

Main Ornithological Collections in Southern Poland

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Abstract. The main collections of avian skins and mounted specimens in Poland result largely from the collecting activity carried out by German and Polish professionals as well as amateurs in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. At present considerable material has been accumulated in the southern Poland cities of Krakow, Bytom (Upper Silesia) and Wrocław. All collections housed in Poland suffered extensive loss and damage during World War II. Only a few new skins or mounted specimens are nowadays added to our collections yearly. The ones acquired are usually traffic kills, or they come from zoological gardens (rare species).

Key words. ornithological collections, Poland, Krakow, Bytom, Wrocław

1. INTRODUCTION

The main collections of avian skins and mounted specimens in Poland largely result from the collecting activity carried out by German and Polish professionals as well as amateurs in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. At present, besides the largest Polish collection deposited in Warsaw (see a separate paper by REJT & MAZGAJSKI), considerable material has been accumulated in the southern Poland cities of Krakow, Bytom (Upper Silesia) and Wrocław. All collections housed in Poland suffered extensive loss and damage during World War II. Now they are preserved in a few museums which, however, owing to a recent lack of understanding, as a rule do not significantly increase their volume. Several factors contribute to the recent decline in museological activity. Among them the following ones can be listed:

- a) lack of understanding among the decision-makers in biology, who often consider traditional taxonomy and physiography as „old-fashioned“ disciplines,
- b) lack of interest among young researchers and students,
- c) shortage of finances,
- d) shortage of space for housing the remains of bigger animals,
- e) lack of taxidermists, due to very low wages paid to auxiliary staff,
- f) negative ideological pressure of animal-rights organizations, opposing any collecting of animal specimens.

For the last 20 years, a taxidermist for vertebrates was employed only at the regional museum of Bytom; elsewhere the skills of this profession are largely forgotten. Consequently, only a few new skins or mounted specimens are nowadays added to our collections yearly. The ones acquired are usually

traffic kills, or they come from zoological gardens (rare species).

The remaining smaller collections (in Jelenia Góra near the Sudety mountains, in Częstochowa, in the University of Krakow and at Białowieza in NE Poland) hold several hundred or fewer skins and mounts each, usually exclusively of regional or national origin, often unlabelled.

Against such a background, the „living“ skeleton collection established in Krakow at the Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals, Polish Academy of Sciences, by Prof. Z. BOCHEŃSKI and his co-workers, and strongly developed during post-war time, is exceptional.

2. THE COLLECTION OF THE INSTITUTE OF SYSTEMATICS AND EVOLUTION OF ANIMALS (Polish Academy of Sciences) IN KRAKOW

This, one of the largest zoological collections in Poland, is moderately rich in ornithological specimens, such as skins and eggs. Its main part consists of a large (>3,000 specimens in 1,033 species) skeleton collection established and developed after World War

Table 1: The size of Polish ornithological collections

	Skins and mounts No of species		Eggs	Nests	Skeletons and skulls
Warszawa	c. 42,000	c. 3,000	6,600	–	–
Kraków	1,400	c. 250	2,309	274	c. 3,000
Bytom	1,700	c. 500	3,821	234	140
Wrocław	12,500	c. 2,460	11,260	200	c. 200
Cieplice	922	370	541	30	–
Częstochowa	135	119	567	–	–
Białowieza	946	c. 130	335	–	–
Totals	c. 59,600		25,433	738	c. 3,340

II. All avian orders except Apterygiformes, with specimens from all continents except the Antarctic, are represented in it. The Krakow school shows a specialization in the study of fossil birds. Therefore, the collection serves as a reference when fossil and subfossil avian remains are to be identified and studied.

The skin collection once established by collectors as J. SAGAN and K. WODZICKI now contains c.1400 specimens in c.250 species. They are mostly specimens from south-eastern Poland and the present-day eastern Ukraine (plus a few from North Korea).

