

FINGERPRINTS ARE CLUES TO EXHIBITS' POPULARITY

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THE FINGERPRINTS and even the noseprints that visitors leave in the Museum are the best clues we have to the popularity of an exhibit. No one knows this better than Jack Roberts, whose job includes seeing that the glass in front of the exhibits is clean. The glass in front of Bushman, the gorilla that once lived in the Lincoln Park Zoo, quickly is plastered with prints; next to it is a family of hyraxes from Abyssinia, and there is rarely a print on its glass-sided case. It's pretty elementary detecting to establish that more people are interested in Bushman than in hyrax.

Not everyone who looks at an exhibit leaves a print on it as a record. Most of the prints are made by children and some of the marks, at the bottom of the case, indicate that the children are pretty small. But some are made by adults. One noseprint in front of a group of insects was level with my face, and I'm above average height. I saw one dignified lady point out a clam to her companion and inadvertently touch the glass. In front of an exceptionally interesting exhibit with reading matter a visitor may rest his forehead on the glass. Anyone may leave prints. We don't really mind the prints although it keeps Roberts busy polishing, and we make a virtue of a necessity and use these prints as automatic popularity computers. Summertime is better for fingerprints than winter, Roberts tells me. In hot weather prints take better, evidently due to the extra activity of human sebaceous glands.

OTHER CHECKUPS TRIED

Of course these marks do not tell us how many of the 2,000 to 3,000 visitors in an average day look at any one exhibit, nor do they tell us how long those who do so devote to it. We've tried other methods for estimating popularity. Presenting a questionnaire to visitors as they left the Museum was tried for a while; visitors have been followed and their courses plotted and timed (all very discreetly of course); an observer has been stationed by an exhibit, recording very unobtrusively the length of stay of the visitors, and the comments made. Frequently on my way to lunch I saunter through the exhibition halls, gathering general impressions.

But none of the methods are as reliable as Roberts' automatic computer. It's not infallible, mind you. A fingerprint on the glass does not necessarily mean that someone was interested in an exhibit. This I found by observing a "control" exhibition case, one temporarily empty. A group of fourth or fifth-grade boys, after looking at cases full of snakes and lizards came to the empty case. At once they peopled it in their imagination with crocodiles and boa con-

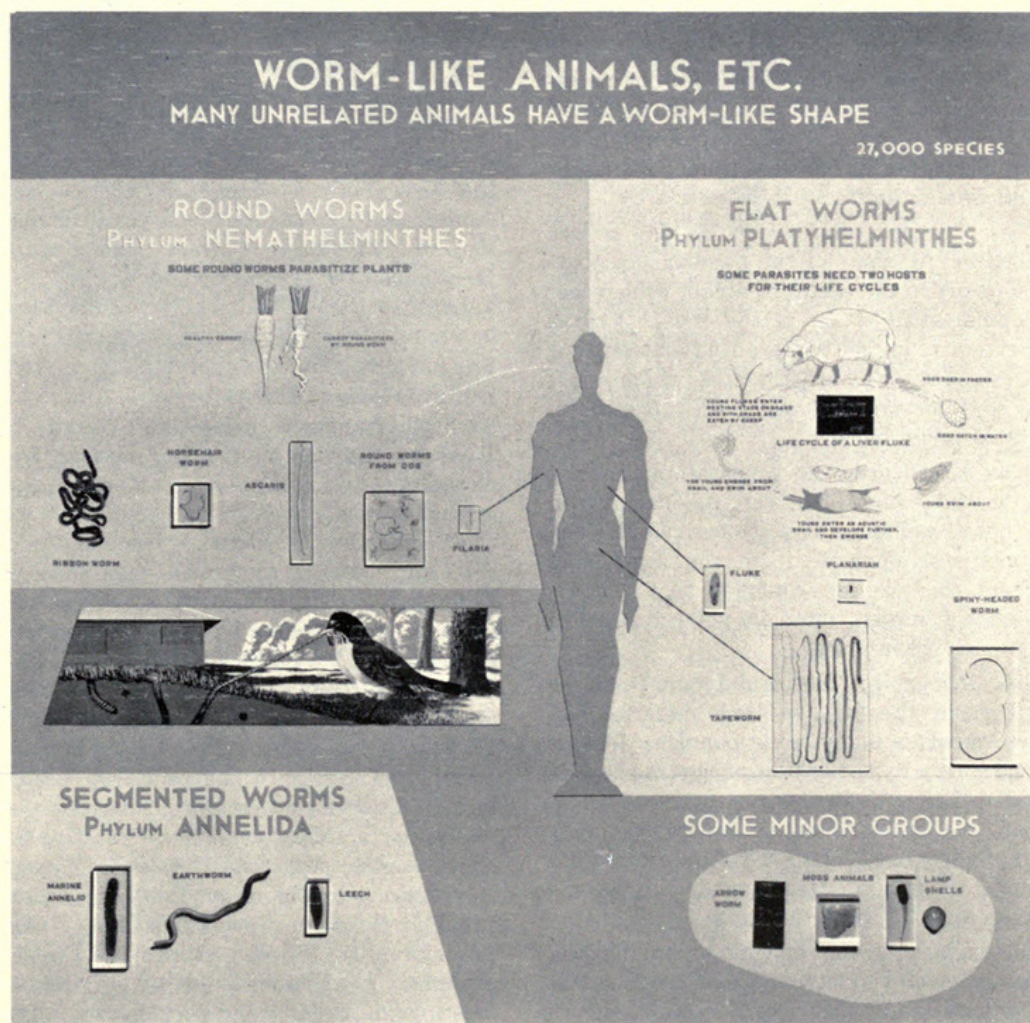
strictors and called their friends' attention to them, pointing out color and size. This resulted in a fine crop of prints on the glass that might have been confusing to an uninitiated observer.

