedition funds locked in my tin trunk when a pirogue overturned in a flood-swollen river near Maromandia in north-western Madagascar. Once, atop a ridge above the Mambarano River in New Guinea, we had to turn out all hands to keep our tents from blowing away. Again, a giant forest tree came crashing across camp and only the roots, tearing loose as the tree swayed, woke the boys and enabled them to escape. When a storm destroyed the airplane that brought our supplies to the headwaters of the Fly River, we had to raft down the river, equipment, personnel, specimens and all, for five days. I've stumbled upon a grizzly she-bear, with cubs, in the waist-high brush on a Yukon hill and, as the hair rose on her back, I went rapidly away.

But adventures can also be stirring thrilling experiences, not needing the sharp spice of danger. Such adventures have come to me in the field in plenty. I collected a new genus of warbler in Madagascar, recognizing that it was new, and the thrill was repeated when Jean Delacour named it for me, *Randia*. I found the unknown nest and young of the aberrant relative of the cranes that are called *Mesetes*. I've built a hide (blind) by a magnificent bird-of-paradise display ground and watched at arm's length the bird's display. From the hills above Dumaguete I've looked south over the Sulu Sea and seen Siquijor shimmering in the brightness, apparently hanging in the sky. At night I've sat on the beach of Dipolog in Zamboanga and watched the moving light of flying-fish fishermen. I've heard wolves howl near my campfire in

Mackenzie Mountains, and the babacoote wail in the mountain forests of Madagascar.

Adventures in a museum naturally follow a different pattern, but the thrill of discovery, of accomplishment, of wonder and enjoyment is there, too.

The arrival of a collection is always an event. I've had shipments from Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines, Borneo, Australia, Java, Turkey, Africa, Tristan da Cunha, and Central America at Chicago

**On the two pages that follow,  
the story of what happens to a  
bird collection after arrival at  
the Museum from the field is  
told graphically in a series of  
sketches by Artist Ruth Andris.**

Natural History Museum. Each specimen as it comes from the shipping case may be new: like the new species of babbling thrush from Negros, the new subspecies of a little screech owl from the Philippines, a babbler from Nepal, or the new thrush from Angola. The specimens may represent new records for the country, as a pigmy rail for Liberia from the Beatty collection and a mangrove warbler for Negros from the Rabor Collection. Or, as still often happens, the specimens may be new to our collections and thus are another step toward the complete representation of birds of the world at which we aim.

There's no telling when discoveries may be made. Some come when the birds are unpacked—as the unpacking of a leaf-lined bulbul's nest from Borneo recalled a snake-skin trimmed nest from Madagascar and led to an elaboration of the question of why birds use snake-skins in their nests. But discoveries are most likely to be made after the specimens are unpacked, named tentatively, arranged in trays, catalogued, filed in their steel cases, and are being studied.

When we unpacked one shipment from the Philippines, I arranged all the little green leaf-warblers under the name they had been known, *Phylloscopus olivascens*. But when I measured them and compared them with specimens already filed in our cases, I found that two species had always been confused under this one name.

### RELATIONSHIPS CLARIFIED

The specimens of land birds in a shipment from Tristan da Cunha were all well-known species (and new to our collections) but when I studied their relationships by comparing them with other species, and with published accounts, I found that their ancestors all came from America, not some from Africa as had been thought. Examination of a fresh casualty from the zoo, a cassowary, led to an improvement in the

## PHOTO CONTEST DEADLINE SET

Amateur and professional photographers are readying their entries for the world's largest nature photography contest, results of which will be exhibited in Stanley Field Hall during the month of February.

Sponsored by the Nature Camera Club of Chicago, the Chicago International Exhibition of Nature Photography, now in its eleventh consecutive year, will include prints and color slides of scenery, animals, plants, and other natural phenomena.

The deadline for entries is January 16, but early entries are encouraged so that both the contestants and the contest committee can benefit from additional time to classify and file the thousands of entries. The contest consists of two divisions—prints and color slides. In the print division, photographs may be either black and white or in color. In both divisions, to be eligible, entries must fall within one of three sub-classifications: (1) Animal Life (2) Plant Life, or (3) General.

understanding of cassowary moult, which does not resemble the moult of penguins in some particulars as has been thought. The handling of a spur-winged plover and having the horny covering of the spur come off in my hand led to a survey of wing armature in birds.

Ideas are where you find them, and these are the things that we turn into scientific papers, the end product of our research. Our writings range from one-page notes on such subjects as "Philippine Bird Names of Blasius," short papers such as "Altitudinal Variation in an African Grass Warbler" and "Immature Females with Adult Male Plumage," to modest monographs such as "Social Feeding Behavior in Birds" and more comprehensive accounts such as my forthcoming "Checklist of Philippine Birds."

Our accomplishments do not end there. We make our information available to the general public too. Emmet R. Blake, Curator of Birds, wrote *Birds of Mexico*, *A Guide for Field Identification* for the bird-loving public going to Mexico, and together we wrote *Birds the World Over*, an illustrated guide to this Museum's Hall of Habitat Groups of Birds (Hall 20). There are also our popular articles such as we write for our Museum BULLETIN and which, collected into book form as *Stray Feathers from a Bird Man's Desk* (Doubleday), go out to the reading public.

These are the products of our work. The specimens in our cases and the published accounts based on our observations and reading are the tangible results of our stewardship. These things give us our adventures, and final presentation to the public is their highlight.



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1955. "Adventures Abound in Museum 'Labs'" *Bulletin* 26(11), 3–3.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25710>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/371155>

**Holding Institution**

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.