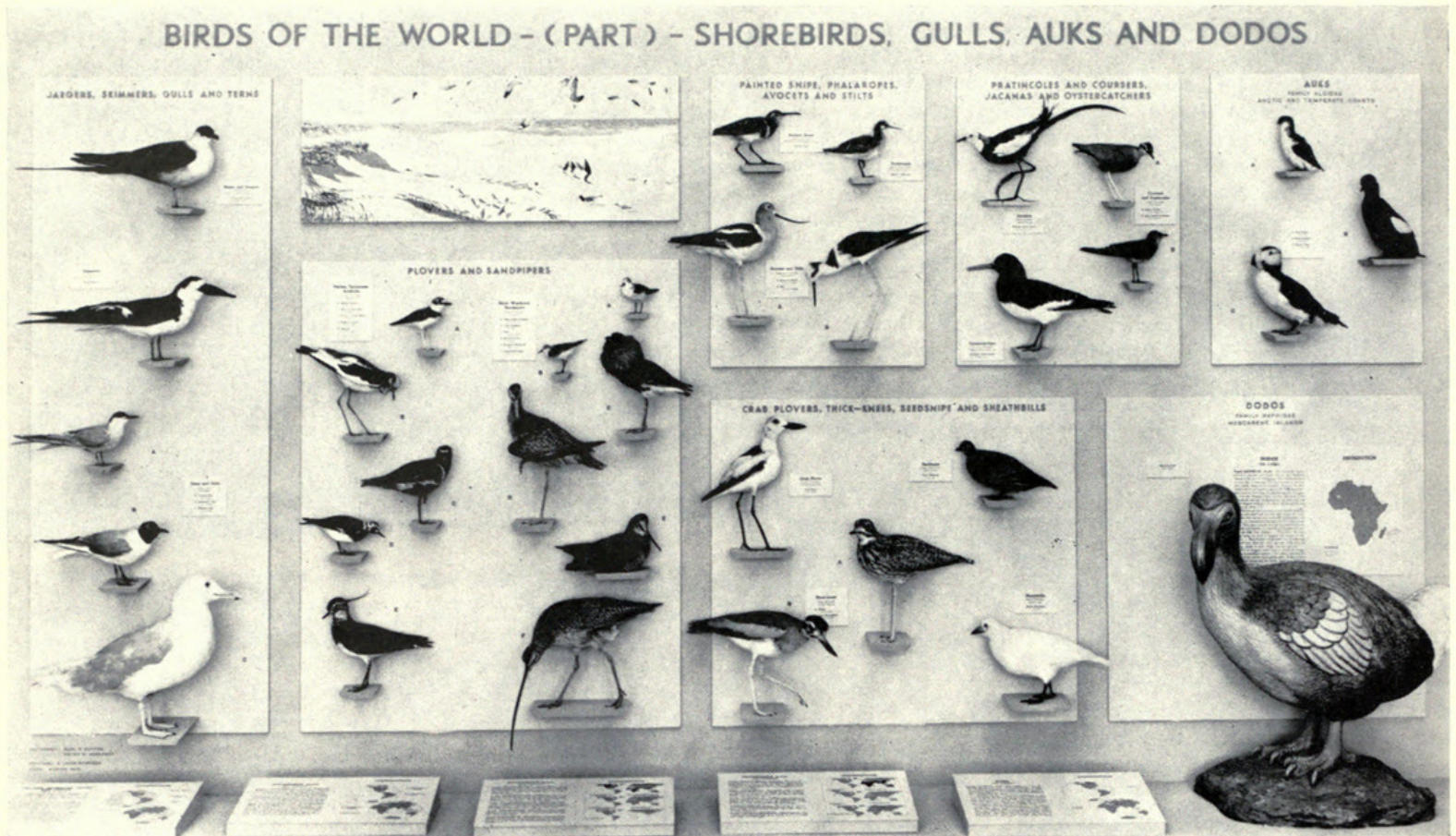


A Bird's Eye View . . .



of the

MUSEUM'S NEWEST EXHIBIT

By EMMET R. BLAKE, Curator of Birds

A new bird exhibit recently installed in Hall 21 treats in synoptic form all 16 families of the avian order Charadriiformes, a cosmopolitan group containing some 300 species. Most of these are shorebirds—plovers, sandpipers, and similar families of long-legged waders—but the order also includes many other birds of distinctive appearance and unusual habits, such as skimmers, gulls and terns, sheathbills, auks, and others.