FASCINATED BY WORMS

Over a recent long holiday weekend when we had our usual large crowds in the Museum, we got an abundant crop of prints and I made a quick survey of the glass in Zoology to buttress earlier impressions. Some of the exhibits that are most popular are not those one might expect. This has been especially true for the units in the "Animal Kingdom" exhibit that have been on exhibition for less than a year. Of all the groups of animals in this exhibit the most

popular were the arthropods, insects, crabs, etc., which show much color and bizarre shapes as well as attractive paintings. The third most popular unit was still more of a surprise. It was the protozoan exhibit, with microscope and slides and greatly enlarged replicas of the microscopic single-celled animals carved in plastic and an illustrated text covering a synopsis of the animal kingdom. This last was apparently the real attraction, judging by the position of the marks of foreheads on the glass. Perhaps it was the result of the activity of a group of students taking notes.

Backboned animals, starfish, and clams and snails ran neck-and-neck for fourth place, then corals and jellyfish, and sponges last.



WORMS ARE POPULAR—IN AN EXHIBIT

This has proved to be one of the most crowd-attracting panels in the Animal Kingdom series of exhibits. Although worms are simple in appearance and obscure in habitat, some of them have very complicated life histories. Some also are important in relation to man as parasites of humans and other animals, or of food crops.

popular is that of the worms. Not only that, but the section showing tapeworms and flukes has received most attention, in which a long tapeworm is folded back and forth in a piece of plastic in which it is embedded, and a liver fluke is shown with a diagrammed life cycle passed partly in a snail's insides and partly in those of a sheep. Next most

I went on through the other halls (exclusive of habitat halls) and, in each hall, the most popular items were as follows:

Mammals: furbearers; kangaroos; lion

Reptiles: snakes, especially the huge python

Insects: the malaria mosquito exhibit; the temporary beetle case

Comparative Anatomy: "Birth of a Baby"; the very popular whale has no glass and can't be included

Birds: eggs; fossil bird restorations

SURVEY AIDS PLANNING

From this cursory survey certain points emerge which we must keep in mind in planning other exhibits.

1. Interest in the subject matter may be decisive, as indicated by the attractiveness of snakes, Bushman, tapeworms and flukes, and "Birth of a Baby."

There are things about which the visitor knows before he comes to the Museum; one of our functions is to make the visitor aware of other things which he does not know, while he is here.

Yet the general interest in birds and mammals does not offset the greater appeal of the worms and insects over the vertebrates in the "Animal Kingdom" series.

2. The size of an object does not necessarily influence attractiveness as indicated by both Bushman and a tapeworm being popular, drawing interest from both larger and smaller animals exhibited nearby.

3. The location within a hall is not decisive, for some of the popular snake exhibits are in the center of a hall, while other popular exhibits are at the ends. A good location is undoubtedly an advantage, but it can be offset by other factors, which is just as well, for we must utilize all the space in the Museum halls.

4. Excellence of preparation is not a decisive factor. The very popular python is not as well done as is the less popular boa constrictor opposite it in the same hall. From this we can conclude that the exhibitor's interest must be subordinated to the visitor's interest.

5. An exhibit that is different from the others in the hall, in both material and treatment, is likely to be popular. This is well shown by our exhibit of eggs in the bird hall. This question of diversity within a hall, the relieving of monotony, is a very important one. Also we must remember that a striking treatment will become monotony through repetition.

6. The aversion of people to reading long labels is well known in museum circles. But the long labels that give a synopsis of the animal kingdom in the exhibit of protozoans are popular. Perhaps the extent to which the text is broken up by small illustrations is the decisive factor. This must be explored further in label writing.

