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The Bird Collection in the Museum and Institute of Zoology (Polish Academy of Sciences)

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Abstract. In Poland the biggest and oldest collection of birds belongs to the Museum and Institute of Zoology (Polish Academy of Sciences) in Warsaw. The beginning of this collection stretches down to 1819 – the year in which a collection of approx 20,000 specimens was obtained. The collection was enriched with gifts, purchases and by scientific expeditions. It was decimated by two world wars, plunders and fire, but part of this ancient collection is still available for research. In 1953 the Museum, transformed into the Museum and Institute of Zoology, was incorporated into the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Nowadays the Warsaw bird collection holds approx 4,000 species belonging to almost all known orders and families from all continents. The majority of them has detailed label information and is catalogued. Over 42,000 of the deposited bird specimens were collected between 1813 and 1970.

Key words. bird collection, birds of South America, birds of Siberia, Museum and Institute of Zoology, Warsaw

The animal collections gathered and stored in numerous museums all over the world represent an invaluable material for comparative (e.g. Stepanyan 1995, White et al. 1995), evolutionary (e.g. Kirby 1980, Simpson & Cracraft 1981, Swierczewski & Raikow 1981), ecological (e.g. Carlson 1998) as well as genetic (e.g. Pääbo et al. 1988, Chatigny 2000, Iudica et al. 2001) studies. The results obtained can be used for bird or even habitat protection and for the assessment of changes in biodiversity.

In Poland the largest and oldest collection of birds is that of the Museum and Institute of Zoology (Polish Academy of Sciences) in Warsaw. The beginning of this collection goes back to 1819 – the year in which a collection of approx 20,000 bird specimens completed by Sylvius Minckwitz was acquired by the Zoological Cabinet of the Royal University of Warsaw. The collection was especially valuable and contained several types and many voucher specimens of birds species recorded in Silesia for the first time. In 1887, a private Zoological Museum was created by the Branicki family. The Branicki brothers sponsored scientific expeditions to the Ussuri Territory in 1883-1885, to Korea and Japan (1885-1887) and to Peru (1881-1902). Both collections were united in 1918 into the National Museum of Natural History, Section of Zoology, renamed State Zoological Museum in 1928. The collection was enriched with gifts, purchases and by scientific expeditions. It was decimated by two world wars, plundering and fire, but part of this ancient collection is still available for research. In 1953, the museum was transformed into the Museum & Institute of Zoology and was incorporated into the Polish Academy of Sciences. More information about the history of the museum and its collection is available elsewhere (e.g. Kazubski 1996).

According to the labels, the approx 4,000 species of the Warsaw collection represent almost all known orders and nearly all families according to Sibley & Ahlquist (1990) and all continents (Table 1). The majority of the > 42,000 specimen in the collection is labelled in detail and catalogued. They were collected between 1813 and 1970 (Table 2). Before 1939 there were 427 holotypes of species and subspecies in the collection (Sztolcman & Domaniewski 1927).

Table 1: Geographic origin of the specimens in the bird collection in the Museum and Institute of Zoology.

Area	%
Europe	40.62
Africa	3.45
South America	25.41
North and Central America	1.94
Australia	1.93
Asia	17.80
Arctic and Antarctic	0.07
no information	8.78

Table 2: Temporal distribution of the collected specimens.

Period	%
19th century	28.70
1901-1913	2.76
1914-1939	34.65
1939-1970	3.23
no information	30.66

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About one third of the specimens in the museum was obtained in the 19th century. Among these specimens from Asia (Siberia, Near and Far East, and Caucasus), Africa and South America prevail. During that time numerous expeditions were undertaken by well known Polish zoologists like Benedykt DYBOWSKI, Tomasz BAREY, Mikołaj PRZEWALSKI, Ludwik MLOKOSIEWICZ, Micha JANKOWSKI, Jan KALINOWSKI, Konstanty JELSKI, Jan SZTOLCMAN and many others who enriched the bird collection of the museum with valuable specimens. These collections formed the basis for numerous scientific publications by many native and foreign scientists (e.g. TACZANOWSKI 1877, BERLEPSH & SZTOLCMAN 1892, 1894, 1901). Birds from Peru were studied by Władysław TACZANOWSKI, and his „Ornithologie du Perou" (1884-1886) was the first bird monograph of South America.

After the First World War the collection was enlarged with birds from Europe and South America (Peru, Equador, Mexico, Brazil). Expeditions to Central and South America were organized mainly by Tadeusz CHROSTOWSKI, Tadeusz JACZEWSKI and Arkady FIEDLER. The European specimens came not only from the territory of Poland but also from Ukraine, the European part of Russia, Balkan Peninsula and western Europe. In this period, zoological expeditions to Egypt and Madagascar (1930-1931) were organized as well as three cruises of „Dar Pomorza" in the Atlantic Ocean (1931-1932, 1933-1934, 1938).

Collecting was much less intensive in the period after World War II. And above all, a significant part of the specimens in this period was insufficiently labelled – the date as well as the location are in many cases not noted. Most of the collections deported by the German occupants were returned to the museum subsequently. The museum was also enriched by collections of former German institutions in Poland and by private collections. Among them were for instance a collection of the natural History Museum in Szczecin or the collection of Hummingbirds of the Museum in Cieplice.

The greater part of the bird collection in the Museum and Institute of Zoology is catalogued and available as database. The biggest problem in cataloguing of the old specimen is the archaic nomenclature used by former zoologists.

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