About fifty species, representing five of the families featured in the new exhibit, have been reported from the Chicago region. The majority of these pause in the area only briefly in spring and fall while traveling between their summer and winter homes. Most shorebirds have

remarkable powers of flight and some regularly migrate thousands of miles. Typical of many is the eastern golden plover, which nests in Arctic Canada and spends the winter in southern South America. Its migratory route is most unusual: the autumn flight is mainly over the Atlantic ocean, but the return trip is by way of Central America and the Mississippi Valley. The migratory pattern of a western variety of golden plover is equally noteworthy: after breeding in western Alaska, it flies 2000 miles or more across the open Pacific to winter in Hawaii, southern Asia, or even Australia.

Diversity of habits is a prominent attribute of the shorebird assemblage.

Phalaropes are unusual in that the female is brightly colored and courts the male, who builds the nest and raises the young. Among painted-snipe, also, the female is dominant during courtship; she even has several extra loops in her windpipe which produce deep, booming sounds. The crab-plover, unlike any of its relatives, nests in a burrow deep within the sand and lays unmarked white eggs. Avocets, surely the most graceful of all shorebirds, feed by immersing their thin, recurved bills in the water, and then walk about sweeping the bill from side to side. The thick-knees are nocturnal and prefer grassy or arid regions to the water-side habitats favored by most shorebirds.

The sandpiper tribe is closely related to plovers but forms a separate family of about 80 species. They are found principally in open country near water, but a few species, such as snipe and woodcock, prefer marshes or moist woodlands. The plumage is usually gray or brown above and the underparts white, barred, or spotted. Although much like plovers in habits, sandpipers are more diversified in size (5–24 inches) and especially in the shape of the bill, which may be moderately or extremely long, and straight, decurved, or recurved.

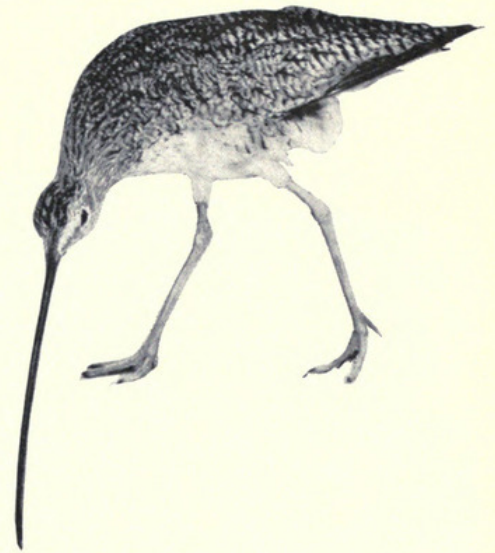
One of the largest members of this family is the long-billed curlew, which measures almost two feet in length and is distinguished by its very long, down-curved bill. A smaller relative, the Eskimo curlew, was formerly very abundant but has become virtually, if not totally, extinct within recent decades. Unique among its fellows is the diminutive spoon-billed sandpiper of eastern Asia. Although superficially resembling other small sandpipers, its bill has a conspicuously flattened, spoon-like tip. The ruff, a common Eurasian sandpiper, is especially noteworthy for its remarkable courtship performance. In spring conspicuous erectile featherruffs and facial warts are grown by the males, who posture and fence at ancestral courtship areas for hours, competing for the assembled females, or “reeves.” Perhaps most extraordinary of all is the fact that at other times the sexes remain apart, and even in winter live in separate flocks.

