THE MUSEUM'S NEWEST EXHIBIT

By MELVIN A. TRAYLOR, JR., Associate Curator of Birds

The newest bird screen in Hall 21 adds the families from Sandgrouse to Owls to the systematic series of the Birds of the World.

SINCE THE PURPOSE of the most recent exhibit to appear in the bird halls is to entertain and stimulate as well as to instruct, pride of place has been given to the colorful family of parrots. The parrots, which include the various groups known as macaws, cockatoos, parrakeets, lovebirds and lories, show a great diversity of size and color, and there are few that can be considered dull. As pets they have always excited interest and amusement because of their "human" qualities: they learn to talk well, they use their feet to feed themselves (not a truly human characteristic, but the effect is like that of using their hands), and, having a longevity beyond that of most birds, they make almost lifetime pets. The finest talkers are the African Gray and the Amazons; at times they seem almost capable of carrying on a conversation. We must be docile in the face of facts, however, and admit that this is not a sign of real intelligence but of their ability and delight in mimicry. On the other hand, it is hard to deny them intelligence when you discover, as I did on my first trip to Mexico, that they easily learn to speak excellent Spanish!

Two of the least typical but most interesting parrots are the Kea and the Kakapo, or Owl-parrot, of New Zealand. The Kea was originally a vegetarian, as are most parrots, but after the arrival of the English settlers it developed the habit of eating meat, and will now occasionally attack and kill sheep. In areas where the habit has become general the bird is a serious pest and must be killed off, but fortunately the majority of Keas live in relatively inaccessible country above the timberline and there is little present danger of their being exterminated. The Owl-parrot is the only member of its family that has lost the power of flight. To reach the top of the trees on which it feeds it must climb up using its beak and claws; from there it can glide down to the foot of the next tree, but then must start climbing all over again.

The other families on the screen are also of interest, though less spectacular in appearance. The sandgrouse inhabit the arid regions of the Old World, which seems a strange choice since they must have water at least once and usually twice each day. Since water holes are scarce in the desert, each will draw birds from hundreds of square miles around. At dawn and dusk there are spectacular flights of birds coming to water. The sandgrouse share with pigeons the unbird-like habit of immersing their bills and sucking up water like a horse or a man, rather than dipping up a few drops and then tilting back their heads to let the water run down their throats.

The young cuckoo on the nest has ejected its rightful occupants. Meanwhile, the smaller foster parent works hard to satisfy the usurper's voracious appetite.

Painting by Staff Artist John Pfiffner for the newest bird screen in Hall 21, which adds the families from Sandgrouse to Owls to the systematic series, "Birds of the World." The birds were mounted by Taxidermist Carl Cotton and Assistant Taxidermist Peter Anderson. The exhibit was designed by the Museum's Division of Birds.

Pigeons and doves (or doves and pigeons, for there is no difference between them) comprise a family almost as numerous and diverse as the parrots. They have been deliberately scrimped in our treatment here, however, since we already have two wall cases showing the variation in wild and domestic pigeons. The extinct Dodo was a close relative of the pigeons, although the resemblance is difficult to see now. When the Dodo lost its power of flight it also lost its incentive to keep its slim, streamlined shape, so that by the time it was discovered in the 1500's it was the size and shape of a turkey.

The cuckoos are as widespread as either the pigeons or parrots, but as a rule much more soberly clad. Cuckoos are mostly remembered for their parasitic breeding habits; the female lays her egg in the nest of some other bird and then goes off, leaving the foster parents to hatch and feed the young. This habit is found mostly in typical cuckoos of the Old World and is not confined to this family, for we find it, among others, in the Cowbirds of North America. It is among the cuckoos, however, particularly the European Cuckoo, that we find the greatest disparity in size between host and parasite. As you can see in the figure, the foster parent seems almost in danger of disappearing down the young cuckoo's throat as it tries to satisfy the youngster's clamorous appetite.

Although in this country a warbler may often be seen feeding her own young along with the parasitic cowbird, that seldom happens with the cuckoo. When just hatched, the young cuckoo's first instinct is to eject any other object from the nest. This it does by crawling beneath it, then humping its back and working its way up the side of the nest till the other object, the egg or young of its host, falls over the edge. As a further method of insuring the success of their young, individual cuckoos seem to specialize on one host species and will lay eggs that match in color those of the host.

Touracos are a small family of brightly colored birds confined to Africa. They were formerly called plantain-eaters, but recent studies have shown that they feed on almost any fruit and berries *except* plantains, so the name is being discarded. Most members of the family have a brilliant red patch on the wing. It is caused by a pigment with a copper base, called turacin, found nowhere else in the bird world. For a long time it was thought that turacin was soluble in water and that birds soaked by a heavy rain would lose their color. This is not true, however, and washed-out birds are never seen.

The last two families on the screen are the Barn Owls and the typical Owls. Superficially they are much alike and are usually lumped together in people's minds although there are well-marked anatomical differences to separate them. The barn owl is one of our most familiar owls because of its habit of nesting near human dwellings. Despite its eerie calls it is a good neighbor, for it feeds exclusively on mice and is a boon to the farmer. Recent experiments have shown one reason for its success as a hunter: when placed in a pitch black room a barn owl is just as capable of catching mice by sound as it is by sight.

The big horned and eagle owls are the real "hoot" owls of song and story and are the source of the many superstitions about owls as birds of ill omen. The source of the "wise old owl" probably traces back to the sacred owl of Athena; in fact, the epithet *Glaukopis*, meaning "keen-eyed" in Homer, may have originally meant "owl-faced." The snowy owl is a form of the high Arctic that we get to see only occasionally around Chicago. Irregularly, when their food supply fails in the north, there will be an eruption of snowy owls that brings them to these latitudes in considerable numbers. The last year that happened I spent my spare time combing the beaches and fields trying to find one. When I had just about given up hope, I arrived at work one morning to find my elusive bird sitting on the roof of the Museum!

After you have seen the new bird exhibit described by Associate Curator Traylor, why not revisit these?

A unique exhibit in this Museum is that illustrating the cultures of the people of Madagascar, who are of mixed Asiatic and African origin. The collection is the only one of importance from this island in the United States, and is one of the most complete in existence.

The largest, and one of the most spectacular habitat groups in the Museum, is the African waterhole in Carl E. Akeley Memorial Hall (Hall 22). Representing a scene in southern Ethiopia, it includes twenty-three animals of six different species.

Distension of ear-lobes, often with large round objects as much as three inches in diameter, is a fairly common form of personal ornamentation in northeast Africa. In Hall E are shown examples of wooden ear-plugs and fine metal chains of the Akikuyu tribe.

Antiquities of the Roman Empire, recovered from ancient Pompeii and Boscoreale where they were buried by an eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, are exhibited in Hall L.

*Long before the United Nations was organized, representatives of the peoples of the world were gathered together in this Museum's Chauncey Keep Memorial Hall (Hall 3—Races of Mankind).

Now largely irreplaceable, the Museum's Melanesian collection in Hall A, most of which was obtained by an expedition in 1909–13, is considered the finest and most complete in the world.

---

*Salmon fishing as practiced by Indians of the Northwest from about A.D. 1000 to 1800 is illustrated in an exhibit in James Nelson and Anna Louise Raymond Hall (Hall 4).

Primitive jewelry, both ancient and modern, as well as productions of the modern jeweler's craft, is shown in H. N. Higinbotham Hall (Hall 31).

The anatomy and some amazing structures of bats are illustrated by models exhibited in Hall 15 (Mammals in Systematic Arrangement).

**Soundtrek tours available*