The former private collection of K. WODZICKI counts over 2,300 eggs of 276 Palearctic forms (predominantly originating from SE Poland and Western Ukraine) and, additionally, there are some other smaller private collections of European bird's eggs and nests (approx 500 specimens, over 100 species, plus a few gathered in recent times in North Korea).

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3. THE UPPER SILESIAN MUSEUM AT BYTOM

The Nature History Department of the provincial museum contains over 6 000 avian specimens, in the following categories:

Skins	1,104	in	212 species
Mounts	884	in	c. 300 species
Eggs	3,821	in	214 species
Nests	234	in	77 species
Skeletons, skulls	140	in	c. 50 species

About 77 % of skins and mounted specimens come from areas within the present Polish boundaries, chiefly from the province of Silesia (67 %), the remaining ones are from Europe and Asia. Some common breeding species are represented by series of 10-50 specimens per species. The oldest specimens are dated from the 1880s. The present collection originates from two ancient collections from the Landesmuseum in Beuthen/Bytom and the Silesian Museum in Katowice as well as from several smaller Upper Silesian local collections recently combined.

Some specimens, such as two vulture species, *Tetrax tetrax*, *Stercorarius skua*, *St. pomarinus*, *Pastor roseus*, constitute the invaluable documents for an occurrence of these rare visitors in Silesia. The main collectors included: E. DRESCHER, O. NATORP, GEDROY, S. SOBANIA and M. BIELEWICZ. Exotic species are represented by approx 130 mounted specimens from the Island of Borneo.

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4. THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AT THE WROCLAW UNIVERSITY

The University of Wrocław houses the second largest collection in Poland, after that of Warsaw. It constitutes a part of the Zoological Collection of the former Zoologisches Museum der Universität Breslau, founded in 1814. Its long history was written by many eminent directors, including the professors A.E. GRUBE, W. KÜKENTHAL, F. PAX and W. RYDZEWSKI. According to its first director, J. L. C. GRAVENHORST, already in 1832 the ornithological section contained 1739 bird skins and some eggs, nests and skeletons. The collection significantly increased during the first half of the 20th century, chiefly after the inclusion of two large private collections, that of P. KOLLIBAY and a part of O. NATORP's. Both these owners collected mostly Palearctic species, but P. KOLLIBAY was also able to preserve series of skins from a SE-Asian archipelago.

During the Breslau siege in 1944-45 the collection was seriously damaged (a part of the building was hit by a bomb): about half the specimens from the scientific part and the majority of the exhibition specimens were destroyed.

At present the collection counts c. 12,500 skins and mounted specimens of c. 2,460 species, mostly from the Palearctic region, plus some from the Philippines, SE-Asia, Africa and South America. However, roughly only two third of the specimens are provided with complete labels indicating the place and time of collecting. Series larger than 20 specimens are available only in approx 100, mainly Palearctic, species.

There are no type specimens in the collection, only single specimens representing extinct species, such as *Pinguinus impennis* (2 ex.), *Conuropsis carolinensis*, *Ectopistes migratorius*, *Heteralocha acutirostris* (female), and *Vanellus macropterus*.

Among the approx 1,000 mounts there are representatives of c. 90 % of the world's bird families. Currently many of them are on display in an exhibition.

The scientific part of the collection further contains over 2,000 clutches and many single eggs, some nests and c. 100 bird skeletons or skulls (some exhibited in the vertebrate skeletons hall). The most valuable object is a well preserved egg shell of the *Aepyornis maximus* (Fig.1).

While our museum as a whole has recently grown up to hold approx 2 million zoological specimens, largely invertebrates, the collection of higher vertebrates has hardly seen an increase owing to reasons indicated above. The avian collection, chiefly the bird skins, are currently used only to solve some rare



Fig. 1: *Aepyornis maximus* egg from the collection of the Museum of Natural History, University of Wrocław.

species identification problems, as well as for the purpose of student training (mounts).

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