Several groups of birds related to, but in appearance quite unlike, sandpipers and their kind are sometimes called “shorebirds” as a matter of convenience. Perhaps the strangest of all is the skimmer, a tropical tern-like bird with a blade-shaped bill. In feeding, skimmers plow the water’s surface with their protruding lower mandible, catching small fish and crustacea. Skimmers breed in colonies on sand beaches and are often active at night. Ocean shores and large rivers and lakes are their habitat.

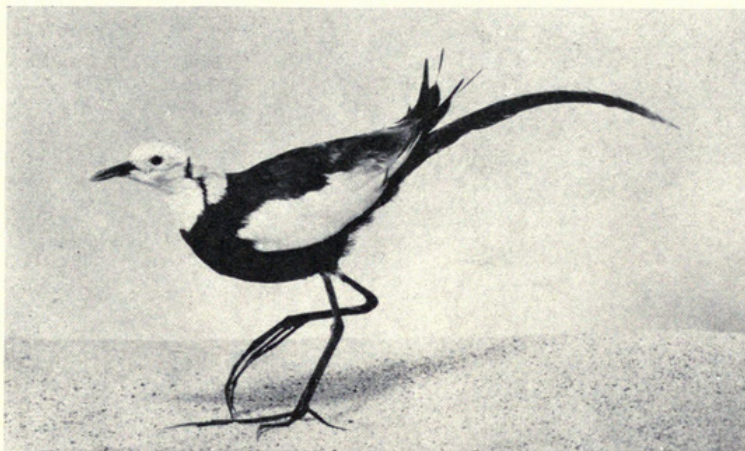
Skuas and jaegers resemble gulls, but are even more aggressive and predatory. They often rob other birds of food and harass their nesting colonies. The four species of this family mainly inhabit oceans and coasts of colder latitudes, but

several migrate between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Gulls and terns are more cosmopolitan in distribution, but nevertheless seldom venture great distances from land. Most of the 82 species prefer seashores and lakes or rivers, but some inhabit prairie marshes. Typically the plumage is gray and white, though many gulls have black wing-tips and most terns are black-capped. Gulls are essentially scavengers and have relatively heavy bills; terns have sharply pointed bills and usually dive for their food.

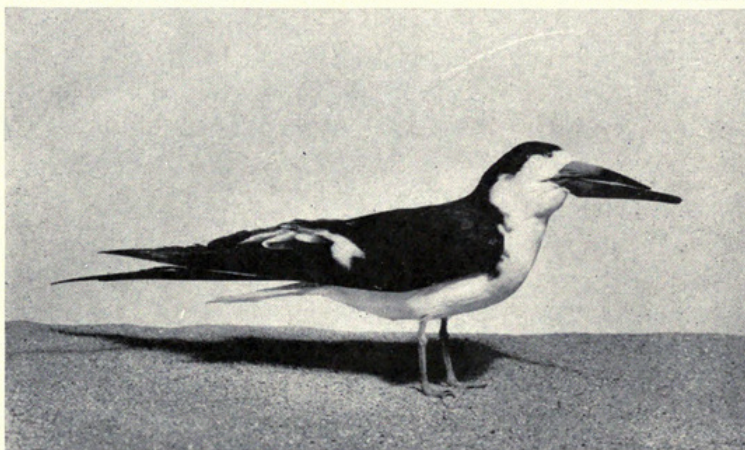
The auk family, which includes dove-kies, murres, guillemots and puffins, is confined to the Northern Hemisphere



Above:
Long-billed Curlew



Left:
*Pheasant-tailed
Jacana*



Left:
Black Skimmer

Below:
Horned Puffin

where the various species nest in enormous colonies on rocky cliffs or islands. Puffins, comical creatures with out-sized bills, are the only auks that make nests. These are placed, safe from predators, at the ends of burrows. Most auks nest on narrow ledges and lay eggs that are pointed at one end and thus roll in small circles if jostled. Auks winter in the open sea and approach land only during the breeding season. Perhaps the most famous species is the great auk, a large, flightless bird that was exterminated by Icelandic fishermen in 1844.





Reynoso, Alvaro. 1961. "A Bird's Eye View...of the Museum's Newest Exhibit." *Bulletin* 32(1), 6-7.

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