7. Thoughtful, teaching exhibits are not necessarily popular. For instance, the exhibit "What is a Bird?" is not nearly as popular as the exhibit "Fossil Birds" opposite it, which simply shows some restorations. The striking strangeness of these birds may be the main factor. But explanatory, teaching exhibits can be popular, wit-

ness the "Birth of a Baby" and the life cycle of a liver fluke.

This survey does not try to evaluate whole halls contrasted with other halls, and we do know that some halls are much more popular than others. But from comparisons within each hall there are some generalizations possible. It appears that a wide variety of factors determines the interest-appeal of an exhibit. Exhibition seems to be not a science, nor a craft, but more an art, like writing and painting. There are certain basic rules, and the subject matter and space available impose limits on exhibits. Standards of scientific accuracy must be kept in mind, and there are a host of intangibles. The treatment of these will spell the difference between an exhibit that will be studied and one that will be passed without a glance.

STAFF NOTES

Dr. Theodor Just, Chief Curator of Botany, attended a symposium sponsored by the New York Academy of Sciences last month, and participated in a panel discussion of "The Present Status and Future Development of Germ-free Life Studies." . . . **John R. Millar**, Deputy Director, has been in the East visiting museums of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. . . . **Dr. Donald Collier**, Curator of South American Archaeology and Ethnology, and **George I. Quimby**, Curator of North American Archaeology and Ethnology, attended the annual meeting at Norman, Oklahoma, of the Society for American Archaeology and the Central States Anthropological Society. Quimby retired as president of the Society for American Archaeology, and Collier was appointed review editor of the society's official archaeological journal, *American Antiquity*. . . . **Henry S. Dybas**, Associate Curator of Insects, conducted a seminar on population ecology of the periodical cicada for the Department of Entomology at the University of Illinois (Urbana). . . . **Dr. G. Alan Solem**, Assistant Curator of Lower Invertebrates, was a recent guest speaker on the Phil Bowman Show on WMAQ-NBC. . . . **Loren P. Woods**, Curator of Fishes, attended the Illinois Academy of Science meetings at Urbana and served as a judge of the biological exhibits of the high school section. . . . **Rupert L. Wenzel**, Curator of Insects, held a seminar on problems of the systematics of a genus of histerid beetles for the Department of Biology of Northwestern University. . . . **Melvin A. Traylor**, Assistant Curator of Birds, recently made studies of specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University.

Products of wood distillation are shown in the Hall of Plant Raw Materials and Products (Hall 28).

BIRD EXPERT BEGINS PERU JUNGLE TREK

Madre de Dios, Peru, an area rich in bird life and as yet virtually unexplored by zoologists, is the locale of a Museum expedition that began late in May. This field project, led by Emmet R. Blake, Curator of Birds, is part of the Museum's long-range program of South American research. Efforts on this trip will be devoted solely to gathering a large representative collection of the bird life of the area.

Blake will be making his ninth trip to tropical America but his first to Peru. He will arrive by plane in Lima on June 1 and will fly from there to Cuzco, where he hopes to pick up a young zoology student from the University of Cuzco as assistant.

A truck route leads out of Cuzco to the head of Rio Madre de Dios, where native canoemen, campmen, and hunters will be hired to accompany Blake on his descent of the river. Through this sparsely settled, jungle rain-forest the party will travel in dugout canoes almost to the Bolivian frontier.

The area to be explored is geographically situated east of the Andes in the Amazonian lowlands of southeastern Peru. In contrast to the Andean section of Peru, which has already been explored by scientists, relatively little is known of the flora and fauna of these lowlands.

A small collection of some 100 birds from the Madre de Dios region was received by the Museum a few years ago. In this collection were found several birds unknown to science. It is probable that still others will be discovered on Blake's expedition—the first ambitious ornithological reconnaissance of this section of South America.

The greater part of the collection will be gathered on the trip down river. Camps will be set up at intervals along the bank and occupied for several weeks at a time. Mornings will be spent in hunting, and the afternoons and evenings devoted to skinning, labeling, and cataloguing the specimens.

Additional small collections will be made in the foothills of the Andes. These specimens from higher elevations will be compared with those gathered from the lowlands. After the trip down river is completed Blake hopes to charter a small plane to carry him to outlying lowland areas where he will make spot checks to see if the bird life is stable throughout the Madre de Dios territory.

The expedition, which will last from five to six months, is financed by the Conover Game-Bird Fund, established by the late Boardman Conover, a former Trustee and Research Associate at the Museum.

The principal facts about bird migrations, including migration routes and a timetable of average dates of arrival and departure, may be obtained from an exhibit in Boardman Conover Hall (Hall 21).



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